

story

Itsuki Mizuho

art

Nekobyou Neko

To Another World...  
with LAND MINES!

10



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To  
Another World...

with **LAND  
MINES!**



## A teacher around the same age?!

“In a situation like this,  
the greeting one ought to  
reply with is—”

Metea

Mary

Illias

The class had turned out a bit different from what we had expected. Illias-sama had guided us to a room where a slightly plump woman was waiting for us. We assumed that the woman would be our instructor, but instead, Illias-sama herself stood at the front of the room.

I had been a bit worried about whether the sisters would be able to keep up. Mary seemed like she was struggling, but Metea had no trouble absorbing the information and even asked questions from time to time.

“...By the way, what made you want  
to give me a massage all of a sudden?”

All of a sudden,  
Haruka's hands stopped moving  
and her face was right next to mine.  
*Man, she looks beautiful even up close.*  
As her face got closer and closer,  
I extended my hands, she let her  
eyes drift shut, and—

“We're partners, right?  
I figured it wouldn't hurt to  
act like actual partners.”

# A sudden move?!



Nao

To  
Another World...  
with LAND  
MINES!  
10



Sae glared at Kaho and shouted,  
“Gosh, why didn’t you tell me ahead  
of time what would happen  
when I prayed?!”

Kaho just tilted her head and shrugged.

Saeko

Yoshino

“I enjoyed the surprise  
and wished for you to have  
the same experience. To spoil a game  
is an unforgivable sin.”

Kaho

Side Story  
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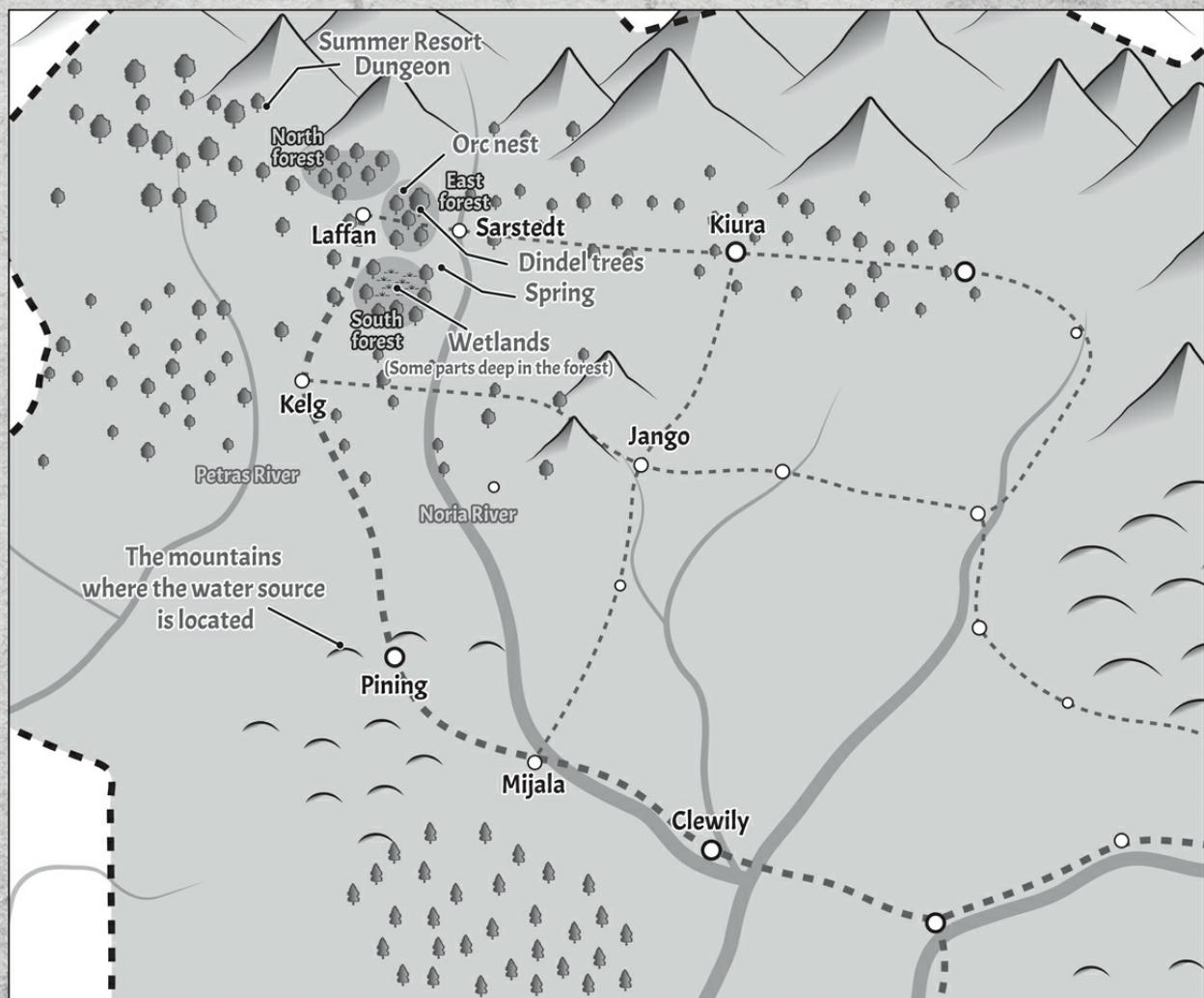
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# Prologue

The first time we journeyed from Kelg to Pining, we had gone by carriage, but this time, we were walking. The distance was about one and a half times longer than the distance between Kelg and Laffan, and it took about five days by carriage. We were fit enough to run long-distance, however. We departed Kelg early in the morning and arrived at Pining by about three in the afternoon, having taken just one short break around noon.

We had plenty of time to spare, so there was no real need for us to rush, but it was currently winter. It wasn't snowing, but the wind that blew through the grasslands was bracing, so none of us were in the mood for a picnic. Likewise, we wanted to avoid sleeping out in the open, so we'd agreed to continue running down the highway until we reached Pining. It was the first time Mary and Metea had run such a long distance with us. I was slightly worried that they might need healing, but...

"A city!" Metea exclaimed. "And I've got some pocket money on me this time!"

Metea remained quite excited while we were waiting outside the gates of Pining. Even considering the short break we'd taken, we had run over one hundred kilometers, so I was surprised by how energetic she was.

"Do you feel okay, Mary?" I asked. "Do your feet hurt at all?"

Mary looked up at me and blinked a couple times, then nodded. "Hmm? Oh, no, my feet feel perfectly fine. We didn't run very fast." It was almost as if she had no idea why I would ask such a question.

*Now that I think about it, Mary and Metea are beastgirls of the tiger subspecies. Sure, they haven't trained as long as we have, but they're probably much better at running than a normal human like Yuki or an elf like Haruka.*

"The two of you have gotten much healthier and more energetic than before," said Haruka. "Is everyone else okay as well? I can provide healing if

needed..."

Even as she asked about healing, Haruka was casually casting Purification on us. We could run long distances just fine, but we weren't immune to fatigue, and we still sweated from our exertions, so Haruka was probably using Purification to prevent us from getting chilled now that we'd slowed down.

"Thanks, Haruka," said Yuki, "but I feel perfectly fine."

"Likewise," said Natsuki. She tapped her toes. "These new boots were well worth the investment."

The rest of us looked down at our own feet and laughed. We had furnished the materials ourselves, but they had still cost us twenty-five gold coins per pair. They doubled as armor, so they didn't feel light by any means, but they had been carefully crafted by artisans to fit our feet perfectly, so there was no need for us to worry about blisters.

"I'm confident that being able to move comfortably is the key to battles and running," I said.

Touya nodded. "Yeah." He turned to look at the gates. "Hey, looks like it's almost our turn."

The line had moved quite a bit while we were chatting, and we were now close to the gates. I took out my adventurer card, as did Mary and Metea, both of them moving hastily. Their cards were still plain, since they'd had them made just the other day, but Metea stared at her own card before glancing up at me and smiling.



A few months had passed since the last time we were in the city of Pining. Superficially, at least, it seemed as peaceful as before. The main difference this time was the fact that there were fewer people walking the streets; those who were out and about were all wearing thick clothes. I wasn't sure if it was simply because of the weather or if there was some other reason.

"Hmm. It feels more boring than before," said Metea. "Oh well. I'm still looking forward to exploring the marketplace and stuff like that!"

“Just don’t wander off by yourself, Metea-chan,” said Natsuki.

“Mm, I know. I’ll listen and behave.”

Metea was always a very obedient kid, but the reason Natsuki had specifically reminded her was because of what Diola-san had told us before we left Laffan —namely, there were rumors of people going missing in Pining. The total number of missing people seemed to be unclear, but apparently the number wasn’t inconsiderable. There was no concrete evidence of a human carrying out abductions, however; monsters and bandits were common outside of towns, so a certain number of people disappeared every year. Nevertheless, Diola-san had sounded confident that these incidents weren’t natural.

“Well, me and Nao should be fine, but it’s probably best for you girls to avoid walking around alone,” said Touya.

“Mm. We know our hometown, but this is only the second time we’ve been in Pining, so better safe than sorry,” said Yuki.

We had lived in Laffan for long enough that we could now call it our hometown, and we had run through the entire city of Kelg during the mayhem caused by the Holy Satomi Sect, so we had a good idea of what places to avoid in those two towns, but Pining was a different story. We no longer had any reason to be scared of the average thug, but none of us enjoyed beating up other humans unless absolutely necessary, besides which it would be bad if any of us suffered injuries, so it was best to avoid trouble to the extent possible.

“...Missing people, huh?”

If the people who’d gone missing had been adventurers on quests, then their disappearances wouldn’t have qualified as unusual; one could simply assume they had been slain by monsters. However, Diola-san had indicated it was highly likely that people *inside* the city had abruptly disappeared, which suggested some kind of malicious plot. *Are there kidnappers or murderers lurking in this seemingly peaceful city?* The wind that blew down the barren main street felt weirdly cold for some reason, and I shivered as it swept over me.

Natsuki regarded me with a worried expression. “Do you feel cold, Nao-kun?”

I shook my head, then looked up into the sky. “No, not really, but it is winter.”

Natsuki looked up as well. “It seems that snow isn’t very common in this part of the world, but it might be a good idea for us to make some more winter clothing. It does feel cold when we’re idle. Sweaters would be perfect, I think.”

The clothes we usually wore were designed for rapid, strenuous movements during combat. In that sense, they were very practical, but I felt a bit cold whenever we were just walking or sitting for a spell. We could have warmed ourselves with magic, but wearing proper winter clothes was a more conventional solution.

“Hmm. We haven’t run into any sheep-or goat-type monsters yet, so how are we supposed to make yarn?” Yuki asked.

I thought that was kind of a dumb question. It was true that we’d made most of our equipment from materials that we had gotten ourselves by slaying monsters, but...

“I kinda see what you’re getting at, but we don’t necessarily need to make everything ourselves,” Touya chimed in, sounding slightly exasperated. “We can just buy stuff.”

Haruka nodded. “Even if we happen to find sheep-or goat-type monsters in the near future, it’ll still take a significant amount of time to produce yarn ourselves. Spring will roll around by the time we’re done turning that yarn into sweaters.”

“I guess that’s true. In that case, let’s buy some here—we might be able to get some real high-quality yarn,” said Yuki. “Also, let’s restock on cloth while we’re at it. I hope we can find some pastel fabrics for spring clothes.”

Pining was the capital of the viscounty ruled by Viscount Nernas, so there was a good chance that we could find a wide variety of goods in the stores here. Shopping wasn’t the main reason we were visiting Pining, however.

“Let’s deal with work before shopping.” Natsuki chuckled as she looked up at the largest building around.

# Chapter 1—Escort Quest

This was our second time visiting the viscount's mansion, but it looked just as intimidating as before. The gates were ornate, and the two guards outside regarded us with suspicion in their eyes. From an objective point of view, we were a group of armed people, so it was perfectly natural for the guards to be wary of us; moreover, we hadn't booked an appointment this time. However, our only goal today was to deliver the bottles of red strike ox milk, so there was no need for us to meet the viscount in person. Diola-san had told us that we could just drop by the mansion, so we took out the letter of introduction she had written for us and presented it to the guards, who nodded and looked relieved when they'd seen it.

"I see. Please wait here for a bit."

We waited outside of the gates for a few minutes. Soon, the butler who had been at the viscount's side last time appeared from within.

"Greetings, Meikyo Shisui. It's a pleasure to see you all. Please follow me inside."

The butler led us into a room very near the entrance. There was just one table inside; a wooden box sitting atop it was the only other thing that stood out. It was a rather drab room, but it wasn't like we'd been invited as guests, so it was suitable enough for handing over the goods we'd been enjoined to deliver.

"Let's take care of the delivery first. Place the goods on top of the table, if you please."

"Okay," I said.

I took the bottles of red strike ox milk out of one of our magic bags and lined them up on the table. The butler carefully inspected the seals on each before transferring them into the wooden box ten bottles at a time. After placing all of the bottles inside, he sealed the box and put it inside a magic bag that he had apparently prepared for this purpose.

All of the bottles were sealed tight and in good condition, so the butler breathed a sigh of relief. “I hereby confirm the receipt of one hundred bottles of red strike ox milk. Thank you very much.”

“We’re glad to be of service,” I said. “Circumstances conspired to make this a very simple quest for us.”

I handed the butler a receipt, and he thanked us again as he signed it. I responded with further words of gratitude. All we’d had to do to earn one hundred gold coins was transport and deliver the bottles, so it had been a very easy and profitable quest for us.

“I believe that goes both ways. I am very grateful that your party accepted both the escort quest and the quest to prepare and transport the gifts. Diolasama highly recommended your party, and clearly she was right to do so. It’s terribly hard to find high-ranking female adventurers...”

“Was that the main reason we were considered as candidates?” I asked.

“It was a significant factor, yes. Unfortunately, the House of Nernas does not currently employ any female knights capable of fulfilling the role of bodyguard.” He glanced behind me at Mary and Metea. “Incidentally, will the two girls behind you accompany your party?”

The sisters were already much stronger than the average adventurer, but they looked like kids, so it was perfectly normal for others to feel uneasy about their competence.

“Is that a problem? They are still young, but they’re quite strong—”

Before I could explain any more, the butler hastily shook his head and interrupted me. “Oh, not a problem at all! In fact, it would be wonderful if they could participate. Illias-sama is nine years old, so I believe that it would be pleasant for her to have other girls her own age to talk to.”

*Hmm. We brought the sisters with us last time, so the House of Nernas must know that they’re members of our party. With that in mind, he’s probably being honest when he says he’d welcome their participation. The reward for the escort quest is the rights to the dungeon that we discovered, so it’s not like the House of Nernas has to pay us extra because of Mary and Metea tagging along. Yeah, I*

*guess there's no reason to say no as long as the girls perform well.*

The butler's explanation made perfect sense to me, so I nodded. He continued, "If I may ask—your party is staying in Pining until Illias-sama's departure, correct? Have you already decided upon an inn?"

"No. We headed here right after we got through the gates," I said.

The bottles probably wouldn't have broken easily inside our magic bags, but they were still extremely valuable, so all of us had agreed that it would be best to deliver them as soon as possible. As a result, we had made a straight line for the viscount's mansion.

The butler smiled upon hearing my answer, then spread his arms and suggested a possibility we'd never considered. "In that case, please feel free to stay in this mansion. I will prepare rooms for your party."

"Huh? Oh, um, we don't want to cause any inconvenience..."

It would be impossible for us to relax inside a noble's mansion, so I sincerely wanted to turn down the butler's offer. If all of the inns in Pining were dirty, we might have been more willing, but the inn we had stayed at the last time had been decent, and these days, we could easily afford accommodations, so it would be a lot less stressful to stay at an inn.

However, the butler continued to smile as he shook his head in a slightly exaggerated manner. "In fact, it would be exceptionally helpful if your party were to stay here and participate in training sessions with the soldiers serving the House of Nernas. You will, of course, be appropriately compensated for your time."

All of us exchanged glances and pondered this turn of events. We'd assumed we could just slay monsters and bandits and leave the rest to the soldiers who served in the local army; it hadn't occurred to us that we would ever train alongside them.

After a moment, Natsuki spoke up on behalf of the rest of us. "Is there a particular reason you would like for us to train together with the soldiers? As adventurers, we do train on a daily basis..."

"The main objective would be to improve communication and coordination

between your party and our soldiers.”

“Hmm. That’s a good point. I’m confident that we’ll be able to dispatch most monsters ourselves, but any confusion would be troublesome for us,” said Natsuki.

“The soldiers who’ll participate in the escort quest are the same ones who were sent to deal with the mayhem in Kelg, right?” I asked. “We’ve technically worked with them before, so I don’t think we necessarily need to train with them.”

There had been no time for practice back in Kelg, and this quest would presumably be much easier. If it were just a matter of preparing as much as possible during the remaining time before our departure, I could have understood that, but it didn’t feel absolutely necessary to me. I looked to the butler for an answer, and he grimaced, then provided us with more information.

“Mm, everything that you’ve said is absolutely correct. However, many of the household soldiers can’t participate in the escort quest, and they have conflicted feelings about the matter. Would it be possible for your party to demonstrate your abilities and put them at ease? I’m well aware that this is not directly relevant to your party, but...”

*Oh, hmm. Yeah, I guess this is an issue that we can’t ignore.* Illias-sama, the girl that we had to escort, was basically like a princess whom the soldiers had to protect. With that in mind, some of them had to be unhappy about the fact that the House of Nernas had hired adventurers as her bodyguards. We could turn down the butler’s request, but if that decision ended up sowing discord between us and the soldiers, it would be a disaster.

When I glanced around, everyone nodded back at me, so they must’ve all been on the same page. “Very well. In that case, we’ll gladly accept your offer to stay here until the date of our departure.”

The butler smiled and bowed gratefully. “Thank you very much. I will prepare your rooms at once. Please wait here.”



We didn't have to wait long before he reappeared to guide us to our three rooms; he must have prepared things before we even arrived. Touya and I entered the first room, Yuki and Natsuki the second, and Haruka led Metea and Mary into the third. As we were unpacking, the butler returned and asked us to appear before Illias-sama.

He led us to a different room, where Viscount Nernas was waiting along with four women. One of them—a calm and gentle-looking woman, probably in her late twenties—was sitting next to him, so between that and her clothes, I felt certain she was the viscountess. Beside the viscountess was a girl who appeared to be around ten years old—presumably Illias-sama. The two remaining women were wearing maid uniforms, so they were probably accompanying Illias-sama as caregivers.

Viscount Nernas was the first to greet us. "Welcome. Thank you for accepting the escort quest. I can rest at ease knowing that my daughter will be in the hands of advanced adventurers such as yourselves. I'll depend upon your skill."

"Thank you for your trust," I said. "We'll do our best."

Next, the woman sitting beside the viscount introduced herself. "My name is Rillette Nernas. The girl at my side is my daughter, Illias."

"My name is Illias. I am the eldest daughter of the House of Nernas," said the little girl. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"My name is Arlene, and I am Illias-sama's maid."

"My name is Vira, and I, too, am Illias-sama's maid."

Illias-sama's hair was blonde and very long, and she looked to be about 130 centimeters tall. She seemed a lot more mature than I had imagined when I'd been told she was nine, but I wasn't too surprised; I already knew another exceptionally mature little girl in Mary. Nine-year-olds in this world were very different from kids back on Earth.

Arlene-san appeared to be around forty years old, but Vira-san looked much younger; in fact, she appeared to be no older than her mid-twenties. Arlene-san's face was a bit stern by default, while Vira-san had a much gentler expression.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I said. "My name is Nao, and I am a member of the Meikyo Shisui party."

The rest of my party proceeded to introduce themselves. Illias-sama looked surprised and curious when she heard Mary's and Metea's introductions, but she didn't say anything.

Last of all, we finally learned the elderly butler's name. "Ah, it occurs to me that I have yet to introduce myself. My name is Wiesel, a butler in the service of the House of Nernas. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

*Hmm. Actually, the viscount mentioned the butler's name the last time we visited, didn't he? It slipped my mind, since I just think of him as "the butler," but I should probably make an effort to remember his name if I'm going to be staying in this mansion for a while.*

"Your duty as bodyguards will be to protect Illias-sama and these two maids," said Wiesel.

"Are the three of them the only ones who will be traveling with us aside from the soldiers?" I asked.

"Correct," Wiesel replied. "To be clear, there is no need for your party to protect any of the soldiers, and you may abandon even the maids if necessary to improve Illias-sama's chances of survival. The maids themselves have already agreed to this."

Wiesel-san's heartless words made me glance at the maids. Both nodded, their faces solemn. Illias-sama grimaced at their reactions but remained silent.

"Nevertheless, they are my dear subordinates, so I will be eternally grateful if your party protects them to the best of your abilities," Wiesel added.

"Of course. You can count on us," I said.

*Hmm. Is Illias-sama really the only one attending the wedding as Viscount Nernas's representative? You'd expect another adult to accompany her and help her out. Is Illias-sama that mature and bright, or is it just that the House of Nernas can't afford to send anyone else? I guess the maids can offer some support. I dunno... I'm kinda curious, but I guess it's none of my business.*

When Illias-sama noticed that I'd fallen silent, she hesitantly began to speak. "Um, may I ask something? Will the girls behind you participate in combat as well?"

Illias-sama was looking at Mary and Metea. My party had instructed the sisters to remain behind us so that they wouldn't stand out too much, but it seemed Illias-sama was very curious about them.

"Yes. They might not look like it, but they're actually quite strong," I said. "In fact, the two of them are capable of handling any of the monsters in this area by themselves."

"Oh, that's very impressive. How old are they?" Illias asked.

"Mary happens to be the same age as you, Illias-sama," I replied. "Metea is two years younger."

Illias-sama beamed with delight. "That's wonderful!" She clasped her hands, sounding very excited and happy. "In that case, Mary, Metea, would the two of you be willing to become my friends?"

"Uh..."

The viscount and the viscountess were smiling as they watched their daughter; clearly they had no intention of interfering. The sisters, however, were looking up at me as if they had no idea how to react, but there was no way I could say something like "Feel free to say no if you don't want to become friends," so I nodded to indicate that it was up to them to resolve this situation amicably. They both forced smiles as they bowed to Illias-sama.

"Of course. I-It would be our pleasure," the sisters said in unison.

"Mm, it would be my pleasure too," said Illias. "Um, I know this might be a bit sudden, but could you let me touch your ears? This is the first time I've ever met any beastgirls..." She was smiling and staring fixedly at Mary's and Metea's ears.

Illias-sama's excitement was perfectly understandable to me. The sisters' hair had been very coarse when we first met them, and their ears and tails had been in bad shape too, but they had regained their natural fluffiness after the sisters came to live with us and gained access to nutritious meals. In fact, their ears

and tails had gotten so fluffy that I wouldn't have minded spending an entire day rubbing them.

However, beastfolk felt a bit uncomfortable when people they weren't close to touched their ears and tails. According to the sisters, it was similar to what a human would feel if someone touched their butt. Beastfolk probably wouldn't mind if the person in question was family or a close friend, but it would be perfectly normal to be wary if someone of the same sex whom you'd just met for the first time asked for permission to do the equivalent of touching your butt. *Actually, I think another dude asking to touch your butt would be way scarier. If it were me, I'd flee right away or slay him on the spot.*

There weren't many options if the person who had asked was a noble, however. Metea didn't seem to really mind, but a girl Mary's age would undoubtedly be more self-conscious, and indeed, Mary had a troubled look on her face as she glanced back and forth between Illias-sama and me. I couldn't tell her to "just say yes," but neither could I coldly reject Illias-sama's request.

But while I was still pondering what to do, Vira-san stepped forward from behind Illias-sama and spoke up. "My lady, I regret to inform you that your conduct is uncouth. Do you think an ordinary person would ever ask to touch a new friend's hair? Ah, forgive me—I suppose you wouldn't know the answer, Illias-sama, as you have no friends. But for your information, such a request is far from ordinary."

*Whoa, did she really have to go that far? I can't believe a maid was that brutally honest.* But rather than scolding her, the viscount and viscountess just chuckled. For her part, Illias-sama pouted briefly but then nodded.

"Ugh. You didn't have to be so mean, Vira. But I suppose you're completely right. Mary, Metea, I'm very sorry about what I asked just now. May I ask again once we've become better friends?"

"Oh, um, err, okay." Mary sounded like she had no idea how to respond properly.

If everything went according to plan, the round trip would take about twelve days in total. In contrast with her older sister, Metea wasn't the kind of kid to act shy around others, but even she probably wouldn't go out of her way to

interact with a young noblewoman. With that in mind, it was all up to Illias-sama to make use of the time before we departed and on the road in order to become close with the sisters. If she talked to them in her spare time and gradually narrowed the distance between them, there was a chance that they would become good friends by the end of our journey.

“Now then, let us go play together!” Illias exclaimed.

“Huh?” *Whoa, I didn’t expect Illias-sama to be so assertive!* Illias-sama grabbed Mary’s and Metea’s hands and attempted to leave the room with them in tow.

Vira-san blocked the entrance. “A moment, please, my lady.” It seemed to be her role to stop Illias-sama in situations like this. “You still have obligations today, Illias-sama. Please attend to those first.”

Illias-sama reluctantly let go of Mary’s and Metea’s hands. “...Ah, yes. Nobles cannot be negligent in their studies. Ugh. Oh well.”

The viscount chimed in to comfort his daughter. “The Meikyo Shisui party will be staying in this mansion until the time of your departure, Illias. You have plenty of time to talk to them if you wish.”

*Really? Nothing about Mary’s and Metea’s needs? They completely froze up because a young noblewoman grabbed their hands all of a sudden, you know? It’s hard for people of our social standing to say no to a noble’s request.*

Illias-sama pointed at the sisters. “We will certainly play together tomorrow!” she declared confidently.

“Certainly, certainly. If you wish to have free time for play, then make sure you devote adequate time and effort to your studies,” said Vira, gently pushing her out of the room.

Arlene-san bowed to us before following the others.

“I apologize for my daughter’s actions,” said Nernas. “Illias has never interacted with anyone her own age before. She was overjoyed, but having little idea of how to interact with others, she became rather too excited.”

But in spite of his words, the viscount himself sounded pleased, and the

viscountess and Wiesel-san smiled as if in agreement. The viscount and viscountess seemed like doting parents. Wiesel-san, meanwhile, was old enough to be Illias-sama's grandparent and probably regarded her as something like a granddaughter.

"Oh, um, I'm not sure exactly how to put this, but Illias-sama seems like she'll be easy to get along with, so I actually feel quite relieved," I said.

The viscountess's smile deepened as she nodded in response to my words. "It pleases me to hear that. Mary-san, Metea-san, you need not worry about courtesy. If you are willing to join my daughter in play during your free time, it would greatly please me. Should Illias cause you any trouble, simply inform Vira and she will intervene at once."

The sisters both looked nervous, but they nodded.

"I-If you don't mind, then okay," said Mary.

"O-Okay," said Metea.

They seemed unwilling to say no given that the viscountess had asked them so gently. I had no idea what nobles did to keep themselves entertained, and the sisters usually didn't play together very often, but I had a feeling that things would work out fine.

"Um, are nobles busy from a young age?" I asked.

Back on Earth, I'd often heard the saying "a child's job is to play," but apparently nobles in this world were immersed in study from a young age, and common children had to work for a living, so regardless of class, kids didn't have much time for fun.

"Ordinarily, Illias isn't especially busy, but she will be acting as my representative, so she's hard at work learning the necessary etiquette," said Nernas.

According to the viscount, Illias-sama received daily lessons appropriate for a nine-year-old, but in preparing to represent him at the wedding, she had to review some information she'd learned before.

"I see. Is there nobody else who can fulfill that role?" I asked. "Please forgive

me if I'm being rude, but I wonder if Illias-sama isn't a little too young to bear this heavy responsibility..."

"Unfortunately, there is no one else. My eldest son is a babe in arms," Nernas replied. "I'm uncertain how much you know about such matters, but a mere vassal would not suffice as my representative considering the relationship between the House of Nernas and Baron Meredith, so I am left with no alternative."

"Illias's role is simply to deliver a message of congratulations as well as the wedding gifts," said Rillette. "It's nothing terribly difficult, so I have no doubt she will rise to the task, but..."

The viscount and viscountess sighed in chorus, both wearing anxious expressions. They were clearly a bit worried about their daughter. The words "If only the incident in Kelg hadn't happened" slipped out of the viscount's mouth, but the fact that the viscount was still prioritizing Kelg made it obvious that he was a good lord who genuinely cared about his subjects.

"It sure sounds like nobles have it tough," said Yuki, "unlike us carefree adventurers."

"But life can hardly be carefree for adventurers," Nernas said offhandedly. "Your métier is to slay monsters too fearsome even for our household troops. Of course, the work becomes more remunerative as you ascend through the ranks, but it was always my understanding that this privilege is accompanied by a responsibility to undertake more dangerous quests."

Upon hearing that exchange, Wiesel-san looked up and, glancing back and forth between the viscount and my party, smiled to himself. "My lord, what do you think of the idea of having the Meikyo Shisui party take part in Illias-sama's study sessions?"

"Hmm? All of them?"

"Correct, my lord. If they plan to continue adventuring and ascend through the ranks, I believe much of her curriculum would be worth learning for them as well."

"O-Oh, um, we wouldn't want to interrupt Illias-sama's studies..." I said.

We had accepted the escort quest in no small part because we'd been told that we wouldn't need to worry about etiquette when interacting with nobles. It would be a hassle if we ended up having to learn that stuff after all, and seven new students would mean a lot of extra work for the tutors.

But Wiesel-san merely smiled and shook his head at my objections. "I believe that the presence of someone around Illias-sama's age would, if anything, spur her to greater studiousness. There is a chance that having other students learning alongside her will help foster her own sense of initiative. What think you, my lord?"

"Hmm. Stands to reason," said Nernas. "What do you think, lad?"

Although the viscount had asked me, both he and Wiesel-san were looking at Mary. It was possible that a peer would be a positive influence on Illias-sama, and Mary certainly seemed like a perfect fit. She actually wasn't as good at studying as she was at combat, however. She was quite mature for her age, and she wasn't a slow learner by any means, but her academic prowess was pretty average. It would be bad for her if she went down the path of all brawn and no brains, so the girls had been teaching her in their spare time, but it sounded like it wasn't easy.

In contrast, Metea was a quick learner—she could probably have maintained the best grades in her class if she'd been in elementary school—but that was the limit of her academic prowess. She was talented, but she wasn't a genius by any means, and given her age, she probably wouldn't be able to follow if she were suddenly forced to take part in lessons for a young noble. Wiesel-san had said that much of the information would also be pertinent for us, but it would be useless if we continued to avoid any quests that required us to interact with nobles.

I swiftly glanced at my other party members for their opinions, and they nodded back at me; it seemed like everyone had similar thoughts. "...We'll consider the idea if we can fit it into our schedule."

Though I'd tried to reject Wiesel-san's proposal obliquely, he responded with a gentle smile. "Of course. Please feel free to give it some thought."



“Listen up, everyone! These adventurers are the Meikyo Shisui party. They’re the ones who’ve been assigned the role of Illias-sama’s bodyguards! Welcome them to the House of Nernas!”

“Welcome!” the troops roared.

The morning after our arrival, we were visiting the training grounds attached to the viscount’s mansion. Sadius, the captain we’d met in Kelg, was the one who had commanded the soldiers to greet us. There were thirty in total lined up in front of him, all of them young men around the age of twenty. None of them were extremely muscular, but they looked decently fit. They were kind of imposing lined up like that, but I wasn’t scared of them. I wasn’t sure how we would have reacted back when we were still high school students in Japan, but at this point, we’d been fighting monsters for over a year, so the soldiers’ stern expressions didn’t bother us. Mary and Metea seemed a bit intimidated, but they were standing behind us so they wouldn’t draw attention to themselves.

“I’m sure that those of you who participated in the counteroffensive at Kelg know this already, but the Meikyo Shisui party are strong and highly skilled adventurers,” said Sadius. “They will show you exactly how strong they are today, so take advantage of this opportunity to become stronger yourselves!”

“Sir, yes, sir!” the soldiers yelled.

Sadius nodded to himself, then turned to address us. “I’m glad that your party decided to take on the escort quest. I won’t give you any special treatment during training, however. I don’t expect that’s a problem?”

“Of course not. We want to learn and improve too,” I said.

“Mm. We’re looking forward to learning the ropes of combat against human opponents,” said Haruka. “We’re accustomed to combat against monsters.”

The rest of the party nodded in agreement with Haruka and me. Combat against other people was something that all of us still had to master. Thanks to skills like Swordsmanship, we had some basic moves, but when it came to applying that innate knowledge in advanced combat, we were still learning through trial and error. We had learned firsthand how to defeat monsters by slaying them repeatedly, but we could hardly do the same with other people, and there was nowhere in Laffan that we could learn. In that sense, Wiesel-

san's request that we participate in training was a boon to us as well.

"I see. Don't know how much help it'll be, but I'll do what I can," said Sadius. He cast a doubtful glance at Mary and Metea. "By the way, are those kids behind you going to participate as well? They weren't with you back at Kelg, were they?"

Girls around the sisters' age would normally have watched something like this from the sidelines, so the fact that the sisters were wearing clothes suitable for exercise had probably confused Sadius. However...

"Yeah, they're going to participate," I said. "These girls are Mary and Metea. They're the newest members of our party."

Touya grinned. "They're actually pretty strong. In fact, I bet your weaker soldiers will be no match for them."

There was some muttering from the soldiers, but Sadius just responded with a dry laugh. "Don't provoke the troops too much, Touya. Girls, are you two sure that you want to participate? Training isn't going to be easy..."

"Yes! I'm looking forward to learning a lot!" said Mary.

"I'm going to do my best!" said Metea. "I'll show you how good I am!"

Sadius frowned when he saw how motivated the sisters were, but he muttered the words "I guess I can just make them sit out if it seems like they can't handle it" to himself, then looked at me and the rest of my party. "All right. But I use rough language during training, and when I give orders, you better obey."

"Sure. We'll obey orders as long as they aren't unreasonable," I said.

We had no intention of going through a boot camp run by a nasty drill sergeant, nor did we have any intention of forcing the sisters into something like that. Recruits in the local army probably had to go through something like boot camp in order to acquire the guts and mental fortitude necessary to maintain their composure even in extreme situations, but we were free adventurers. We had no intention of throwing away our lives for the greater good of an organization, and we wouldn't hesitate to flee if we had to in order to survive, so we had no plans to become like soldiers even if someone tried to

forge us into that role.

“All right. Let’s start off with a warm-up exercise,” said Sadius. “Everyone, fifty laps around the perimeter of the training grounds! Start!”

After energetically responding, “Sir, yes, sir!” the troops began to run, and my party followed.

The perimeter of the training grounds looked to be about four hundred meters, so fifty laps would add up to about twenty kilometers. I had no idea what kind of warm-up exercise would be typical in the military back on Earth, but people in this world were a lot more physically fit on average, so twenty kilometers probably wouldn’t be an issue for anyone with military training.

As it turned out, the soldiers’ average pace wasn’t very fast, so it was easy for my party to keep up; we were used to running every morning. By the time we’d completed twenty-five laps, there was more separation between the individual runners. Touya, who had the most stamina of any of us, was at the front of the pack with no competition. In fact, he was about two laps ahead, so he wasn’t physically in front of me, but that was very much beside the point. Yuki and Natsuki were tied for second place, but they were actually running slower than usual, and they looked like they still had plenty of stamina left. In terms of position, they were immediately in front of a group of soldiers who were one lap behind them. Some of them had gone pale in the face, probably because the girls had unwittingly thrown them off their usual pace. There were a couple soldiers here and there behind the main group, and I was about a third of a lap behind Yuki and Natsuki. Haruka was running near me, and the sisters were running between us.

“Come on, you can do better than this! Are none of you ashamed of losing to *kids*?! How dare you call yourself soldiers!” Sadius exclaimed. “Whoever comes in last place is getting a wonderful present from me—starting this exercise over immediately!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

The troops who were lagging behind started to run faster. Mary and Metea looked at me as if asking whether to hold back, but I shook my head and maintained my current pace. It was a bit slower than usual for me and a bit

faster than usual for the sisters. I had no idea if Mary and Metea could keep up with me all the way to the end, but the laps were shorter than our usual jogging course, so I felt confident that they would be fine. *Too bad for the soldiers in last place. Oh well.* As for Sadius, he was running right behind Yuki and Natsuki, so he definitely had more stamina than the average soldier.

In the end, not one of the soldiers was able to finish the last twenty-five laps. The sisters had managed to maintain the same pace from beginning to end, and Sadius was the only one who completed fifty laps ahead of them. The primary reason the sisters had been able to finish all fifty laps was that Haruka and I had set the pace for them. The primary reason that the soldiers *hadn't* been able to finish was probably that they had unconsciously tried to match Yuki and Natsuki's pace. These guys probably ran fifty laps on a daily basis, but the majority of them had looked like they were on the brink of exhaustion by the halfway mark.

After all of us came to a halt, Sadius scolded his men, "I don't believe it! We have a few guests joining us and suddenly you men can't even perform routine running? Soldiers should always remain calm and in control of their emotions, and yet you dare to show me *this*?! Bullshit! All of you, drop and give me fifty, now!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

*Uh, weren't you the one who provoked them during that twenty-fifth lap, Sadius? It was when you started yelling at them that the troops lost their cool and temporarily overtook us. I mean, sure, if your words were part of the exercise, then I guess I can't really object, but...*

"All right. Next up is a short rest, then swinging practice," said Sadius. "Get ready, you lot!"

Having finished their push-ups, the troops limped away to get some wooden swords. The swords looked very familiar; in fact, they looked similar to the one that Touya had bought as his first weapon. *Oh, so that was a training sword, huh? No wonder it was so cheap.*

"Can we borrow some wooden swords too, Sadius?" Touya asked.

"Yeah, of course," Sadius replied. "You could also just use your own wea—

actually, I guess that wouldn't work for the kind of sparring I've got in mind. Feel free to take any of the wooden swords."

"Thanks," said Touya. "They all look the same, though."

Indeed, they were identical in shape; they must have been generic weapons for soldiers in the local army. Touya picked up seven swords at random and distributed them to everyone in our party. I had never used a wooden sword on a regular basis, but when I gave mine a couple swings, it felt quite light, so it didn't seem like it would be hard to use. I didn't have the Swordsmanship skill, but I could probably use a wooden sword similarly to how I used a kodachi.

After a few minutes had passed and all of the soldiers were armed with practice swords, Sadius yelled at everyone to gather around. "Caught your breath? Well, line up! Start swinging practice! One! Two! Three!"

The troops immediately began swinging their wooden swords, and my party imitated them. *Hmm. This almost feels like an after-school club activity, so it's actually kind of fun.* But the troops, unlike us, had pained expressions on their faces. Metea looked like she wasn't perfectly comfortable swinging a practice sword due to her size, but stamina, at least, wasn't an issue for her, so she kept at it. Mary—although she, too, was small in stature—used a sword the same size as Touya's on a regular basis, so her movements were very smooth.

Sadius observed the sisters for a bit and then nodded to himself as if quite impressed. "Hmm. Though they be but little, they are good. Their movements are stable. Must've done some core training before."

"Yeah. This kinda stuff is part of our daily training too," said Touya.

"Your party doesn't slack off, huh? I suppose that's what I ought to expect of any adventurer who's reached your rank."

"It's more like we have to continue training in order to survive," I said. "That's the life of an adventurer."

Outside of emergency situations, troops spent most of their time training, but adventurers had to learn in actual combat, so our lifestyle was completely different. We were financially secure enough by now that getting stronger no longer felt like a matter of life and death, but still, we never slacked off when it

came to training.

All of us continued to swing our wooden swords for about thirty minutes. My arms were starting to feel a bit sore, but Sadius raised his voice to announce that swinging practice was over.

“Stop swinging! Next up is a short break, then sparring! As for the pairs...”

Everyone in my party was still standing while the troops were sitting on the ground, and Sadius was paused in thought, glancing back and forth between us and the soldiers. There were a total of thirty-eight people here on the training grounds, Sadius included, so it was possible to make nineteen pairs. *But surely he isn't going to make everyone spar at the same time? I'm nervous at the thought of letting Mary and Metea spar when we can't watch over them. If that's the idea, I'd prefer to say no.*

Touya spoke up about another fundamental problem with this plan. “By the way, Sadius, the only people in our party who use anything like these wooden swords are me and Mary.”

“Really?” Sadius blinked in surprise, then nodded to himself as if he'd suddenly recalled our time working together. “Oh, right. None of you struggled with swinging practice, so I completely forgot. You were using different weapons back in Kelg.”

Haruka casually shrugged, then put in, “Magic is our party's main weapon. As adventurers, we of course also have physical weapons, but...”

“Hmm. So am I hearing proper sparring matches will be difficult?” Sadius asked.

“It'll probably depend on who you put us with,” Yuki replied. “I think our sparring partners need to be people who can put up a good fight. It's a bit difficult to be precise with weapons you aren't familiar with, after all.”

“Mm. If, for instance, we have trouble staying our hands before landing blows, we may end up injuring our opponents,” said Natsuki. “That could be quite dangerous.”

“I see. In that case, I'll spar with each of you, one at a time,” said Sadius. “You're up first, Touya. You ready?”

“Yeah!”

So apparently Sadius and Touya were going to spar while everyone else stood around watching them. The soldiers who’d been sitting on the ground used their wooden swords like walking sticks as they rose and walked a little farther away to make space. Sadius and Touya moved to the center of the circle the soldiers had cleared, and both of them held their wooden swords at the ready. Touya seemed excited to spar with Sadius, probably because his opportunities to fight people outside of our party were so few and far between. The rest of us felt the same way. We all focused our attention on Touya and Sadius to see if we could learn anything from the match that was about to take place.

“Let’s do this!” Sadius said.

“Roger!”

The sound of wooden swords clashing together echoed through the air. The guys crossed swords at close distance a couple more times before swiftly stepping back in unison. Then they grinned at each other.

“Your style isn’t orthodox, but you’re damn strong,” said Sadius.

“Yeah? The way you’re talking me up makes me feel even more confident!”

Touya and Sadius leaped forward and crossed swords again and again, but I was certain that Touya wasn’t fighting at full strength. For one thing, he wasn’t enhancing his physical abilities with mana, and for another, the way he was fighting was a lot gentler than usual. In fact, the battle in front of me looked more like a kendo match. There wasn’t anything inherently unusual about that, but Touya was much more merciless when sparring against other members of our party. *Man, I remember all the times he ended up breaking somebody’s bones. I’m the one who’s suffered the most from your brute strength, Touya! I’ve had to ask for healing from Haruka and Natsuki so many times because of you, dude!*

Sadius forcefully pushed Touya away and took a step back, then clicked his tongue in irritation. He must have realized that Touya wasn’t being completely serious. “Damn it. You’re holding back, aren’t you?”

“Not exactly. This is a sparring match, after all,” said Touya. “No point if both

people can't learn from the experience, right?"

"Yeah, you've got it!" Sadius said with a laugh.

They both laughed as they continued exchanging blows. The girls all had slightly exasperated looks on their faces as they watched the two of them. In contrast, the soldiers were watching quite intently, and all of them looked extremely surprised by how the match had gone so far.

The clashing of wooden swords had gone on for about a minute when Sadius stumbled, fatigued by the rigors of combat. Touya took advantage of that opening and, with a swift downward strike, smacked his opponent's sword out of his hands, then brought the tip upward to point at Sadius's neck. Both of them froze in place.

"Ugh. I lost," said Sadius. "You really got me."

"Well, we were hired as bodyguards," said Touya. He grinned. "Don't you feel a little safer having strong adventurers like us around?"

Sadius nodded, but he kicked the ground in frustration. "Yeah, I do, but that doesn't make me any happier about losing!"

"Only advice I can give you is to work harder," said Touya. "But I appreciate the chance to fight an orthodox swordsman."

"Hmph." Sadius picked up his wooden sword and moved away before pointing at two of the soldiers. "Okay, you two are next! Give it your all!"

The two started to spar right in front of us. Sadius had said he would spar against every member of my party, but there was no way he'd have the energy to face us one after another, so after each match, we watched soldiers spar while he recovered.

Sadius was decently strong; it was no surprise that he'd achieved the rank of captain. Still, the only members of my party who ended up losing their sparring matches against him were Mary and Metea. Natsuki was able to defeat him easily even without using mana to enhance her physical abilities; the remaining three members of my party prevailed despite each of us, myself very much included, getting in some close shaves.

In the end, Sadius was totally shocked by the outcome. “Seriously? Swords aren’t even your primary weapons and I still lost to most of you? Ugh...”

Sadius probably wasn’t too surprised about losing to me, but it seemed like he was having a harder time believing that he’d lost to girls who didn’t use swords. “Everyone I sparred with after Touya except for Yuki and Mary—the ways you wielded your swords were odd somehow, but you’re all damn strong.”

Yuki used a kodachi as her regular weapon, but she technically had the Swordsmanship skill as well, and Mary had learned how to wield a sword from Touya, so that was probably why Sadius had felt their styles were more conventional. Haruka, Natsuki, Metea, and I had only our experience wielding kodachi to rely upon, though we’d still been able to give a good account of ourselves against Sadius. It was probably a bit dangerous to use a wooden sword in the same manner as a weapon like a kodachi with an actual cutting edge, but it hadn’t been an issue here. If anything, it was possible that it had worked to our advantage by confusing Sadius.

“And no question you’d be even stronger if you could use the weapons you know best and cast powerful spells.” Sadius covered his face with his hands, then gazed up into the sky and took a moment to process this shocking information. “Ugh. No wonder the lord hired you!”

Touya casually tossed Sadius a question that was awkward to answer. “By the way, Sadius, how strong would you consider yourself compared to others in this kingdom?”

Sadius laughed in a self-deprecating way. “Me? Are you really asking me that, Touya? Please...” He stopped laughing and kept a straight face as he stared back at Touya. “Well, there are no particularly strong monsters within the lord’s viscounty. It’s a very peaceful region. You know what I mean, surely?”

*I guess he’s implying he’s not very strong. If he were, he could probably go somewhere that he could make more money. But from my experience living in this viscounty for a year, I bet if you can slay an orc with the help of a group of other soldiers, that’s good enough. Sure, it might not be the most lucrative job in the world, but serving in the local army sounds like a safe and stable job.*

Sadius grimaced as if he had an idea of what we were thinking, but he exhaled

to calm himself. “All right! Will you do me a favor and spar with the boys? I’m confident that you’ll have no trouble.” Sadius turned toward the soldiers and raised his voice. “Listen up, you lot! If any of you have complaints about not being assigned to protect Illias-sama, then defeat these adventurers in a sparring match! Additional soldiers may be needed!”

The soldiers’ eyes seemed to light up after they heard Sadius’s words. *Does this mean the soldiers adore Illias-sama, or just that they really don’t like adventurers? Hmm...*

“Are you serious, man?” Touya demanded. “What if we get injured and aren’t in top shape for the escort quest?”

“I don’t think there’s any risk of that happening,” Sadius replied. “And the boys won’t take their frustration out on the kids, so you don’t have to worry about that either.”

Indeed, the soldiers did seem to be looking at the sisters more kindly than at the rest of us. I had no idea if it was because the sisters were around the same age as Illias-sama, but regardless, Sadius was probably right.

“Just so you’re aware, I’m a fragile elf,” said Haruka.

“And I’m a man who lost to a fragile elf—one who doesn’t use a sword, at that,” said Sadius. “There’s not a chance any of you will get injured sparring.”

Having brushed off Haruka’s complaint, Sadius told us to prepare for more sparring. He had four of us at a time fighting soldiers one-on-one, so he must have been exactly as confident in our abilities as he’d claimed.

From the second day onward, Sadius prepared spears and clubs the same size as our kodachi, and we used those weapons for sparring. Sadius explained that he wanted us to help teach the troops how to contend with opponents wielding similar weapons. The matches continued to be easy, but that changed on the third day of training. That was when the many-on-one matches began. The “many” were, of course, the soldiers, and the “ones” were each of us; we had to face two or more opponents at a time. Two-on-one wasn’t so bad, but fending off three or four simultaneously got pretty difficult, so it ended up being an instructive experience for us. We could only do this kind of training as part of a large group, after all. We ended up spending the morning of every day

until our departure training with the soldiers.

Our training with the soldiers continued to go smoothly, and all of us ended up taking part in Illias-sama's study sessions as well. She went out of her way to drop by our rooms and urge us, "Come, let us be on our way!" with a smile on her face, and none of us were able to say no to such a cute little girl. Wiesel-san was standing at her shoulder, so he must've been the one who'd put the idea in her head. Regardless, our only option was to attend these lectures, which turned out to be somewhat similar to classes.

It made me feel a bit nostalgic; it had been a long time since I had last attended a class. Illias-sama had wanted to study with Mary and Metea, so the rest of us technically had the option of letting her take the sisters and skipping class ourselves, but Mary and Metea had looked at us as though begging for help, so we hadn't been able to resist their silent plea either.

Haruka and Natsuki, however, had actually been quite eager to attend classes with Illias-sama. Apparently they agreed with Wiesel-san's assessment that much of the information would be worth learning for us too, and they were concerned that other opportunities to acquire such knowledge would be quite rare.

In fact, it was generally very difficult to learn new skills and information in this world, one of the primary reasons being that there were hardly any teachers. Back in Japan, you could easily find resources like cheap adult education centers, cooking classes, and music classes, but nothing like that was readily accessible here. Even if you were fortunate enough to find teachers, they commanded high compensation as professionals with specialized knowledge.

It was possible to learn combat-related skills by issuing quests to adventurers and employing them as teachers, but only high-rank adventurers were skilled enough to teach others, and hiring them wasn't cheap. On top of that, there weren't any high-ranking adventurers in Laffan. Our party had once discussed the idea of looking for someone who could serve as our mentor and help us become stronger, but we had ultimately dropped the idea. With all of that in mind, we were actually very lucky that we'd gotten the opportunity to train with soldiers and attend lessons of the same kind that young nobles had to attend, all without having to pay a cent.

Still, words like “lessons” and “classes” made me reflexively flinch. *My inner high schooler hasn’t completely disappeared, huh? I mean, sure, I wouldn’t feel apprehensive about having to learn something that would directly help me as an adventurer, but the idea of learning about noble etiquette doesn’t motivate me at all. Oh well. This is a good opportunity, so I guess I’ll do my best to learn.*



“In a situation like this, the greeting one ought to reply with is—”

The class had turned out a bit different from what we’d expected. Illias-sama had guided us to a room where a slightly plump woman was waiting for us. Her name was Sidea, and she appeared to be in her late thirties. We assumed that Sidea-san would be our instructor, but instead, Illias-sama herself went to stand at the front of the room and lecture us. Sidea-san mostly remained silent, only chiming in intermittently to provide additional information or corrections.

Only five days remained before our departure, so on reflection, the whole thing would have been a disaster waiting to happen if Illias-sama hadn’t already finished absorbing all of the information she needed for her role. Sidea-san secretly informed us that her objective was to suss out Illias-sama’s command of the material by having her teach Mary and Metea. At the same time, the sisters would motivate Illias-sama to study on her own; she wouldn’t want to underperform in front of her new friends.

“Okay, I get that the way you greet nobles changes depending on their peerage,” said Metea. “But what are you supposed to say if you don’t know that?”

The sisters and Illias-sama were the main participants in the classes. The rest of us were like background characters; we just sat at the back of the room and listened casually as Illias-sama taught Mary and Metea. I had been a bit worried about whether the sisters would be able to keep up. Mary seemed like she was struggling, but Metea had no trouble absorbing the information and even asked questions from time to time. In fact, Sidea-san had been very surprised by how quickly Metea learned; she had told us that she thought Metea was quite bright.

Unlike nobles, who were educated from a young age, Metea was just a

normal kid of common birth. I already knew she was smart based on how quickly she took in our lessons at home, but apparently she was actually exceptionally smart by anyone's standards.

For the rest of us sitting at the back of the classroom, Illias-sama's lessons weren't particularly challenging by any means. Most of the contents were easy enough to memorize. I had no idea if we'd ever apply this knowledge in real life, but none of it was incomprehensible to us. Yuki, Touya, and I simply listened to Illias-sama as she lectured the sisters.

Apparently the lessons were quite intriguing for Haruka and Natsuki; they were taking notes, so the rest of us could probably just ask to see those if necessary.



My party got a lot of opportunities to talk with Illias-sama after she started teaching Mary and Metea. Our mornings were occupied by training sessions with the soldiers, so etiquette lessons took place in the afternoons, spaced out with a couple of breaks. Illias-sama was brimming with curiosity, and she asked the sisters all sorts of questions during the breaks. I wasn't sure if Wiesel-san had wanted us to spend time with Illias-sama in order to motivate her to study more or to provide her with an opportunity to become better friends with the sisters, but after three days, they had gotten quite comfortable talking with her despite their initial nervousness.

There was an incident during one of our breaks, however. We were enjoying tea and sweets when Metea casually commented that she preferred the sweets the girls made at home. Although it didn't turn into a serious issue, the remark was rather rude, and Mary quickly covered Metea's mouth.

But the main effect of Metea's words was to intrigue Illias-sama, who asked about the desserts we ate at home. We ended up presenting an apple pie that the girls had made.

Illias-sama's eyes were glittering with excitement as she stared at the apple pie on the table in front of her. "Whoa, this looks delicious!"



Sidea-san casually joined us as well. “Does your party make desserts very often?” she asked, looking at us as if slightly puzzled.

Thus far, Illias-sama had mainly paid attention to Mary and Metea; it was the rest of us who had become acquainted with Sidea-san. Given all the information we’d gotten from her, we didn’t mind sharing some apple pie.

“Adventurers like us can acquire ingredients that can’t be bought on the open market, so we do occasionally make desserts during our free time,” said Natsuki. “It’s merely a pastime for us, however; we’re not experts by any means.”

Sidea-san chuckled at Natsuki’s modesty. “One imagines the average chef wouldn’t know how to react if you described something like this as the product of a *pastime*.”

I was confident that the apple pie that the girls had made today would taste much better than the desserts that we’d been served yesterday. It wasn’t just a matter of skill at making desserts. The ingredients and the recipe that the girls used were completely different from the norm in this world. Back on Earth, recipes were the end products of techniques and knowledge accumulated over long spans of history, which constituted a significant advantage for modern chefs.

“Do you not eat desserts all that often, Illias-sama?” Metea asked. “Even though you’re a noble?”

Illias-sama laughed and shook her head. “My father is rather frugal. He doesn’t hesitate to spend when necessary, but he doesn’t waste money on luxuries. He’s very strict about avoiding unnecessary expenses in daily life.”

The apple pie in front of us was a masterpiece that contained a lot of butter made from strike ox milk. The sweet-and-sour aroma of apples mingled very nicely with the rich smell of the butter. Back at home, the girls would pile ice cream on top, and the cream was also made from strike ox milk, so just in terms of the market prices of the raw ingredients, a single slice was worth a whole heap of gold coins. It was honestly a little nerve-racking to think about; even now that we were moderately affluent, our sense of value hadn’t changed that much. *Although, on second thought, Touya had no qualms about burning*

*through dozens of gold coins in a couple of hours at a certain venue.* People like Touya who didn't mind spending that much gold probably wouldn't mind buying a super expensive apple pie, but normal people would never spend that much on dessert. Most desserts disappeared in a few bites, after all.

Haruka nodded to herself. "I see. The lord sounds like a very pragmatic person. Oh, please do take a bite while the pie is still warm, Illias-sama. And please feel free as well, Sidea-san."

The apple pie was still fresh thanks to our magic bags.

"Very well, then. I'll take you up on that offer," said Sidea. After she took a single bite, her eyes widened in surprise, and she covered her mouth.

"Me too!" Illias-sama took a bite too and immediately began gushing about it. "Amazing! This is the first time I've ever had something this delicious!"

Illias-sama swiftly devoured the rest of the slice, and a blissful smile dawned on her face. When we saw Illias-sama's reaction, the rest of us dug in as well.

*Mm, yeah, this is delicious as usual.* The light and crispy texture of the puff pastry crust was completely different from the apple pie snacks that I used to buy at convenience stores back in Japan. The distinctive rich smell of butter was also amazing. The butter itself tasted much better than anything available for purchase back on Earth. The fact that the apple pie was freshly baked probably helped as well. If I absolutely had to come up with something to complain about, then the flavor of the sugar felt a bit off and there was no cinnamon scent, but those thoughts were way too picky to express aloud. And notably, the girls had made this apple pie before Haruka had learned the Refine spell from Aera-san, so the issue with the flavor of the sugar would probably be fixed in future pies.

"...Oh, it's gone." Illias-sama had already finished her portion by the time I was still halfway through my own. She was sitting there with her fork in her mouth, looking like she wanted more.

That elicited a swift response from Sidea. "Pray don't act unladylike, Illias-sama."

"I-I'm sorry..." Illias-sama looked a bit melancholy after that scolding, but if

anything, she seemed more disturbed by the lack of more apple pie to eat. *Hmm. If she really wants more, I wouldn't mind giving her my portion, but it's probably a bad idea to offer a half-eaten slice.* There was one person here who didn't mind sharing, however.

"Illias-sama, do you wanna finish mine?" Metea asked.

"...N-No, but thank you." Illias-sama smiled, but the fork in her hand was trembling a bit, so she must've had to muster a lot of willpower. "Please feel free to finish it yourself."

Sidea-san nodded to herself as if satisfied with Illias-sama's deportment. Nobles undoubtedly had to be raised in a very specific way, but my impression was that life as a noble seemed a bit too strict. Illias-sama had explained proper table manners to Metea and Mary during her lessons, and it had all sounded complicated and annoying to me. The table manners she had described were probably common sense in this world, so I had done my best to memorize them, but I was confident that I wouldn't be able to enjoy my food while observing all those rules.

As Illias-sama reluctantly set her fork down on her plate, Natsuki spoke up. "I'm aware that it's rather late to be asking this question, Illias-sama, but was it really all right for you to eat a dessert that we made ourselves?"

We had gotten permission from Wiesel-san beforehand, so none of us were truly worried, but we had been a bit surprised by how readily he'd granted us permission.

"Of course. The House of Nernas would never have issued a quest to your party if we were suspicious about stuff like that," said Illias. "My dear sister Diola is the one who recommended you."

*Yeah, I guess the viscount wouldn't have engaged our services if he'd thought we might poison his daughter. And anyway, it would probably be much easier to assassinate a target during an escort quest instead... Wait, hold on. "Dear sister"?*

Natsuki looked like she was about to ask another question right away, so clearly I wasn't the only one who'd noticed Illias-sama's choice of words.

“Dear sister Diola?” Natsuki said at last. “Um, pardon me, but what precisely is the nature of your relationship with Diola-san?”

“She is the daughter of my mother’s elder sister, so she’s my cousin,” Illias replied.

*Cousin?! I didn’t expect them to be related that closely! Sure, I assumed that Diola-san was related to the House of Nernas somehow based on the hints she’s dropped before now, but I’m still really surprised.*

Natsuki lifted a finger to her chin. “Does that mean Diola-san is a noble as well?”

Illias-sama frowned as if it wasn’t that simple. “Um, it’s actually rather complicated.”

According to Illias-sama, the head of a noble house and his spouse were the only ones who were treated as true nobles in the Lenium Kingdom. Their scions technically weren’t nobles themselves, but as a matter of custom, they were treated as seminobles one peerage rank below their parents. There were, however, situations in which their parents’ peerage ceased to matter—for instance, if the scion married into a different house or established a new independent house. If they were lucky enough to marry the head of another noble house, then the two would both retain their status, but nobles tended to have many children, so there was a lot of competition. The kingdom technically permitted polygamy for both men and women, but that resulted in an increase in the number of children as well as the number of open slots for the position of spouse, so most children of noble families ended up as commoners.

Diola-san’s father was apparently the head of his house, and as such, he had inherited the title of baron. Ordinarily, a single woman like her would be treated as equivalent in rank to a knight, but her circumstances were a bit complicated. According to Illias-sama, Diola-san’s mother was a concubine; Baron Meredith’s lawful wife was a different woman. However, Diola-san was the baron’s only child, so she was the only candidate for the title of family heir. In a situation like that, Diola-san would normally have inherited her father’s rank after finding a suitor who was willing to marry into her family. The issue was her relationship with the baron’s lawful wife. Diola-san’s status as the heir

would be an obstacle to any child the baron's wife bore, so apparently she refused to allow anyone to join the family by marrying Diola-san. She also refused to acknowledge Diola-san as the baron's rightful heir. At the same time, if Diola-san married into another household, the baron wouldn't have any heirs—at least, not for the time being. That was why Diola-san was still single.

*Man, I kinda feel bad for Diola-san.*

"Baron Meredith's lawful wife is a rather difficult person," said Sidea.

Sidea-san was a private tutor in the service of the House of Nernas, which was presumably how she knew Baron Meredith's wife. Smiling awkwardly, she told us the woman's age, which sounded a bit too old to me. Late childbearing was risky even back on modern-day Earth, so it was presumably much more dangerous in this world. Given the existence of magic and alchemy, it was possible that there were unique methods of maternal care that were unknown to medical science, but there was no way a baron had the necessary connections or money to explore that avenue.

Illias-sama pouted and swung her arms around as she voiced some complaints of her own. "His wife's stubbornness is indeed contemptible, but even worse is the baron's indecisiveness! If he doesn't want to acknowledge my dear sister Diola as his rightful heir, then why doesn't he just allow her to live her life?! It's so unfair!"

Diola-san was still decently young by modern Japanese standards, but in this world, marriage started to become difficult for people around her age, so it made perfect sense to me that Illias-sama felt so frustrated on her behalf. She went on to tell us that Diola-san herself had almost lost all hope of finding a husband by now. If she was really unfortunate, she might end up as the second wife of some nasty nobleman. She'd decided that if she couldn't inherit her father's title, it would be preferable to remain single forever. She'd also contemplated adopting a child as her heir in the event that she did somehow inherit the title of Baroness Meredith.

"I understand that Diola-san's rank is currently equivalent to a knight's, but there is still a chance that she will become a baroness in the future as is, isn't there?" asked Natsuki. "That being the case, why is she working at the

Adventurers' Guild?"

"My dear sister's noble household doesn't own any land, so she had to find a job to provide for herself," Illias replied. "She also told me that she hoped she might find someone to marry in the process."

Compared to ordinary women in this world, most adventurers married late, so Diola-san technically still had a chance, but I felt like Laffan wasn't the most suitable place for that objective. I had heard before that Diola-san had been in the position of vice-branch master of the local guild for quite a while now, so it sounded like her plan had yet to bear fruit.

"Life for nobles sounds real tough," said Metea, shaking her head with an air of exasperation. "I like how carefree the adventurer life is."

Illias-sama immediately rejected that opinion. "Well, I believe that life is actually harder for adventurers. Although, if your party can make sweets like this..." She ended up staring at the empty plate in front of her.

However, Mary hastily chimed in to correct Illias-sama's misconception. "U-Um, Illias-sama, life as an adventurer is actually much more difficult than you might think! A lot of adventurers can't afford a proper meal or a place to sleep! Haruka-san's party is a special exception!"

"O-Oh, I figured as much. Your party seemed very different from what I've heard about from my dear sister Diola, so I was a bit confused." Illias-sama nodded and glanced at the rest of us with apparent relief.

All of us laughed as we nodded back. I figured the risk was slight, but it would have been really bad if Illias-sama had decided she wanted to become an adventurer herself.

The five days before our departure passed very quickly, partly because our mornings and afternoons were occupied. We ventured into town to buy things on a few occasions, but we spent most of our time productively, training and studying at the lord's mansion.



When the day of our departure arrived, we all gathered outside the entrance of the lord's mansion with the ten soldiers who had been selected to serve as

Illias-sama's bodyguards. Our party of seven, plus Illias-sama's two maids, made twenty people total. Viscount Nernas, Rillette-sama, and Wiesel-san were standing in front of the soldiers, who were lined up in an orderly formation. A horse-drawn carriage had been prepared for Illias-sama.

Our planned route would take us through the mountains south of Pining. Along the way, we would stop in a town called Mijala in the southeast of the viscounty; from there, we would travel to Clewily, the capital of Baron Dias's domain. Illias-sama and her companions were the only ones who would ride in the carriage; the rest of us had to walk.

"My squad of ten has assembled, sir! We are ready for duty!"

"Mm. I'm counting on you."

"Yes, sir! We will fulfill our duty even at the cost of our own lives!"

The man who'd responded to the viscount with a salute was named Ekart. He was the commander of the soldiers who'd been assigned to escort Illias-sama, and my party had become acquainted with him over the last five days through the morning training sessions. He was slightly weaker than Sadius but still stronger than the average soldier. He was the overall commander but wouldn't issue orders to my party. In an emergency, the troops would gather around Illias-sama's carriage and my party would move freely to dispatch any attackers. In essence, we were something like an independent squad.

The viscount strode up to my party. "I'm entrusting my daughter to your party, Meikyo Shisui."

I saluted him. "We will do our best to protect her, sir."

I wasn't quite willing to risk my life to protect Illias-sama, but she was a cute girl, so I was motivated to work as hard as I could without putting myself in true danger. I wasn't sure how I would actually handle a situation in which I myself was in danger of dying, however. *Hmm. Actually, I'm pretty sure my party wouldn't risk our lives to save someone else. It's not like we're professional bodyguards, after all. Most of us were normal high school students just a bit over a year ago.*

Viscount Nernas grimaced as he walked over to the carriage to address Illias.

It seemed he truly regretted the fact that he was unable to discharge this responsibility himself.

"I'll be going, father," said Illias.

"Mm. I'm sorry for putting this burden on you, Illias," said Nernas.

"Not at all. This is simply a responsibility I have to fulfill as the daughter of a noble household. Please rest at ease and entrust this task to me."

Illias-sama sounded a bit nervous despite her confident words, and Rillette-sama walked over to hug her.

"Don't worry so much, Illias. You are not yet of age, so a few minor faux pas shouldn't matter. Your father will smooth things over if it comes down to that, so have no fear."

Illias-sama's face looked a bit less tense after she heard her mother's reassurances. "...Thank you, mother."

"Arlene, Vira, I'm counting on the two of you as well," said Rillette.

"Yes, ma'am," the maids replied in unison.

"Mother, father, I'm heading off!" Illias exclaimed. She hopped into the carriage first, followed by the two maids and the sisters.

The viscount had requested the sisters' presence in the carriage ahead of time. For one thing, they had become fast friends with Illias-sama; for another, the sisters, although not the strongest members of our party, were decently skilled at combat. Mary and Metea were the perfect candidates for bodyguards who Illias-sama could also enjoy chatting with, so the two of them had been selected as her companions. The rest of us were fine with this arrangement; it meant that the sisters would be in a safe place.

Once the doors of the carriage closed, the entire squad began to move with my party in the front. The plan was to head straight for Mijala, which would take about four days if everything went smoothly. Mijala wasn't actually very far from Pining, but the highway would lead us through the mountains and into Baron Dias's domain. It didn't sound like the route was well paved either. In fact, the physical path was likely to be the most dangerous part of the journey.

The highway from Mijala to Clewily was well paved, however, so after we reached Mijala, the remainder of the journey would be safer. Based on the research we had done ahead of time, there weren't any dangerous monsters along the way, but considering Viscount Nernas had thought it necessary to hire us as bodyguards, we couldn't afford to let our guard down.



The beginning of the journey was quite peaceful. As we'd been forewarned, the highway wasn't well paved, but it posed no obstacle to the carriage. The only monsters that appeared were goblins, so there was no need for the soldiers to engage them; my party instantly dispatched them with magic. We weren't familiar with camping out in the open and adhering to a rotation of three lookout shifts, but that routine would only last a week, so it wasn't anything we couldn't endure. The biggest issues could be resolved through use of Purification, after all. None of the soldiers were capable of using magic, but I did learn, to my surprise, that Vira-san had some command of Light Magic. Human mages were very rare, so that must've been one of the reasons she'd been selected as Illias-sama's maid. As a result, Illias-sama and her maids remained clean for the duration of the journey.

The food we ate along the way was a bit disappointing, however. Our client was supposed to cover the costs of food for the duration of the quest, so everyone was served the same victuals, but the magic bags that the House of Nernas owned didn't seem to be as high performing as our own. Arlene-san and Vira-san used the same ingredients to cook for everyone—ingredients with long shelf lives, chosen because there wasn't much free space in the magic bags with all the bottles of red strike ox milk—and although they weren't bad at cooking by any means, the meals they produced were ultimately limited by the ingredients.

If my party members had chosen to eat our own food, it could have become a bone of contention with the soldiers, so even Metea and Illias-sama refrained from complaining, but it was obvious that they weren't satisfied with the food on offer. Starting with our second meal on the road, the girls who had the Cooking skill offered to help, and from that point onward, the food improved a bit, but it was still way worse than the fare we were used to, so...

“Oh, there’s a tusk boar nearby,” I said.

It was the afternoon of the second day when I sensed the presence of a tusk boar in the forest to our left. I turned in that direction.

“Yeah, you’re right,” said Touya. “Seems pretty big. We can ignore it if we want to, but...”

Tusk boars were technically classified as animals rather than monsters. A lone boar usually wouldn’t attack a large group of people, but there was a chance that it would charge at us if something startled it. I nodded at Touya, then walked over to where the girls were positioned around the carriage.

“There’s a tusk boar nearby,” I said, pointing in its direction. “Be carefu—”

Before I could get the words out of my mouth, the doors of the carriage were flung open.

“Grilled meat! Finally!”

Metea hopped out of the carriage. She looked very excited as she drew her kodachi and charged in the direction I’d pointed. When the tusk boar caught sight of Metea, it panicked and charged her, but she dodged it with ease and sliced off its head in a single blow.



“Victory!” she crowed.

Blood gushed from the stump of the tusk boar’s neck, and after a few steps, it collapsed to the ground. Metea was beaming as she turned around and started back toward us. There was a dramatic contrast between her innocent smile and the bloodstains on her face, and the sight of her dragging a carcass much bigger than her own body would undoubtedly have been shocking to someone who hadn’t seen this before, but...

“That was amazing, Metea!” Illias exclaimed.

Illias-sama looked quite happy as she exited the carriage and applauded Metea. Apparently the young noblewoman’s mental fortitude was greater than I would have assumed. That was probably one of the reasons Illias-sama had been considered fit to represent the viscount in a formal capacity.

Metea’s actions were absolutely unacceptable for a bodyguard, however. The soldiers looked shocked at what had just happened, and Natsuki had a serious expression on her face as she beckoned Metea over before the troops could react.

“Come here, Metea-chan.”

Metea tilted her head in confusion, but she immediately let go of the tusk boar and walked over to Natsuki. “Hmm? Okay.”

Natsuki wiped the blood from Metea’s cheeks before gently admonishing her. “Listen carefully, Metea-chan. It’s fine for you to act somewhat independent during our usual adventures, but we are currently serving as bodyguards. With that in mind, can you reflect on your own actions just now?”

Metea was a quick thinker, so she instantly understood what Natsuki was getting at. “Oh, right. I messed up. I’m very sorry.” As she apologized, she flattened her ears and tail.

But honestly, my party was kind of at fault too. We were adults in this world and had to serve as role models for Metea; it was just that up to this point, we had mostly avoided quests that would restrict our behavior in this way. In fact, we’d spent most of our time freely hunting monsters and gathering materials. We had explained what an escort quest entailed ahead of time, but Metea was

still a kid, so the thought of delicious food had been enough to distract her.

“Mm. I’m glad that you understand.” Natsuki smiled and patted Metea on the head. “Please be more mindful in the future.”

I lowered my own head toward Illias-sama. “I’m very sorry about the fact that one of our party members acted without leave, Illias-sama.”

Metea hastily bowed her head as well. “I-I’m very sorry!”

Illias-sama just smiled and shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. You can do as you please—as long as you also carry out your duties. Besides, I’m kind of curious about what grilled meat is. Can you tell me more, Metea?”

“It’s wonderful and delicious! At home, they use all kinds of tools to cook the meat for us!” Her face glowing with delight, Metea pantomimed cooking.

“Wonderful and delicious, you say?” Illias-sama glanced at Haruka.

Illias-sama must’ve been thinking about the apple pie that the girls had served the other day. Her curiosity about the girls’ cooking was only natural, especially since the meals we’d been having lately hadn’t been very good.

Haruka met Illias-sama’s gaze with an awkward smile, then turned to look at Arlene-san. “Since Metea went out of her way to slay this tusk boar, may we have permission to use it for tonight’s meal? We’ll prepare portions for everyone, including the soldiers, of course.”

At those words, the soldiers cheered, but when Arlene-san glanced at them, they fell silent and forced their faces into a semblance of seriousness.

“I have complete confidence in your culinary abilities, but are you certain about this?” Arlene asked. “One of your party members felled the tusk boar. If you were to sell it, you could no doubt earn some coin...”

I glanced at Metea as I responded, “Yeah, we don’t mind. Anyway, we’re all in the mood for a hearty meal.”

Arlene-san sighed when she noticed that Illias-sama was staring at her as if hoping for a positive answer. “Very well, then. You have my permission.”

Metea and Illias-sama cheered in unison the moment they heard Arlene-san’s words, then faced each other and clasped hands. It seemed they had become

even closer during their time together inside of the carriage. For her part, Mary was watching the two of them with an awkward expression. *Hmm. I guess this means Illias-sama might actually get to touch Metea's fluffy ears in the near future, huh?*

While I was speculating about Illias-sama's intentions, Mary walked over to me and apologized on her sister's behalf. "I'm sorry about the trouble that Met caused, Nao-san. I should have kept a closer eye on her, and yet..."

"Hmm? Oh, I think you've got the wrong idea, Mary." I told Mary to follow me as I walked over to the tusk boar to dress it.

"It's true that you should have paid more attention to her, but that 'you' is more like a 'we,'" I said. "Metea is your younger sister, but she's also everyone's younger sister. There's no need for you to handle everything yourself."

Yuki, who'd fallen in beside us, nodded. "Yeah, all of us could have done a better job of warning Metea, me included. Actually, I think you should just focus on cheering Metea up if she feels down after getting scolded."

"Met isn't the kind of person who gets down in the dumps easily, but thank you very much," said Mary with a laugh. "Oh, and I'll handle dressing the tusk boar. Can you please stand guard instead, Nao-san?"

"Sure. I'll leave it to you."

Touya and the others were still on guard, so I felt like there was no real need for me to join them, but we had to watch a much larger area than usual due to the fact that we were traveling with a larger party. I stepped back to allow Mary to take over, and she nodded at me with a smile on her face.

"Thank you. Met! If you want to eat grilled meat, come help me out!"

"Oh, okay!"

Metea hastily dashed over, and the two of them started to gut the tusk boar. They weren't as fast as the rest of us, but when they worked together, it didn't take them much time.



"Is one meant to use these nets to cook the meat?" Illias asked.

"Yes," Natsuki replied. "You can also grill meat on skewers, but nets are more convenient for a variety of reasons."

Illias-sama had been brimming with curiosity as she watched the girls prepare our dinner. Touya, the soldiers, and I had been assigned the task of preparing the fire and the stoves, and once we'd set those up, the girls had placed big wire meshes over them. The net was something that Tomi had made for us, and it was big enough that we could easily cook enough for all seven members of my party despite the fact that some of us were big eaters. However, the girls had to cook for a total of twenty people tonight, so they were also using three of our spare nets.

"Pray tell, is there a reason you're slicing the meat so very thinly?" Illias asked.

"Yeah. Thin slices cook faster and more evenly," Yuki replied. "I guess you could say it makes it easier for anyone to cook, y'know?"

Ease of cooking was, indeed, one of the benefits of grilling meat on wire meshes. There was no need to cook meat slowly, like on a skewer; all you had to do was lay thin slices of meat on the mesh for a while, and then you could pick them up and dip them in sauce. The procedure was so simple that anyone could do it, and it didn't take a lot of time either. It was true that you had to spend some time beforehand slicing up the meat, but thanks to the girls, slices of meat had already been piled up on the plates; it had taken them no time at all. Once they moved the plates to the four stoves, everything was ready to go. All that was left was for everyone to cook and eat as they pleased.

Metea was standing next to Illias-sama and guiding her step-by-step. "I'll show you how to grill meat, Illias-sama! You use these tongs to put it on the net!"

Mary, looking rather nervous, was watching the two from nearby, but Illias-sama seemed to be having a good time. "A-Ah, yes, I see! O-Oh my, the meat is sizzling rather loudly!"

"That's fine. You just gotta pay attention, 'cause it cooks very fast," said Metea. "Flip it upside down once it changes color."

"Oh, it changed color now," said Illias. "Like so?"

"Yeah. And make sure and use a different pair of tongs. You should never use the same pair of tongs that you used to put it on the net!"

"I see. I'll keep that in mind."

I was very proud of how well Metea had remembered all of our instructions to her. It was important to take precautions against food poisoning, after all. I had yet to suffer food poisoning in this world, probably thanks to the Robust skill, but if we'd failed to take simple precautions, that would have been horribly negligent of us. There weren't any hospitals in this world, so we had to be more careful than back on Earth.

"All that's left is to dip the meat in some dipping sauce," said Metea. "The dipping sauce tastes very good too!"

"This was rather easier than I thought it would be," said Illias. "Oh, you're right! The dipping sauce is really quite good!"

The sauce we'd provided was one the girls made routinely, so we could always keep it in stock in our magic bags. In a way, the sauce was actually the most essential part of grilled meat, so we had provided enough for everyone here. Grilled meat seasoned with just salt wasn't bad either, but it was easy to get tired of the taste.

As for the troops, we'd mostly left them to their own devices. They were grilling and eating meat at a rapid clip, probably thanks to the flavor of the dipping sauce. I was a bit worried about them getting upset stomachs from rare meat, but I heard Ekart yelling, "That meat isn't fully cooked yet, soldier!" from time to time, so fortunately, someone was taking charge.

There were four wire meshes in total. My party was using one with Illias-sama, the two maids were using another, and the soldiers were using the remaining two; basically, we'd divided them evenly between two groups of ten people. Our space was a lot more peaceful than the area around the troops; we weren't eating quite so voraciously. Still, certain members of my party were demonstrating big appetites, per usual.

"Why, this dipping sauce is heavenly, Arlene-san!" Vira exclaimed. "Never in my life have I had the like!"

“Calm yourself, Vira,” Arlene admonished her. She glanced at Haruka. “It is certainly delicious, however. Might you be willing to share the recipe?”

Haruka smiled awkwardly. “I’m sorry, but the recipe is an elf secret...” she said, shaking her head hesitantly.

Inspiel sauce was the main ingredient in the dipping sauce. Apparently the exact recipe varied between each elf household, but regardless, it was an elf secret that Aera-san had shared with us, so it wasn’t really something we could casually teach outsiders, at least not without her permission. We’d also mixed in some other ingredients that were hard to obtain in order to make our own unique inspiel sauce, which was probably another reason that Haruka had replied with a no.

However, Arlene-san didn’t seem offended; she nodded to herself and said, “I suppose that stands to reason. Recipes are valuable assets. In that case, would your party be willing to sell your sauce? I’m confident that when the head chef of the House of Nernas hears tell of this sauce, we will want to acquire some, besides which Illias-sama would love to have it at home.”

As she spoke, Arlene-san glanced at Illias-sama, who was really devouring her meat now, as if to catch up with Mary and Metea. In fact, Illias-sama was enjoying the vegetables too; it looked like the dipping sauce had helped stimulate her appetite. In this world, vegetables hadn’t been bred for taste as extensively as they had back on Earth, so a lot of them tasted kind of bad. The fact that Illias-sama was enthusiastically snapping them up was evidence of the power of dipping sauce.

“Hmm. What do you think, Nao?” Haruka asked.

“Sure, why not? It shouldn’t be an issue as long as we don’t sell too much. I think it’s definitely worth it.”

Specifically, I felt confident that selling some of our sauce would be a small price to pay in order to build a connection with the House of Nernas. If we wanted to continue living in this viscounty, we’d benefit greatly from maintaining a good relationship with the lord, and it was possible that the House of Nernas could even provide us with assistance in the future if we ever ran into a sticky situation involving other nobles.

"Won't the price have to be pretty high?" asked Touya. "I thought the ingredients you used were all kind of expensive."

Natsuki nodded in agreement. "Mm. We've managed to obtain most of the ingredients ourselves rather than buying them, but their market prices are far from cheap."

Plus, the girls had been constantly improving our version of the sauce; this version included the fruit we'd harvested from the Summer Resort Dungeon. Inspiel sauce stopped fermenting when heated, so the fruit that the girls had tossed in hadn't fully broken down, and the final product had the flavor of fresh fruit. That meant that commoners couldn't possibly afford it, and I wasn't sure how much money Viscount Nernas would be willing to spend either, considering he was supposedly very frugal.

"...Well, if you're willing to accept it at Laffan, then we can sell it roughly at cost," I said.

Laffan was a town under Viscount Nernas's rule, so there was presumably routine trade between Laffan and Pining. As long as the House of Nernas could handle transporting the sauce, it wouldn't be too much work for us.

Arlene-san nodded, looking relieved. "It's only natural that such a delectable sauce should be expensive. I believe your idea ought to work, but I cannot make the decision myself, so please allow me some time to discuss this matter with my superiors once we return to Pining."

"Okay. I guess the viscount and the head chef probably need to taste it for themselves before they can make a decision," I said.

"Mm, thank you for your understanding," said Arlene. "Oh, please excuse me for a moment. It appears that I need to intervene..."

It looked like Illias-sama had eaten so much that she'd been rendered immobile, but Arlene-san was actually looking at the troops, who were still devouring tusk boar meat. Given their ages and their profession, they looked like their stomachs could handle a lot more, but I wasn't sure if it was right for them as bodyguards to become so absorbed in feasting. The troops finally realized their mistake when they noticed Arlene-san heading their way, but by that point, it was too late.

“What is this display of gluttony?! Are you all really capable of protecting Illias-sama like this?!”

Arlene-san scolded the troops as if they were ill-behaved children, and they scrambled to their feet. When the rest of us saw that, we decided it was time to stop eating. Metea was the only one who kept at it, but she ended up passing out next to Illias-sama not too long afterward.



Our peaceful journey took a turn on the third day. The highway narrowed as we approached the mountains on the border of the viscounty, and the surface of the road itself got rougher, increasing the frequency of shocks to the horse-drawn carriage. The forests to either side were starting to block our line of sight; the trees were closer to the highway. I felt a bit uneasy for some reason, so I kept a watchful eye on our surroundings just in case.

We stopped the carriage upon arriving at a spot where a third of the highway ahead appeared to have collapsed.

“What is this, erosion from rain?” Touya asked.

“Maybe,” I replied, “but I’m not an expert, so who knows.”

The hole in front of us was about a meter wide and a meter long but only about fifty centimeters deep, so it certainly looked like erosion.

Ekart walked over to us and looked down into the hole as well. “Hmm. That’s a rather large hole. I suppose we’ve got no choice but to fill it in.”

Ekart explained that the soldiers had brought boards to use as makeshift bridges in the event of this kind of obstruction, but apparently Illias-sama wished for us to repair damaged sections of the highway, at least within her father’s viscounty. It sounded like a lot of work, but we couldn’t ignore our client’s wishes, so we glanced at each other as if to say, *Well, I guess there’s no avoiding it.*

But before we set to it, Ekart interrupted us. “Oh, don’t worry. We’re no match for your party when it comes to combat, but we’re quite used to this sort of thing. We’ve recently gotten some new tools as well. You there—go fetch them!” As Ekart turned to give instructions to the soldiers behind him, he

seemed almost elated at the prospect of running into a job that the troops could do themselves.

“Yes, sir!”

Three soldiers brought over a tool that could indeed be used to fill holes. When Touya saw what it was, he let out an involuntary “Oh...”

It was one of the shovels that Gantz-san and Tomi had made based on Touya’s idea. Apparently their shovels had now made it all the way to Pining.

Ekart began to explain the shovel, sounding very proud. “This tool is quite useful for digging, so—hmm? Something the matter, Touya?” he asked, having noticed Touya’s awkward expression.

Touya avoided directly answering Ekart’s question; it seemed he was too embarrassed to explain that he was the reason shovels existed in this world. “Uhh, anyway, we can just fix this hole with magic.”

“Magic, you say?”

“Right, Yuki?” Touya asked.

“Yeah, something like this will be no problem. We’re not in a dungeon, after all.” Yuki sounded very relaxed as she answered Touya’s question. It was much easier to pass mana through soil than the walls of a dungeon. In fact, it would probably only take us a few minutes if I worked together with Yuki, so there was no need for shovels.

“...How much mana do you have in reserve?” Ekart asked. “And more importantly, are you truly capable of using Earth Magic?”

“I’ve still got plenty of mana left,” I replied. “I’m an elf, so I’m good at magic.”

“I see,” said Ekart. “Well, I suppose there’s nothing for us to do, then.”

“...Roger,” the soldiers replied in unison.

Ekart and his subordinates looked a bit disappointed despite the fact that there was no need for them to engage in manual labor. *Hmm. Should we assign them some tasks? Actually, their job is to protect the carriage, so it’s not like we can ask them to slay monsters in our place, right?*

As I was ruminating on what to do, Haruka tapped me on the shoulder and, after I turned toward her, shook her head. “We only need to worry about our own jobs, Nao. Don’t overthink things.”

“Yeah, exactly,” said Yuki. “Everything has gone fine so far, but this is probably the most dangerous leg of our journey. We need to get outta this area as soon as possible.”

“Mm. And in any case, there would be fewer people available to serve as bodyguards if we assigned some to assist us in fixing the highway,” said Natsuki.

Yuki and Natsuki were basically telling me to snap out of it too, so I just laughed and shrugged. “Well, it wasn’t like I was completely serious. Anyway, let’s get to work, Yuki.”

“Righto. Let’s harden the ground too while we’re at it,” said Yuki.

Road maintenance usually took a lot of time, but we finished it in an instant thanks to Earth Magic. We immediately resumed our journey, but...

“There’s something suspicious ahead,” I said.

We’d been walking for a while, and now my Scout skill was detecting some signals in the forests. They weren’t monsters. I glanced at Touya and noticed that he’d already been looking my way, so we exchanged a nod, and when the girls noticed our reactions, they walked over to join us.

“What’s wrong?” Haruka asked.

“Oh, well, I think there are some bandits lying in ambush ahead of us,” I replied.

“Are you certain?”

“Pretty certain. There’s no way that people would just be out here camping,” I said. “And besides, there’s a group of two on the left side of the highway and a group of three on the right, and all of them are staying completely still.”

“If we were back on Earth, they might be forest rangers, but that’s pretty much impossible in this world,” said Yuki.

“Yeah. Too easy to bump into monsters in the woods,” said Touya.

"Well, the five of us could probably be competent forest rangers, but that's not important right now," said Natsuki. "I'll go inform Ekart."

"Okay," I said.

Natsuki walked over to the carriage and brought Ekart back right away.

"Do I understand correctly that there are bandits lying in wait?"

"Yeah, that's right," I said. "Ekart, can you tell the troops to protect the carriage and watch out for arrows? We'll take care of the bandits if they actually attack us head-on."

I was almost sure that the people ahead were bandits, but we couldn't simply unleash a volley of spells on them without being sure.

However, Ekart seemed a bit confused by my response. "There's no need to wait until we're attacked. Feel free to take the initiative. Anyone who behaves in a suspicious manner on the highway that the viscount's carriage is traveling is presumed guilty. They can hardly object if we attack them."

"O-Oh, really? Okay, then," I said. "I guess we'll use magic if we're in danger."

It sounded like nobles enjoyed a lot of license when it came to physical force, especially compared to how hard it was for violence to qualify as self-defense back in Japan. However, Ekart added that this was standard protocol even for normal caravans, so apparently it was generally understood that people who acted suspiciously in suspicious places bore the blame for whatever fate befell them. *Hmm. That sounds like something my party had better keep in mind too given that we sometimes lurk in the woods hunting monsters or animals.*

Ekart added that we would be fine as long as we didn't hide near the highway, however. Regardless, even now that he'd given us permission to strike first, none of us were so coldhearted as to kill a bunch of strangers on sight, so we decided to wait and see how the suspicious people ahead would act. Allowing our potential assailants the chance to launch the first attack put us at a disadvantage, but the main reason we'd chosen to hold off was that Haruka now had access to the spell Wind Wall. She'd been practicing ever since we accepted the escort quest, and she was already proficient enough that she could easily block arrows from a considerable distance. Wind Wall was a Level 6

spell, but Haruka was able to use it despite the fact that her Wind Magic wasn't Level 6 yet. The flexibility of magic in this world was convenient in that way. And of course, the ideal outcome would be for us to get past these people without Haruka having to use Wind Wall at all, but...

A tree collapsed onto the highway in front of us, blocking the road, and Touya sighed. "Yep, they're definitely bandits."

The moment Haruka saw the tree fall, she unleashed her magic. "*Wind Wall!*"

No sooner had she cast the spell than arrows came flying at my party out of the surrounding woods. Wind Wall deflected all of them, and we shot three Fire Arrows in return, but...

"...Seriously?"

Each of our three Fire Arrows had been aimed at a different spot, but all of them missed; our targets had dodged. Of course, I was well aware that human opponents were different from monsters, but I was still confident enough in my Fire Arrow that I was a bit shocked.

"Be careful, Touya!" I hollered. "These guys might be professionals!"

"I know, dude!"

Five people leaped out of the trees—exactly the number that my Scout skill had detected. Their faces were covered by masks, and they remained completely silent as they split into two groups. A group of three headed our way, while the other two moved toward the carriage.

*Are these guys really bandits? They seem a lot more coordinated than the ones we slew before. Well, no matter who they are, our job remains the same.*

Touya and Natsuki took on one assailant each, while Yuki and Haruka faced off against the third member of the group of three. As for the two who were approaching the carriage, it sounded like Ekart and his troops were ready for them.

"Divisions two and three, confront each bandit in groups of three!" Ekart yelled.

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Three on one represented a significant numerical advantage, but at the same time, none of the soldiers were that strong. I was about to go back them up just as a precaution, but...

“Nao, sorry, but I need some help over here!” Touya called, sounding a bit nervous.

He was facing off against a guy who looked every bit as big as him; the bandit was wielding a slightly thick shortsword. Even Sadius had been no match for Touya, but it looked like he was having a hard time keeping up with this assailant.

“Who are you?!” I demanded.

I hadn’t expected an answer; I’d simply been trying to draw the guy’s attention as I lunged with my spear, but he remained silent and easily dodged my attack, which even Touya had trouble dealing with in sparring matches.

“Is this guy really strong, Touya?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Touya replied. “And he has way better fine control than me. My raw strength and speed are the only reason I haven’t gotten completely overwhelmed.”

Beastmen were stronger and more agile than humans, and Touya was also enhancing his physical abilities with mana, so the fact that the assailant had survived the clash meant that he was very dangerous. I cast an uneasy glance at the girls, but their opponent didn’t seem to be as strong. The girls appeared to be struggling a bit, but they were holding their opponents off just fine.

Meanwhile, at the carriage, the soldiers were now fighting the attackers in groups of four. Nobody had been slain on either side, so the biggest danger was probably the guy in front of Touya and me. We still had Ekart, one of his soldiers, and the sisters as Illias-sama’s final line of defense, but none of them would be able to stop this guy, so our mission would be doomed if he managed to get past Touya and me. If there was another group of enemies that hadn’t attacked yet, Touya and I would be doomed too. My Scout skill hadn’t detected any other signals, but I was well aware that it wasn’t perfect due to countermeasures like the Sneak skill.

*Ugh. We really can't afford to lose anyone here.* I swung my spear in a broad arc to force my opponent to fall back; at the same time, I myself fell back and yelled loud enough for the girls to hear.

"Number two, three shots!"

"Okay!"

*Three, two, one—now!*

"Fire Arrow!"

In terms of our spellcasting, Yuki, Haruka, and I were basically one-trick ponies, but the Fire Arrow spell was simply the most efficient option available to us, and our opponents were human, so if we could just injure them, we'd gain a huge advantage. Pain would make them sluggish, and they probably wouldn't be able to heal their injuries right away even if one of them was capable of healing magic, so the battle would tilt in our favor if even one of them had to retreat temporarily.

All three of the Fire Arrows had been aimed at Natsuki's opponent; number one was the man Touya and I were dueling and number three was Haruka's opponent, but we had the best odds of landing clean hits on number two. Given that Yuki and Haruka had cast in the middle of combat, their Fire Arrows were a little slow and weak, and their aim wasn't perfect either, but none of those factors mattered; I'd been relying on Touya to handle the guy in front of me for a moment, so everything came down to my Fire Arrow.

Despite the fact that Natsuki was pressing the attack the entire time, her opponent avoided the Fire Arrows from Haruka and Yuki, dodging one and slicing the other out of the air. But my Fire Arrow had much more power behind it and flew at him much faster. He tried to intercept it, but that proved impossible while he was avoiding Natsuki's attacks, so the most he managed was to twist his body right before my Fire Arrow struck. The spell barely missed the man's trunk and instead struck his left leg.

"Argh!"

The man's left leg was blown to pieces. As he groaned in pain, Natsuki tried to press her attack, but he immediately discarded his weapon and crouched down

to press his palms to the earth, then used his arms and his remaining leg to spring backward.

“Whoa...”

I was stunned by what I had just seen. My Fire Arrow had cauterized the stump of his left leg, so he hadn’t bled too badly, but he was still losing blood. I couldn’t imagine how painful it must have felt to move that fast with that kind of injury. *How did he even survive in the first place? My Fire Arrow is powerful enough to blow off an orc’s head no problem, and yet he only lost one leg?*

There was no way Natsuki’s opponent could survive against her with just one leg and no weapons, so I finally felt confident that we’d prevail. However, Touya’s opponent took that moment to act. He pushed Touya back, gaining some distance, and then drew a whistle from his pocket, blew it, and immediately dashed toward the injured man. The man who’d been fighting Yuki and Natsuki fell back as well. The two able-bodied men carried their injured companion and fled into the forests. The assassins who’d been engaging the soldiers around the carriage also swiftly fell back at the sound of the whistle.

I could have cast spells at them while they retreated, but I was still stunned that they’d been so much stronger than I’d expected. In fact, I was reluctant to injure them further in case they decided in desperation to throw away their lives in order to kill us. If all of them were like the man with the severed leg—capable of moving swiftly in spite of severe injuries—then there was a good chance that we wouldn’t survive another confrontation. In addition, our job was to serve as Illias-sama’s bodyguards, so there was no need for us to slay every single one. We had already fulfilled our duty by chasing them away, so we had no reason to take any risks.

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Whew. That was exhausting. You okay, Touya?”

He, too, sighed as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “Yeah, I somehow managed to avoid getting hurt. Honestly, I got real spooked during combat, but I think the guy was actually playing it safe to an extent.”

Yuki walked over to us and nodded. “Yeah, I felt the same way. There were a couple of times when the guy I was fighting could’ve landed a hit if he’d taken a risk, but he never did—which was good for us, but...”

"Mm. They didn't seem as though they were intent on killing us by any means necessary," said Natsuki. "Had they been serious, I believe we would have been in genuine danger."

"We ended up letting them escape as a result, however," said Haruka.

"That doesn't really matter," I said. "Our job here isn't slaying bandits. But I don't think they were actually bandits." I turned toward the carriage. "Ekart, how did things go on your end?"

He turned to regard me with a slightly grim expression, but he nevertheless seemed relieved as he nodded. "Everything turned out well—for the most part. Although we fought four against one in two groups, so the results are hardly worth crowing about."

"You guys protected the carriage, so that's more than good enough," I said.

Illias-sama peeked out a window of the carriage. She must've been aware that the battle was over. The carriage itself didn't appear to have been damaged, so clearly the soldiers had done well enough.

"Is anyone injured?" Haruka asked.

"Two soldiers have flesh wounds," Ekart replied. "Not the kind of thing that will hinder them in combat."

"I see," said Haruka. "Well, I'll heal them just in case."

"Will you, now? I'd appreciate it," said Ekart. "Line up, you lot!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Two soldiers approached and saluted us. There were cuts on their arms and legs, but they didn't appear to be deep and weren't bleeding too much.

"These should be no trouble," said Haruka. "*Light Cure.*"

The wounds closed up and stopped bleeding instantly.

"Thank you very much, sir!" the men exclaimed in unison.

The wounds they'd suffered could have been blocked if they'd had something like the chain mail my party wore, but it seemed likely that the House of Nernas couldn't afford to equip every soldier in that way. Elemental metal was very

expensive, and even armor made of white iron cost the equivalent of a car back on Earth.

As a sidenote, the reason the troops still acted a bit stiff around us was probably that we had sort of ended up acting as temporary instructors during the training sessions back at the viscount's mansion. We had gotten better acquainted with each other after grilling meat together, and we talked with each other quite casually under most circumstances, but now they were acting as if they were currently on duty.

"Oh yeah, now that I think about it, there was a guy who cut a Fire Arrow out of the air," I said.

"Mm," said Haruka. "With that in mind, they probably had weapons made of elemental metal, if not some stronger material."

"I actually picked up the weapon that he dropped," said Natsuki.

She presented a shortsword for our inspection. It looked the same as the weapon that had been in the hands of the man whom Touya and I had fought.

Touya took the shortsword from Natsuki and examined it. "Yeah, it looks like metal imbued with the Fire element. No way could normal bandits afford shit like this."

"Yeah, and they were super strong," said Yuki. "It's scary to think there's somebody out there who you and Nao together couldn't bring down."

"It was scary how decisive they were too," I said. "They attacked without a word *and* retreated without a word. Do you have any thoughts, Ekart?"

The assailants hadn't yelled any of the cliché phrases I'd associate with bandits—stuff like "Hand over your money!" or "Die!" In fact, they had even engaged in combat without speaking to coordinate, and they had immediately fled as one when the whistle signaled retreat. If they were bandits, they were exceptionally well-trained ones, probably members of a famous bandit gang. But if bandits like that had been common, I honestly wouldn't have felt sure I could cut it as an adventurer. In fact, I might have been too scared to venture outside of town.

I summed up those thoughts for Ekart, but he shook his head. "Forgive me,

but that's not my area of expertise. I believe only Illias-sama would have a good general idea. My lady, would it please you to offer your opinion?"

"Of course," said Illias. "Is it safe to leave the carriage?"

"There are no hostile signals as far as I can detect, so it should be safe."

After I answered Illias-sama, the sisters hopped out of the carriage, followed by the young noblewoman and her two maids.

Illias-sama breathed a sigh of relief; clearly being confined to the carriage for so long was exhausting. She proceeded to examine our surroundings with a troubled look on her face. "I never imagined we'd get attacked by bandits. This highway isn't one that merchants travel often—although that's not exactly a good thing for the viscounty."

"There were a few things about the bandits that seemed suspicious to us," I said.

If we hadn't repaired the road with magic, it would have been impassable to carriages, so I had no doubt that Illias-sama was right when she said merchants seldom used this road. That being the case, it was hard to believe that bandits would have been lying in ambush for a caravan. Moreover, they'd attacked us without first issuing any demands, and they were far too strong and disciplined for mere bandits. Illias-sama and her maids frowned and paused in thought after I had spelled out each suspicious point one at a time.

"I do rather doubt that ordinary bandits would attack this carriage," said Arlene. "Anyone could tell from afar that there were ten soldiers and five adventurers on guard. Only fools would attack such a convoy as a group of five."

Ekart was the one responsible for the decision to use force, but Arlene-san had overall authority here. Or rather, Illias-sama was in charge on paper, but she was a bit too young to exercise her theoretical authority. Viscount Nernas was undoubtedly well aware of this, which was why Arlene-san had been assigned to accompany Illias-sama.

"We ended up getting attacked, however," said Haruka.

Arlene nodded. "Mm. Frankly, I can't make sense of it." She frowned as she

sank into thought once more.

“Can you think of any reason that someone would attack this carriage?” asked Haruka. “Maybe a grudge against the House of Bernas?”

“Frankly, the House of Nerves is too weak to be the target of a power play,” Arlene replied. “It would be a different story if the viscount had been riding in this carriage, but I can’t imagine why someone would want to attack Illias-sama. Moreover, the House of Nerves has now been favored with the birth of a son...”

*Hmm. Objectively speaking, I guess that means it wouldn’t matter if Illias-sama got killed, since the House of Nernas already has an heir. Sure, Illias-sama’s death would probably stir up the viscount’s fury, but there’s no real reason for someone to go out of their way to assassinate her.*

“Hmm. What if attacking Illias-sama was their actual goal?” Yuki asked.

Arlene-san smiled awkwardly and shook her head in response to Yuki’s hypothesis. “No, I cannot imagine that’s the case. As I just said, the House of Nernas isn’t influential or powerful enough to make enemies, so—”

“But there was that incident in Kelg recently, remember?” Yuki interrupted. “I’m pretty sure a decent number of nobles and wealthy merchants got stripped of their titles and fortunes.”

When she caught Yuki’s implication, Arlene-san stopped smiling and contemplated the idea with a somber look. “...It’s true that there were some houses, noble in name only, that were stripped of their titles, but I still find it difficult to believe they’re the culprits. They met their ruin because they lavished money on a cult. For that very reason, they can’t possibly have the funds to hire assassins, and especially not assassins strong enough to be a match for your party—unless they’ve resorted to some extraordinary means.”

“Mm,” said Haruka. “But if there’s a cult involved, they could have resorted to other means of securing help.”

“The House of Nernas dismantled the Holy Satomi Sect and captured its leader, so it stands to reason that some people would still be nursing grudges,” said Natsuki.

Haruka and Natsuki both sighed after chiming in. We were technically the

ones who'd captured Satomi, but the House of Nerves had detained her. We were fairly certain that she would meet a terrible fate due to the severity of her crimes, but we had no idea whether she was even still alive; we hadn't inquired about what had happened to her. Regardless...

"It's also possible their goal was to capture Illias-sama," I said.

"Me? Really?" Illias asked.

"Mm. For example, you could have been used as a bargaining chip, maybe to persuade the viscount to exchange hostages," Haruka replied.

It seemed entirely plausible that the idea had been to demand the release of Satomi in exchange for Illias. But even if that happened, I had no idea where Satomi could have fled to. There were some nations back on Earth that would harbor people like terrorists, but I was fairly sure that none of the nearby lords or nations would be willing to shelter Satomi considering *why* the House of Nerves had clamped down on her cult.

"By the way, what happened to Saint Satomi after she was captured?" Touya asked.

*I can't believe you actually asked, Touya! Did you not get that I was purposely avoiding the topic?!*

"Oh, um, well..." Illias-sama sounded like she genuinely had no idea.

Arlene, however, just shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I cannot answer that question."

"Mm, right." Honestly, as a mere adventurer, I would have been terrified if we had gotten a detailed answer about such a politically sensitive topic. Actually, in that scenario, there was probably a good chance that the House of Nerves would dispose of us once we had outlived our usefulness.

"I doubt that my father would agree to such a deal even if I were captured, however," said Illias.

*Man, I didn't think Illias-sama would view herself in such a cold and objective way.* I glanced at Arlene-sama for her opinion, and she nodded back solemnly. "The viscount is a proper noble. He is a kind man who treasures his family, but

he is hardly the sort to fall prey to mistaken priorities.”

Nobles had duties to discharge. In that sense, Arlene-san’s answer put me at ease as a citizen of the county, but...

“I guess life is really tough for nobles.”

Metea was completely right, and Illias-sama smiled awkwardly rather than denying her words as she had before. I was pretty sure that if an upright person had to wield the authority of a viscount, he’d fall ill from stress. It had to be a hard job unless you were a really skilled slacker—the good kind—or had skilled assistants. The role of assistant or adjutant to a noble sounded pretty unattractive to me, so for us, continuing to accept quests from the viscount periodically was probably the better option. In that way, we could gradually forge a good relationship and request help in times of trouble in exchange for our services. In fact, that was exactly the kind of position that we wanted to win as a result of accepting this quest.

“The guys who attacked us didn’t seem like fanatics, though,” said Touya. “They were more, like, cold and rational...”

I nodded in agreement. Our assailants had fought like well-trained soldiers, so I was all but certain they weren’t bandits. *Don’t suspicious cults tend to have secret cadres to carry out their dirty work? When I think of cults, I imagine them training assassins from a young age. Actually, though, the Holy Satomi Sect was a new cult with no real history, so I guess that wouldn’t make sense. Oh well.*

“They could’ve just been sellwords, but it’s also possible that this has nothing to do with the Holy Satomi Sect,” said Haruka. “What do you think, Arlene-san?”

Arlene-san reflected on Haruka’s question, then at last slowly shook her head. “It’s hard to be certain with the limited information available to us, but I agree that this incident may have been completely unrelated to the Holy Satomi Sect. In fact, it’s possible that the House of Nernas wasn’t the true target of the assailants either...”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Arlene-san bowed her head. “...I’m sorry, but I can’t say anything for certain

at the moment.”

So she was going to refrain from providing us with any more specific theories. Even if she had other possibilities in mind, they probably weren’t the kind of thing she could casually share with us.

“For now, let’s clear the fallen tree and move on,” said Haruka. “I don’t think we’ll be attacked again, although maybe I’m being too optimistic.”

“Well, the group that just attacked us probably won’t attack us again, anyway,” said Yuki. “But...”

Haruka and Yuki both looked uneasy, presumably because they couldn’t forget the sight of the assassin calmly performing an impressive physical feat on just one leg. That said, our opponents had clearly been just as acutely conscious of how strong *we* were. There were probably low odds of them attacking us again while they were one member down, but regardless, without knowing their capabilities, we couldn’t let our guard down. It was possible that there were also reserve members who had yet to make their presence known.

“We need to keep an eye on our surroundings while we clear that tree,” I said. “Ekart, can you please pick out a couple of soldiers who are really strong and have them help us?”

“Certainly. I trust three will be enough?”

“Yeah, that’s more than enough,” I said. “On our end, Touya will participate, and—”

Before I could suggest any other names, Metea and Mary interrupted me by putting their hands in the air.

“I’ll help!” Metea exclaimed. “I’m good at physical stuff!”

“I can help out too,” said Mary. “Manual labor is what we’re best at.”

Illias-sama looked very surprised by the sisters’ words, but the two of them really were almost as strong as the average adult. In fact, Mary was almost as strong as Haruka by now, and it probably wouldn’t be long before she surpassed her. Mary had recently started trying to learn the Enhanced Muscles skill from Touya, and once she mastered it, a normal adult would be no match

for her. I was still stronger than the sisters for the time being, but regardless, they probably weren't comfortable with the thought of sitting idly in the carriage while we cleared the tree.

"I'm counting on you two," I said. "I'll stand watch, so I'll leave the role of giving out orders to you, Touya."

"Roger. Let's start by dealing with these branches first," said Touya.

The girls and I watched our surroundings while Touya and the others worked on clearing the tree. I could easily have dealt with it myself using Time Magic, but I didn't want to reveal that power when there were so many other people around, and the tree wasn't unmanageably huge. Touya seemed to understand why I hadn't brought up my Time Magic; he worked on clearing the tree without voicing any complaints, and the task was soon done.

We paid closer attention to our surroundings as we followed the highway over the mountain pass and entered the Barony of Dias. The condition of the highway deteriorated even further after that point. There were numerous potholes along the way as well as a lot of sections that had completely collapsed. We could pick our way on foot, but it wasn't easy going for a carriage. However, we were in a different lord's domain now, so we used boards as makeshift bridges rather than fixing the sections that were in disrepair.

On the third night of our journey, we were very vigilant against another attack, but in the end, nothing serious happened, just some trivial monster attacks from time to time. By the morning of the fourth day, we finally saw the town of Mijala in the distance. The staging point of our journey was almost within reach.

## Chapter 2—A Difficult Reality

Something seemed off about Mijala even from afar. All of the towns we'd seen up to this point had been completely surrounded by walls. The sturdiness of the walls had varied from town to town, but all of the human habitations had been inside. Outside, there had been nothing but fields, farms, and some huts to store tools and crops; we hadn't seen any buildings resembling actual residences. Mijala, however, was different.

"Is that a slum ahead of us?" I asked.

Scattered across the area outside the town gates were houses, all of them so dilapidated that even the word "hovel" would have been too dignified. Even from a distance, we could tell that the area was dirty and crowded. There weren't even any fences.

A question escaped my mouth before I realized what was happening. "Is that a safe place for a slum? What if they get attacked by monsters?"

Ekart, walking by my side, casually replied, "It's the furthest thing from safe."

"...What do you mean by that, Ekart?"

"In the event of a disaster, no more than a few fortunate souls would escape alive."

*Huh. I guess you might make it if you were lucky enough to get inside the walls, but without an Adventurers' Guild ID card, you'd have to pay a toll at the gates. Do the residents of the slum have anything like that? Sure, it's relatively easy to get an adventurer card, but your card gets confiscated if you don't do any actual adventuring...*

"Luck is not, however, the only factor," said Ekart. "Take another good look. See if you notice anything else."

As we drew nearer to the slum, I inspected it more closely. The buildings were the first thing that caught my eye. The ones closest to the gates were in decent shape, but the farther away from the gates they stood, the more dilapidated

they got. The ones on the outermost edge of the slum barely qualified as buildings. Many had only pillars and roofs, and some consisted of no more than freestanding sticks and boards. In fact, I was fairly confident that the buildings I'd seen at the orc nest were less crude than some here.

Touya chimed in, sounding exasperated. "The buildings on the outskirts look run-down."

Ekart nodded. "Correct. Anything more?"

The slum dwellers themselves caught my eye next. All of them looked dirty and lifeless. There was a wide range of ages, from children to old people of both genders, but there were more men than women. Many appeared to be unhealthy or injured. Some were missing arms or legs, and others had suppurating wounds that were attracting flies. It was an awful sight, and I wanted to avert my eyes, but...

"It looks like there are a lot of old people, sick people, and children on the outskirts," I said.

"Indeed," said Ekart.

*Hold on. Does that mean the slowest people were purposely placed on the outskirts as bait for monsters? Oh, there are actually some corpses that look like they were just left out in the open. Do the residents of the slum try to get inside the walls while monsters eat those bodies? What if they fail to get in? What if the monsters aren't satisfied eating corpses? I guess there's only one answer to those questions.*

The girls, who'd been listening to our conversation, grimaced. Obviously they had arrived at the same conclusion I had.

"It's no use pitying them," said Ekart, a bitter look on his face as he effectively ended the conversation. "That's simply the kind of place this is."

"...Roger," said Touya.

"...Okay," I said.

The reality of the slum clearly wasn't pleasant for Ekart either. As our carriage passed among the hovels, an unpleasant smell, like the stench of death,

invaded my nostrils. The slum dwellers watched us, but none dared approach. Whether that was because we were guarding the carriage of a noble or because the soldiers kept their hands on their weapons, I could not guess. Of course, the assassins who'd ambushed us yesterday had been much more dangerous, but I somehow felt more anxious here.

Suddenly, a child rolled out of a nearby building and into the road ahead of us.

“Oh—”

I unconsciously halted, but Ekart poked my back as if to snap me out of it.

“Don’t stop walking, my man,” said Ekart. “Show the slightest pity and they’ll surround us in an instant.”

“But—”

“Throwing oneself to the ground is a common ruse among such as these,” said Ekart, sounding totally disgusted. “These people won’t scruple to cut off their children’s limbs in order to extort alms from passersby.”

With a thrust of his jaw, Ekart indicated the child in the road, and I saw that he was right: half of one of the boy’s arms was missing. *Is this the actual reason a lot of the slum dwellers seem to be missing limbs?*

“What? You thought this the work of monsters? Of course not,” said Ekart. “What monster would be sated by taking a single limb and nothing more?”

In this world, you could generally assume that anyone with missing limbs had narrowly escaped a monster’s clutches or been saved by other people, but I wasn’t sure if the slum dwellers were capable of escaping *or* fending off monsters. An adult with missing limbs might be something like a disabled veteran, but the person ahead of us was a kid...

“Ugh. This is revolting,” I said.

When we’d been on the bandits’ trail, we had stumbled upon a truly horrible scene, but we had been able to swallow our revulsion because everything we’d seen had been the result of human wickedness. The incident in Kelg had been quite bad as well, but that had been a crisis. This slum was far worse despite the

fact that nothing out of the ordinary had happened yet. I was glad that Illias-sama had allowed Metea and Mary to ride in the carriage with her, though the sisters would eventually have to get used to this kind of harsh reality if they wanted to continue adventuring professionally. *Man, I'm not looking forward to the moment when they finally have to confront stuff like this. Until they grow up, I want to shield them from sights like these as much as possible, but...*

“Don’t let your guard down. If this carriage belonged to a merchant rather than a noble, these people wouldn’t hesitate to toss children in front of the horses’ hooves,” said Ekart.

Ekart added that the only reason the slum dwellers hadn’t jumped in front of the carriage was that they knew they would be slain without mercy. They apparently considered it a major success to waylay a merchant’s carriage—even if a child was crushed to death in the process. When the carriage halted, they would immediately begin begging for money—or take it by force, depending on the situation.

“What’s our duty, Nao?” Haruka prompted me.

“We’re Illias-sama’s bodyguards,” I replied.

“That’s right.”

Haruka fell silent afterward. When she’d asked me, it had sounded as if she was really reminding herself.

When I glanced at Touya, it looked like he had sealed his lips tight and was firmly clenching his fists. We had been forewarned that Mijala was a wretched and dangerous town, but none of us had expected it to be this bad. In the viscounty we’d just left, some towns had dangerous areas, and we had even seen some places that looked like slums, but they were nothing compared to this. *Do the territories of this kingdom actually vary a lot depending on the lord who rules over them, or is there some other factor at work here?*

A gut-wrenching feeling came over us as we turned away from our surroundings and proceeded through the gates. The interior of the town looked scarcely better than the outside. It was every bit as unsanitary, and if anything, the air smelled staler and more putrid due to the fact that the walls restricted its circulation.

“...What kind of town is this?” I asked.

“It’s only the area around the north gates that’s like this,” said Ekart. “The area near the inn where we’ll be lodging is entirely different. Pray bear with this unpleasantness until we arrive.”

Apparently rooms had already been reserved at an inn for our party. Ekart and the troops all wore worried expressions, but none of them looked surprised in the slightest. Mijala was close enough to Pining that they’d probably been here before.

We followed into town. He was right: our surroundings gradually got a lot cleaner.

“We’ve arrived at our destination.” Ekart pointed at an imposing stone building near the river that flowed through town. “This is the inn where we’ll rest tonight.”

The other nearby buildings looked as good as the ones in the decent areas of Pining.

“I can’t believe we’re still in the same town,” I said in exasperation. “Everything looks so different here.”

Ekart chuckled and shrugged. “That’s a distinctive feature of this town... We’ve arrived at the inn, Illias-sama.”

The doors of the carriage opened, and the sisters hopped out first, followed shortly by Illias-sama.

“Thank you for your hard work,” said Illias.

“Not at all. I imagine your ride was quite tiring, Illias-sama,” said Ekart.

Illias-sama thanked the soldiers as well before heading inside the inn. Ekart followed her, accompanied by four soldiers. The remaining troops moved the carriage to the stables, and the sisters rejoined my party.

When we entered the inn, the staff looked very excited to see us. They proceeded to guide us to a room located to the right of what I mentally dubbed the “VIP room”—the room in which Illias-sama was staying. Inside were six beds in total, lined up very close to each other. The room itself was wide enough,

however, so it didn't feel cramped at all.

The soldiers seemed to have been assigned similar rooms, located between the VIP room and our room. Haruka and Natsuki would join Illias-sama and her maids in the VIP as bodyguards for the duration of the night watch. Apparently this was merely a precaution; they weren't obliged to stay awake all night.

Once we were alone in the room, I sighed. "Man, I never imagined a town like this actually existed."

Touya nodded; he seemed to feel the same way. "Yeah. Turns out Laffan is actually pretty decent."

The girls also nodded deeply.

"The whole way this town is laid out is *nasty*," said Yuki.

"Mm. It was undoubtedly built this way deliberately," said Natsuki.

Mijala was downstream of the Noria River. Sarstedt, the town "famous" for its disgusting fish dishes, was located upstream. Both towns had been built around the river, and both were port towns. However, fishing didn't seem to be common here as far as we could tell; rather, the main local industry was water transportation. Goods from the city of Pining, northwest of here, and the town of Jango to the northeast were gathered here in Mijala and then transported to Clewily, the capital city of the barony.

The highway from Pining to Mijala continued past the Noria River all the way to Clewily, but there was no bridge, so ferry services were another important local business. However, based on what we'd seen traveling the highway, it was obvious that there wasn't much trade between Pining and Mijala; most of the commercial traffic was from Jango. Due to Mijala's location, goods from Pining arrived on the west side of the river, while goods from Jango arrived on the east side. As a result, it was inevitable that the east side of the town would be more developed and prosperous, but...

"The difference between the west and east halves of this town is way too stark," I said.

Our surroundings had become a lot nicer once we had drawn nearer the river. When I glanced out the window overlooking the river, the town looked

downright pretty. It was obvious that all of this inequality was intentional on the part of the local ruler. I looked in the opposite direction from the window, but all I saw was the door that led to the corridor. There had been no windows in the corridor itself—I suspected in order to prevent guests from seeing the ugly half of town.

“You aren’t going to suggest that we save the kids in the slum, are you, Nao?” Haruka asked.

“Of course not,” I replied. “We’ve already talked about this kind of stuff before. Right, Touya?”

“Yep. We decided Mary and Metea are the most responsibility we can handle.”

“Mm, exactly,” said Haruka. “Still, as Nao said, this town is much worse than we anticipated.”

“Yeah. Seeing it for ourselves is different from just hearing about it from other people,” said Yuki.

After we adopted Mary and Metea, Haruka and Yuki had told the rest of us that we would probably see dispiriting sights often if we traveled widely in this world; that was what the General Knowledge skill told them. Thus, we’d arrived at the conclusion that we had to ignore a certain amount of suffering if we couldn’t afford to save people. I would probably have felt more shocked by what I’d seen today if we hadn’t discussed the topic well in advance.

“Met and I were really lucky that you adopted us,” said Mary.

“Well, to be honest, we actually hesitated quite a bit—both to save you and to adopt you,” said Haruka, casting her gaze down awkwardly. “In fact, the main reason we ended up acting was that Touya was determined to save the two of you.”

Mary immediately shook her head. “I think that’s perfectly normal. Nobody in Kelg tried to help us. Injured kids are baggage that most people wouldn’t want to carry.”

By our standards, people in this world were utterly coldhearted toward children. As an example, the eldest son of a farming household would be

treated quite well as his father's heir, and the second son would be treated decently too, being a sort of spare for his elder brother, but any children after that were regarded as surplus. There was no farmland for them to inherit, nor was there work for them to do. In fact, they were lucky if they were given some money and told to hit the road. The unlucky ones were kicked out without money or belongings. For households that struggled to make ends meet, even infanticide wasn't abnormal.

There weren't many people out there who were generous enough to spend anywhere from a few dozen to a few hundred gold coins covering medical expenses for badly injured children whom they didn't know or had only met a few times. The world we lived in wasn't a gentle one in which women and children were unconditionally treated as people worthy of protection. For example, it might sound praiseworthy for a father to give his life protecting his child, but the reality was that with the family breadwinner dead, all of his other children would starve to death. In fact, abandoning a child to preserve one's own life was generally considered the correct choice in this world.

"The fact that we found you and Metea in Kelg was also a big factor," said Yuki. "If we'd found you here, I don't think we could've done much of anything."

"Yeah, there would've been nothing we could have done considering how many people there were in the slum," I said.

Things were much worse here than they had been in Kelg even at the height of the crisis. The girls couldn't possibly heal everyone in the slum. Even if that were possible, there was a chance that people were cutting off their limbs like Ekart had told us...

"I don't think a small amount of money is gonna change anything, but do you guys think we should donate, like, more than usual at a temple?" Touya asked.

Arlene-san suddenly opened the door to our room and interrupted. "I believe it would be wise to avoid doing any such thing."

"Arlene-san...?"

"I apologize for entering your room without asking permission," said Arlene. "I heard something that caught my interest..."

"Oh, well, we don't really mind, but what do you mean by that?" I asked.

"I take it your party feels distressed by what you saw in the slum?"

"Yeah, that's right," I said.

"I would not recommend trying to interfere in any way," said Arlene.

"Consider: I believe you've heard before that the House of Dias is significantly wealthier than the House of Nernas, and yet the slum exists."

The House of Nernas was willing to casually spend over one thousand gold coins on certain necessary expenses, and the House of Dias was much wealthier than the House of Nernas, so...

"Does that mean this is a problem money can't solve, or does it mean the House of Dias has no intention of trying to do anything about it?" I asked.

"The latter," Arlene replied. "There are no orphanages at the temples in this town."

"Is it actually not normal for orphanages to be established next to temples?" I asked.

"That's correct," Arlene replied. "Temples are technically independent of the local government, but it's more or less impossible to run an orphanage without subsidies from a lord, so many temples don't operate orphanages."

Based on what Arlene-san had told us, mere adventurers like us would be singled out if we tried to interfere with the lord's policies, besides which we would cause trouble for the House of Nernas given that we were currently serving as bodyguards for Illias-sama. Unfortunately for us, this was simply the reality.

"There's a reason the people at the bottom of the social ladder in this barony are discriminated against. Their lot in life is to warn everyone else of the worst fate they can suffer," said Arlene. "In fact, there are no slums in the capital city of Clewily. That's because all the poorest of the poor have been chased out."

According to Arlene-san, taxes here in the barony were higher than in the Viscounty of Nernas. That policy was one reason Baron Dias was quite wealthy, but it had also left large numbers of people unable to pay their taxes, and the

punishments for delinquency were severe. All of the money you had on hand would be mercilessly confiscated, as would assets like fields or stores. As a result, people who failed to pay their taxes were soon unable to resume working at all, and with their income totally depleted, they would end up in slums like the one we had passed through.

“The slums serve as a source of motivation for ordinary citizens to work hard in order to avoid the same fate,” said Arlene. “As a result, the capital city of Clewily has grown large and prosperous. It furnishes the baron with ample tax revenue.”

The use of a caste system to redirect people’s grievances or rule them with an iron fist was very common throughout history. It sounded like the barony was an extreme example.

“The temples do operate facilities like soup kitchens, and they receive some subsidies, but all of that is simply to keep the people at the bottom of the ladder alive—barely,” said Arlene.

As a lord, Viscount Nernas was strongly inclined toward generosity. That must’ve been why Arlene-san had a hard time accepting the reality at hand here. She had a bitter look on her face as she explained the situation to us. Despite all this, the viscount had to send expensive gifts to the wedding ceremony for the baron’s heir as well as dispatching his own daughter as his emissary. Clearly the world of the nobility was far more complicated than I could ever imagine.

“Does that not result in problems?” I asked.

“It does not. A lord has the right to decide the taxes that his subjects must pay,” Arlene replied. “It’s against the law to force one’s subjects into bondage on the pretext that they’re unable to pay taxes, but a lord has the legitimate right to confiscate assets like fields. Not even the king can infringe upon that right.”

“Not even the king can do anything, huh?” Touya sighed deeply, shrugged, and looked up at the ceiling. “I guess we definitely can’t do anything about it, then.”

“The king could exercise his own power against the baron, but not lightly,”

said Arlene. “He isn’t strong enough to crush a lord himself. In fact, that is precisely why the House of Nernas has lasted this long.”

*Right, there was that incident with the mithril mine. The House of Nernas was allowed to keep its rank; all that happened was that a different person took over as head of the family, and that person was even the younger brother of the former viscount. I guess I have some idea of the power dynamics between the nobles and the king in this kingdom.*

“With all of that in mind, I’m very sorry, but please bear with these conditions even if you have complaints,” said Arlene. “The House of Nernas cannot protect you if you pick a fight with the House of Dias. It is another matter if you witness something that goes against the laws of the kingdom, however.”

“Very well. We’ll keep that in mind.” Haruka had a gloomy expression on her face as she nodded in assent; it was obvious that this situation didn’t sit right with everyone.

However, there was nothing that could be done, so everyone fell silent until Yuki spoke up, forcing a cheerful tone as if to improve the atmosphere. “By the way, Arlene-san, was there something else you were planning to bring up?”

“Ah, yes. I was about to tell your party about the agenda for the rest of the day,” Arlene replied. “Dinner will be delivered to each of your rooms, so please do not venture outside in search of food.”

“Understood,” I said. “We don’t really want to explore this town, so that works fine for us.”

Arlene-san nodded with an awkward smile. “Haruka-san, Natsuki-san, when your party has finished eating, please visit Illias-sama’s room. Mary-san, Metea-san, Illias-sama said that both of you may feel free to drop by at any time to play.”

“Okay! We’ll go when we can!” Metea exclaimed.

“Mm. I’m looking forward to it. Tomorrow, we’ll cross the river in the morning and head toward Clewily,” said Arlene. “The rest of the journey will be along a relatively safe highway, but I am counting upon your party’s continued diligence.”



The most common route from Mijala to Clewily was apparently by boat. However, that required sailing upriver, so there was a proper highway running parallel to the river, and that was the route Illias-sama's carriage took. The highway was a lot better managed than the one we had been following up to this point, and we had yet to encounter any bandits or monsters along the way.

We reached the city of Clewily and passed through the gates on the morning of the third day after our departure from Mijala. The cityscape was absolutely gorgeous. There were no traces of slums or even places resembling the seedier parts of Laffan. The city seemed well governed, organized, and developed, but having seen Mijala immediately beforehand, I felt like Clewily was concealing a horrible truth. I was aware that I had no choice but to accept this fact, but I still felt a bit uncomfortable, and once we had reached our inn and entered the room that had been assigned to us, I sighed. “Ugh. Well, I guess we’re halfway done with the quest we accepted.” I rolled around on my bed, relieved that I could relax for a little bit.

During our time in Clewily, the troops were responsible for acting as Illias-sama’s bodyguards. It was the first time we had ever attempted an escort quest, and there had been some dangerous moments, like the battle against those ridiculously strong assailants, but we’d managed to chase them off in the end.

“Mm. If everything goes according to schedule, then the wedding ceremony will take place four days from now, and we’ll spend the day after that preparing to head back,” said Haruka, “so we’ll be leaving Clewily on the morning of the sixth day.”

In other words, we had five days of free time. It was normally nice to get a break, especially in a new town, but nobody in my party looked like they were in the right mood—for obvious reasons. I understood that the people who lived in Clewily weren’t really evil, but...

“There’s no need to overthink things, big bro Nao,” said Metea.

“Huh?”

I stared at Metea in confusion, but she looked back at all of us, then puffed

her chest out, slapped it with her palm, and said something I'd never expected to hear from her. "You saved me 'n' my big sis, so two unlucky children vanished from the world—in a good way. You made the world a little bit better."

That sounded like a very detached point of view. Metea was smart, but still, all of us were surprised; her words didn't sound like something a kid would think of.

Mary laughed, then put in, "That's what Illias-sama told us."

"Oh, come on, why'd you have to tell 'em that, big sis?!" Metea swung her arms as if to protest the fact that Mary had spoiled her plan. "I wanted to say something cool and pretend I thought of it!"

So although Metea had surprised us with her air of maturity, she'd simply been repeating something Illias-sama had told her. Still, Illias-sama was only nine years old herself. *I guess that's the kind of perspective you need as someone in line to govern, huh? That being the case, we should probably just do whatever's within arm's reach for us. Taking risks to accomplish something more might result in us losing everything we're trying to protect in the first place.*

"Hmm. I'd say everyone who lives in the Viscounty of Nernas is in good hands," I said.

"Mm. And Illias-sama is completely correct," said Natsuki. "I'm sure there are other towns that are just as bad as Mijala."

Touya nodded. "I guess we won't be able to stand traveling if we get all depressed every time we see shit like that." Then he looked up and grinned as if to put everything aside. "All right! Let's head out and explore Clewily to clear our heads! We don't actually know what kind of city this is, but there's no point staying inside if we're just gonna get down in the dumps, right?"

That made sense to all of us, so we went along with Touya's idea and split into groups to explore the city.



When I looked around Clewily, I got the impression of a peaceful, clean, and

prosperous city. It seemed Baron Dias wasn't an incompetent lord by any means. According to some of the residents I asked, Clewily was safe enough that women could walk around without any worries even after dark. In addition, there weren't any strange regulations that would be an impediment to doing business here; as a result, trade was flourishing, with numerous merchants visiting year round.

My party frowned upon some of Baron Dias's policies, but we learned that the people who lived here had a different outlook. The baron wasn't the kind of stereotypical evil tyrant who exploited normal citizens and taxed them heavily so he could live in luxury, and that being the case, I had yet to hear any complaints from the locals. It was true that Clewily was much more prosperous than Pining, but...

"I guess this isn't a problem the king can solve just by replacing the baron with someone else," I said.

"Yeah," said Yuki. "It would be great if we could just defeat one evil tyrant and then everyone would live happily ever after, but..."

Yuki and I had been exploring Clewily together. Both of us felt conflicted after having seen the happy faces of the citizens here. There were winners and losers in life, and it was best if both were happy, but that would require the winners covering the needs of the losers.

*I guess that's why Baron Dias decided to favor the winners and treat the losers—those who can't afford to pay taxes—as a waste of time and money.* A never-ending supply of money would simply lead to inflation, so that wouldn't solve anything either. Anyone who owned the source of the money would lead a luxurious life, but it would probably cause never-ending war.

"The baron's policies don't sit right with me, but it's technically true that he gets results," I said.

"Not treating your subject like human beings might actually be the right choice for a lord," said Yuki. "Even back on Earth, that was probably how everybody thought a long time ago."

"Yeah, I guess lords probably thought of the population as something that would increase regardless of what they did," I said. "Also, human rights don't

exist in this world.”

On Earth, many people believed everyone was born with basic human rights, but that was the result of historical progress and years of efforts by their ancestors. There was no point in even voicing such an opinion in this world if you lacked the power to back up your words.

“I guess the concept of human rights is more like a social contract, not something universal.” Yuki frowned for a bit, but she quickly smiled again and hugged one of my arms. “Okay, enough of this! Our original plan was to explore Clewily and clear our heads, so let’s enjoy ourselves instead of thinking about gloomy stuff! The two of us almost never get the chance to walk around together.”

“Yeah. Is there anywhere in particular you want to go?” I asked. “Actually, I guess you wouldn’t know...”

My party had decided early on that Clewily seemed like a safe city, so after a game of rock paper scissors, we’d split into different groups to explore it. Touya had been paired with Natsuki, and the sisters had formed a group with Haruka. Yuki and I had been walking around for a while, but neither of us had a specific destination or activity in mind.

“Hmm. Well, for now, let’s go eat lunch,” said Yuki.

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “We don’t have Touya’s nose to rely on this time, though.”

Business was thriving in Clewily, so there were plenty of restaurants. In fact, there were restaurants on both sides of the road that Yuki and I were walking down, although there were no food stalls, which seemed kind of weird.

“I’m down for anything,” said Yuki. “Just go with your gut, Nao!”

“Come on, don’t put that kind of pressure on me.” Just then, my Hawk’s Eye spotted a restaurant where waitresses were carrying delicious-looking meals. I wasn’t set on eating anything in particular, so I pointed at that restaurant. “How about that place over there?”

“That place? It looks like there are a lot of people eating inside, so sure. Let’s go!” Yuki skipped along, pulling me behind her.

The moment we entered the restaurant, a delicious smell filled my nose. *Did I luck out and hit the jackpot? Hell yeah!*

A woman who was dressed somewhat like a cafeteria worker back on Earth greeted us at the door. “Welcome! This is your first time here, right? We specialize in otalca—it’s all we serve. I hope that’s to your liking.”

Although it was actually a little cold outside, the woman’s forehead was covered in sweat, so it must have been really busy in here.

I tilted my head in confusion; I had never heard of otalca before. I pointed at the dishes that the diners at a nearby table were eating. “So is that otalca? What exactly is it?”

“It’s thinly sliced orc meat with potatoes in sauce, all baked in a bowl. It’s delicious, so we do hope you’ll try it out!”

The dish looked delicious even upon closer inspection, so the waitress probably wasn’t lying. I glanced at Yuki, and she nodded with a smile, so I told the waitress that we would eat here, and Yuki and I proceeded to sit at an open table.

“Looks like all you get to choose is the type of sauce,” said Yuki. “I guess otalca really is the only thing they serve.”

“Yeah. So we can choose between tomato, cheese, and salt, huh?” I said. “Wait, tomato?!”

“N-Nao, we can get tomatoes!” Yuki said excitedly.

“Y-Yeah. I wonder if they’re served raw.”

When I’d taken a peek at what the other diners were eating, I had noticed something red, but I hadn’t guessed they were actually tomatoes. We could get dried tomatoes back in Laffan, but they were somewhat expensive, and I hadn’t seen tomato dishes in any of the local dining establishments, so it was possible that they weren’t a popular ingredient. My party rarely ate out in Laffan, though, so there might have been places I wasn’t aware of that did serve tomatoes.

“I personally think a combination of tomatoes and cheese would be the best,

but we probably only get to choose one, right?” Yuki asked.

“Cheese on top of a tomato base does sound delicious, but the waitress said that the ingredients were mixed into a sauce, so it’s probably something like a cheese-flavored white sauce, not a layer of cheese on top,” I replied.

*Would tomatoes actually go well with that? Hmm. If it’s something like a mellow Hayashi rice sauce, then I bet that would be good...*

“I see. That’s a bit different from what I had in mind.” Yuki sounded a bit disappointed, and she shook her head, then paused in thought.

*What should I choose? Tomato is probably the safest choice, but cheese sounds delicious too. Salt could be a hidden gem. It’d be weird to put salt right next to tomato and cheese if the salt wasn’t just as good, so it might actually be better than I’m imagining. Ugh, it’s so hard to make a decision!*

But it seemed we had no time left to think; the waitress who’d greeted us earlier approached our table. “Have you decided what you’d like to order?”

I felt a bit rushed, but in an inexpensive restaurant, you typically couldn’t occupy seats forever without ordering.

“Um, would it be possible to get tomato sauce with some cheese sprinkled on top?” I asked.

The waitress casually agreed, but she seemed confused. “Hmm? Yeah, sure, but you’ll only have yourself to blame if it doesn’t end up tasting good.”

I had no idea what otalca sauce tasted like, so there was a risk that it would end up quite different from what I had in mind. *But even if this combination is a disaster, I’m not going to back down from this challenge!*

“That’s perfectly fine with me,” I said with a nod.

Yuki hastily chimed in. “I-I’d like to order the same thing.”

*Oh, Yuki, you’re down for a challenge too, huh?*

“Okay. What size would you like to choose?”

“Size?” I asked.

“The options are small, medium, and large. Most people go with a medium...

That plate over there is a medium.” She pointed at a bowl of otalca that looked like it had just left the kitchen, but...

“That’s huge!” I exclaimed.

The bowl looked to be about five centimeters deep and twenty-five in diameter. It wasn’t filled to the brim, but assuming it was mainly meat and potatoes, there was no way I could eat the whole thing. It would be the equivalent of three slices of a medium pizza.

“...I’ll go with a small serving,” I said.

“M-Me too,” said Yuki.

“Oh, really? I guess elves truly do have small appetites.”

The waitress looked a bit perplexed as she walked away from our table. *Nah, this has nothing to do with me being an elf. I’m sure Touya could put away a medium serving just fine, but that’s still way too big to call normal.*

“So are the people who live around here just big eaters?” Yuki asked.

“I’m not sure,” I replied. “It looks like some people are sharing, though.”

Some of the other patrons had giant bowls in front of them—bowls that were about forty centimeters in diameter and looked too large for a single waitress to carry easily. Those must have been the large size. Each bowl was being shared by multiple patrons; large servings of otalca clearly weren’t intended for a single person.

“More importantly, why did you order the same thing as me?” I asked. “You could have gone with something different.”

“I mean, there’s no reason not to try something if it might be delicious, right?” Yuki replied.

“The waitress told us that the combination might end up making the otalca taste bad, remember? If we’d chosen different flavors, we could have shared with each other.”

I’d been a bit curious about the salt option, and I had planned to suggest it to Yuki if she’d been unsure of what to choose, but before I could even raise the topic, she had ordered the same thing as me.

Yuki smiled playfully. “Oh, right, sharing a meal is something couples do to show affection.”

I, however, firmly rejected her words. “We’re not a couple, Yuki.”

I definitely thought of sharing food from the same plate as a couple thing, and the restaurant would probably provide plates for sharing if we asked for some. Truthfully, I wouldn’t have minded sharing food with Haruka.

“Oh, come on, play along with me,” said Yuki. “Besides, Nao, you don’t have to stick to just Haruka. Not in this world...”

“My relationship with Haruka isn’t what you think it is—”

“Stop making excuses, Nao,” said Yuki. “I know the truth, so don’t even bother.”

“I’m not making excuses!”

“But it’s just a matter of time before the two of you get together, right? I thought Touya had a chance back when we were still in Japan, but it doesn’t seem like it now.”

“Ugh. Well, I mean, you’re kind of right...”



Touya and Haruka had also known each other since childhood, but Haruka and I had lived next door to each other, so we were probably closer. In addition, there were times when I felt like Touya had kind of kept his distance, so he had probably understood how Haruka felt deep down.

“Also, just to be clear here, I’m not saying that you should start off by going all the way,” said Yuki. “Please plan ahead, Nao. It’ll be bad for the rest of us if Haruka suddenly has to take a break from adventuring for maternity leave.”

“I didn’t expect you to get *that* frank...”

“This is a topic where we’ve gotta be as clear as possible,” said Yuki. “I’d encourage you if we could get condoms in this world, though. It’d make things easier for all of us girls.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

“Hmm? It’d be easier to make a move on you, obviously.”

Yuki’s casual attitude lulled me into thoughtlessly blurting out, “That’s *way* too frank! Besides, I have no intention of marrying anyone other than Haruka!”

“Oh, so you *do* want to marry Haruka, huh?”

“Ugh...” *I-I mean, yeah, I can’t deny that. I like Haruka, so...*

“Hmm. I guess some guys actually do dream about getting married,” said Yuki.

“Huh? Is that a bad thing?” I asked.

“No, but you also have to think about the reality of the situation. Honestly, I’m willing to compromise a little if I can live a safe, peaceful, and luxurious life.”

“...Is it really worth compromising in marriage?” *Am I the only one who thinks it’s not worth getting married if you have to compromise that much?*

“The idea that being poor doesn’t matter as long as you love each other—that’s a bunch of hooey,” said Yuki. “I can put up with my partner losing some of his passion as long as we still have money. Marriage is all about benefits.”

“Are you serious? You’d be willing to get married just for material benefits?”

“That stuff is really important, Nao! Families are basically the smallest unit of society. They’re groups that pursue their mutual interest based on a contract

involving explicit and implicit consent,” said Yuki. “You can’t have a contract unless both sides get something out of it. The actual marriage ceremony is just a way of having a third party witness that contract. And plus, I like you, Nao!”

“Uh, can you summarize all that in simpler words?”

“I wouldn’t have minded living alone back in Japan, but I don’t want to live alone in this world!” Yuki burst out. “It’s really hard to survive here unless we help each other out! A big shelter is better than a small one, so isn’t it better to be part of a group that can keep earning money safely?”

“Yeah, when you put it like that, it makes sense to me,” I said.

After Yuki had explained her thinking, it all sounded pretty convincing to me, but it wasn’t quite enough to make me change my mind about marriage.

“Well— Oh.”

That was when the waitress arrived with our food. “Sorry to keep you waiting!”

I changed the topic right away. “Our food is here!”

Yuki glared at me as if displeased with my evasion, but when she took a look at the bowls of otalca, she blinked in surprise and said, “Whoa, it’s piping hot!”

“It smells delicious too.”

The two hot bowls that the waitress had placed on our table were each about twenty centimeters in diameter. Inside was a red liquid with some white sauce on top, all of it audibly simmering. It looked spicy at first glance, but I could tell the red was from tomatoes due to the smell, besides which there were identifiable chunks of tomato.

My nose also picked up another distinct smell: I was fairly sure they’d used some garlic in this dish. Garlic would have been an awful choice for a couple who’d just started dating, but Yuki and I weren’t bothered by the smell, and besides, we definitely weren’t dating. That being the case, I loved the savory smell; it really stimulated my appetite. I took a glance at Yuki, and she looked happy too. She grabbed a spoon.

The waitress smiled at our reactions but offered a warning before she

departed: "It's quite hot, so be careful!"

I briefly watched out of the corner of my eye as the waitress walked away. Then I picked up my spoon and dug into my own bowl.

"Hmm. I thought this would be heavier, but it's more like a stew," I said.

"Yeah. I originally thought this was going to be something like grilled potatoes and bacon in sauce, but I guess not."

I had assumed the bowls were stuffed to the brim with potatoes and meat, but actually, this was more like a tomato pork stew. There were supposedly potatoes inside too, but I couldn't see any solid pieces, so they must've melted. When I scoop up some broth, I ended up with only a couple of thin slices of orc meat on my spoon, so the bowl wasn't completely full of meat either.

"If this is a small, I think I might have been able to finish a medium," I said.

"Mm. Small is more than enough for me, though," said Yuki.

"Yeah, the melted potatoes will probably fill us up pretty quick," I said.  
"Anyway...time to take a bite."

I was immediately overwhelmed by the smell of garlic. Then the sweet-and-sour flavor of the tomatoes gently spread through my mouth. There was a tiny tinge of grassiness as well, but the garlic helped counter it. The meat, too, was rich in flavor, so it must have been heavily seasoned in advance.

"Oh, the meat was probably cooked before being added to the stew," said Yuki. "I'm pretty sure it would be, like, drier and blander if it had been cooked in the sauce with the potatoes."

"The sauce itself is good too," I said.

"Uh-huh. It has umami from the tomatoes, sweetness from the onions, salt, and something that tastes like bay leaf and rosemary," said Yuki. "Also! I'm super impressed by how they used the garlic."

*Yeah, I guess I'm no match for someone with the Cooking skill when it comes to analyzing food.*

"Everything was probably prepared in advance and mixed together, then baked in an oven. That way, the restaurant can serve it piping hot and it doesn't

end up like an overcooked casserole,” said Yuki. “The oven means extra overhead, but it probably works out just fine if you only serve otalca and get plenty of customers. This whole thing was definitely planned out well.”

“The cheese tastes good too,” I said. “It doesn’t taste like actual cheese, though.”

Specifically, it lacked the flavor of aged cheese, so it was probably more like fresh cheese. The overall flavor was similar to that of cream stew, so it tasted decent, but it didn’t combine well with the tomatoes, so if I ever got another opportunity to try otalca, I wanted to order it with just the cheese sauce.

Yuki and I continued chatting and eating at a steady pace, and in no time at all, we’d finished. Although I’d initially thought that a small serving might not be enough, I felt quite full, and fully satisfied, by the time we were done, undoubtedly because of the potatoes.

“That was sooo good!” Yuki declared. “Actually, I’m kinda curious now... Is this restaurant especially good, or is this just the standard in Clewily?”

“Yeah. I don’t think I can eat any more for now, though,” I said.

“Same. I could probably find room for dessert, but that’s about it. Okay, let’s hit the road.”

We couldn’t occupy seats at a busy restaurant after finishing our meals, so we stood, thanked the waitress who’d helped us, settled our bill, and left the restaurant. Our lunch had cost three large silver coins in total. Lunch at Aerasan’s café cost one large silver coin per person, so this was one and a half times more expensive. I was satisfied with the quantity of food, but the menu left something to be desired...

“Hmm. Considering we ordered small servings of otalca, I think prices are actually a bit high in this city,” said Yuki.

“Oh, right, medium was the normal size,” I said.

“Mm. If we’d ordered a couple of mediums, they would have cost us each two large silver coins. That’s honestly kinda too expensive for lunch.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s hard to compare prices directly, though,” I said. “Food

in Pining was kind of expensive too, wasn't it?"

"Oh, true," said Yuki. "Just going by taste, though, the otalca was better than anything we had in Pining, sooo..."

"Well, trade is probably one reason for the difference in quality, so you have to keep that in mind too," I pointed out.

If the otalca we'd ordered had been offered in Laffan for the same price, it would actually have been quite cheap, but only if you didn't factor in the availability of the ingredients. Fresh tomatoes were hard to get in Laffan, but it was possible that they were more readily available here in Clewily. With that in mind, it was hard to accurately compare prices between different parts of this world. Quality of service was easier to compare, but it wasn't easy to find different samples of exactly the same kind of service.

"Anyway, I bet we'll have a better understanding once we look around the city a bit more," said Yuki. "Let's go, Nao!"

Our schedule for the day was completely free—we just had to return to the inn for dinner—so I let Yuki lead the way. The thing that stood out to me the most was the abundance of stores here. There were plenty of houses along the main street in Laffan, but most of the buildings here in Clewily were commercial. Some of the stores weren't open, but I was fairly confident that they weren't houses based on their designs. Clewily seemed to be primarily composed of commercial zones.

We hadn't seen any fields around the city, so food must've been primarily imported. Clewily had a huge advantage in terms of water transportation, being located near the confluence of several important waterways: the Noria River, which flowed through Mijala; a small river that flowed from the north; and a larger river that flowed from the northeast.

"Oh, there's an alchemist's shop over there, Nao!" Yuki exclaimed. "Can we go take a look?"

"Yeah, sure. I'm kind of curious about how it compares to Riva's store."

Riva's store was a lot brighter and more welcoming nowadays, but in the past, she'd designed the interior based on her idea of what an alchemist's shop was

supposed to look like. She hadn't been wrong, exactly, but regardless, I was curious to see another alchemist's shop.

"So you haven't been to any other alchemist's shop, huh? Well, don't expect too much, Nao." Yuki laughed as she entered the store, and I followed her inside.

*Okay, yeah, this isn't what I expected.* I had assumed there would be a lot of suspicious items packed tightly together, but the interior of the alchemist's shop looked pretty much normal aside from two items mounted on the wall: a giant fang that was almost as tall as I was and a pitch-black pelt that was wider than both of my arms stretched out. Also mounted on the walls were some wooden boards, and I was kind of confused by what I saw written on them.

"The sugasta of a shavastar? Dradkelz scales? Melfia powder?"

The words on the boards made absolutely no sense to me.

"Most products aren't displayed within reach," said Yuki. "They're expensive, after all."

"Oh, I guess that's one way to prevent theft," I said. The bookstore I'd visited in this world had employed the same kind of system, but I was surprised that these stores had so little trust in their customers.

*Although, now that I think about it, I guess it was kind of similar back in Japan. There were things like empty boxes, cards that just had product names written on them, and display windows that prevented people from touching products. Books are expensive in this world—they can be worth the equivalent of over one hundred thousand yen—so I guess it's only natural to keep them away from the hands of customers, but I'm still a little disappointed that there aren't any mysterious products I can just pick up and examine.*

I sighed to myself, then craned my neck to inspect the giant fang I'd noticed earlier. Upon closer examination, it was actually longer than I was tall. It wasn't as sharply curved as something like an elephant tusk, and the root of the fang, which was pointed downward, was so thick that it would have been impossible to encircle it with both of my hands. *I'd need a third hand to carry that. It's as big around as Yuki's waist. That's pretty thick... I mean, the fang is pretty thick, not Yuki's waist. There's no way this belonged to a normal animal, right? I sure*

*hope I never have to fight a monster with fangs this big.*

“So what monster was this fang from...? Oh, it’s a behemoth’s fang? Seriously?”

I was at a loss for words after I noticed the placard above the fang that revealed its provenance. *I don’t recall seeing the name “behemoth” anywhere in the monster encyclopedia...*

I’d been staring doubtfully at the fang for several moments when an old woman put in, “It’s a real behemoth fang, aye. And it’ll cost ye ten gold coins per gram, so in truth, it’s none too costly.”

The old woman looked exactly like the kind of person I would’ve expected to see in an alchemist’s shop, so the garments that Riva had worn in the past hadn’t been too far off the mark. I wasn’t sure what surprised me more—the fact that behemoths actually existed in this world or the fact that a single gram of one of their fangs was worth ten gold coins. That made it costlier per unit than pure gold. I couldn’t imagine how much the entire fang was worth.

“We don’t need anything like that at the moment,” said Yuki. “I gotta say, though, you’ve got a bunch of super impressive stuff in stock.”

“Heh heh heh, don’t I just? I’m proud to say I have the finest wares of any store in Clewily.” The woman sounded quite pleased by Yuki’s praise. Despite how shady she looked, her laughter was merry, and she seemed like someone who’d be easy to chat with.

“Does Clewily end up with goods from all over?” Yuki asked.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, indeedy, wares from far and wide. Precious little comes from Clewily and its environs.”

“So is everything just kind of expensive?” Yuki asked.

“Aye—compared to the prices of goods where they were imported from, ‘course. But ye can hardly go hither and thither to get everything ye need more cheaply.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Anyway, there’s nothing I’m in a rush to make right now, so I’ll think about this later,” said Yuki. “I’ll be here for a couple of days, so I might

come back to buy something before I leave.”

“Very well, then!”

“Can I write down what you have in stock on a piece of paper?” Yuki asked. “I’ll think things over back at my inn.”

“Sure, sure.”

As Yuki chatted with the old woman and took notes, I looked around the store, but I wasn’t very impressed. There wasn’t much to see apart from the names of materials I had no clue about, plus what was apparently behemoth fur—nothing exciting or interesting to look at. In the end, I casually listened in on the conversation between Yuki and the old woman and helped Yuki take notes. When she was satisfied, we left the store.

Yuki and I hopped around different stores for a while, but we didn’t learn much—just that every store had a wide array of goods and there were multiple stores on every street specializing in the same kinds of goods. Places that ordinary citizens frequented, like restaurants, were common in other towns and cities as well, but in other respects, Clewily was different from the norm. Businesses with a more limited customer base, like alchemists’ shops and smithies, weren’t as easy to find elsewhere; towns around the size of Laffan only had one or two total, and generally far away from the main streets. Furniture workshops were a different story, since high-end furniture was a local specialty of Laffan, but that still wasn’t quite the same; those goods were made for sale and export to other towns.

Overall, business was clearly booming here in Clewily, but that also meant that competition was fierce. Yuki and I had seen some empty stores along our route as well as some that weren’t open and seemed to be out of business. I was a bit curious about the fate of merchants who failed and ended up having to close shop, but it was a plain fact that Clewily as a whole was doing well. On Earth, I had lived in a capitalist society, so it was hard for me to criticize the realities of life in the Barony of Dias.



When Yuki and I entered our room at the inn, we discovered that we were the last ones to return from exploring the city. Everyone else was lying down on

their beds or relaxing in chairs, and the sisters were eating what looked like apricot candy.

“Welcome back.” Haruka, who was sitting on a bed, was the first to greet us. There was a book open on her lap; she didn’t seem to have anything else to do.

“Here we are! Are we a bit late?” I asked.

“Nah, the rest of us all got back around the same time,” Haruka replied.

“I see. So, did any of you find or see anything interesting?” I asked.

“I saw a giant bird!” Metea spread her arms wide to illustrate its size, and Mary hastily grabbed the apricot candy that her sister was holding before she could drop it.

If Metea wasn’t exaggerating, the bird had been as big as an ostrich. I glanced at Haruka for confirmation, since she’d been with the sisters, and she swiftly nodded.

“The bird’s body was bigger than Metea, and its wingspan was probably much wider than my outstretched arms,” said Haruka.

“Whoa, that’s huge,” I said. “Was it bigger than a Pacific sea eagle?”

“Pacific sea eagles have wingspans of over two meters,” said Natsuki. “I’ve never seen one up close myself, but the body of the average sea eagle would be smaller than Metea, so the bird that they saw was likely much bigger.”

According to Natsuki, it was possible to observe Pacific sea eagles in Japan if you traveled as far north as Hokkaido. Smaller birds like hawks and falcons looked quite intimidating up close, so seeing an even larger bird flying around sounded pretty scary.

“Apparently it was something called a zephyr bird,” said Haruka. “They’re capable of transporting goods in small cardboard boxes. Also, they don’t really have the menacing look of birds of prey—if you ignore their size, they’re actually quite cute.”

“So they’re like giant homing pigeons?” I asked.

“Well, they’re smarter than pigeons, and they can travel back and forth between two set destinations,” said Haruka.

"Oh, so they don't just fly back to the place that they consider their nest, huh? That's quite convenient," I said.

Apparently it was necessary to transport homing pigeons to their destination in a basket, after which they'd fly home. Zephyr birds sounded like they were easier to use.

"They sometimes drop their baggage, however," said Haruka.

"Isn't that really dangerous?!" I asked. "Can't you just secure the boxes to their feet or something?"

But Haruka explained that most of the air routes that zephyr birds followed were far from human habitation, so it was rare for them to drop packages on people. Packages did, however, simply vanish from time to time, and there were even rare incidents of them damaging buildings. Zephyr birds simply carried baggage with their feet, so I'd figured you could prevent accidents by tying the packages in place, but apparently that would prevent the birds from lifting off smoothly, so they had to take off and then turn back to grab the packages.

"So I'm guessing you can't ride them?" I asked.

"Not even Metea would be able to do something like that," said Haruka. "But a zephyr bird could probably grab a baby and fly off with it."

"It's a shame that we can't explore the world on the back of a giant bird," I said. "We're in a fantasy world, so I'm kinda disappointed."

The idea of burying my body in fluffy feathers while soaring through the air sounded thrilling to me, but the girls just laughed at my dream.

"Can we really call the world we live in a fantasy world?" mused Yuki. "Well, there *are* wyverns here, but they're pretty much irrelevant to us."

"Even the average noble couldn't afford to keep a wyvern," said Haruka. "Only a national army or the richest and most influential nobles could afford to acquire one, let alone take care of it."

Land animals like horses had to be provisioned with food and water. Winged creatures that could carry people while flying would presumably require even

more provender. However, according to Haruka, wyverns were technically classified as monsters, so they apparently required much less food and water than one would expect based on their size and activity levels. In any case, my party had no place to keep a wyvern, so as Yuki had said, it was all irrelevant to us.

“Does that mean we’ll never get the chance to ride a wyvern?” Touya asked. “Man, I’ve always wanted to fly...”

“Well, if all you want is to fly, you can do that with Wind Magic,” said Yuki. “There’s no guarantee of landing safely, though.”

“That doesn’t work at all!” Touya shot back.

I was fairly confident that Touya could train his body to endure rough landings, but as he said, being launched into the air was different from flying.

“I’ve mentioned this before, but there’s also a spell called Airwalk,” I said. “Although again, it’s just a spell that lets you walk on air, so it’s not the same as flying.”

According to the grimoires that I’d read, Airwalk was meant for passing over small valleys or pitfalls; it didn’t sound like it enabled you to travel an indefinite distance. You could technically walk higher and higher, but that would consume a lot of mana, so the idea of casually enjoying a stroll in the air wasn’t realistic. Anyway, no one in my party was capable of casting Airwalk properly yet. I had attempted it a couple of times, but I’d always fallen back to earth upon taking my first step forward.

Haruka paused in thought, then changed the subject. “As far as other things that left an impression on me... Lunch was quite good.”

“Yeah, same here!” Touya agreed with a grin and a nod. “There are so many restaurants, it was hard to pick just one, but the place I ended up choosing was great!”

“The food stalls serve delicious food too,” said Mary. “There were a lot of options to choose from.”

“Big sis Haruka bought some candy for us!” said Metea.

Yuki and I hadn't seen any food stalls, but Haruka and the sisters had come upon a plaza that was filled with them. The candy sticks the sisters were eating—which apparently weren't quite apricot but something similar—were widely available at food stalls, which seemed like a testament to the city's prosperity.

"I saw numerous stores selling ingredients for medicine," said Natsuki, "including ingredients that can't be obtained in Laffan, so I purchased a fair number. It seems that goods from many other towns gather here in Clewily."

"Yeah, that's the impression I got too, although the stuff I found was for alchemy," said Yuki. "I decided to wait and talk with Haruka before I bought anything, though."

"I found mithril, but I couldn't afford it," said Touya.

"Mithril? Tell us more," I said.

"Well, the shopkeep told me it would be gone if I didn't buy it now. He was even willing to lend me money, but..."

"I stopped him before he could make an impulsive decision," said Haruka. "It was only a tiny amount of mithril—smaller than a fingertip."

The idea of a pure mithril weapon was totally unrealistic in terms of the cost, but the amount of mithril Haruka and Touya were describing wasn't even sufficient for a shortsword.

"If you're making a weapon from mithril alloy, you're supposed to use at least ten percent. When I thought it over calmly, I realized the amount they were offering was nowhere near enough. Man, I almost fell for that dude's sales pitch!" Touya laughed and pretended to wipe sweat from his brow.

*"Dude, you should have realized that before Haruka stopped you!" And anyway, aren't you short on money because of the amount you spent on brothels? Why did you even consider buying something like mithril in the first place? Sure, we're bros, so I'm not gonna bring this up around the girls, but still!*

"From what we've seen so far, it's an undeniable fact that this city is very wealthy," said Haruka.

"Mm. And competitive," said Natsuki. "The lord's power derives from the

feudal system, but in other respects, the status quo here has similarities to capitalism. As a result, the food is delicious and a wide variety of products are available to consumers.”

“The real problem is, there’s no social safety net,” Yuki put in.

Touya sighed to himself; he looked conflicted. “Setting aside whether the government’s policies are good or bad, it doesn’t seem like the baron himself has done anything evil. Sure, taxes are high, but everybody here has good things to say about their lord...” It seemed that he, too, had asked around.

“We’d probably get more negative answers if we asked around in the slums,” said Natsuki. “However...”

“People with actual skills to bank on have it easy here,” said Touya. “You can’t really blame one person for the fact that there isn’t a welfare system. Even the king can’t fix everything.”

“Yeah, I had the same thought,” I said.

The baron’s domain had become very prosperous, and most of its citizens lived pleasant and fulfilling lives. That being the case, there was no way the king could justify confiscating his lands on grounds of incompetence.

“The lords of adjacent territories can’t take in the poor from this barony either,” said Haruka. “Harsh as it may sound, high-quality human capital remains here in the barony, and low-quality human capital gets driven out.”

“Yeah, an influx of people from the slums isn’t something that the other lords or their subjects could easily accept,” I said.

The problem at hand was actually similar to or worse than the refugee crisis back on Earth. If a large number of people who couldn’t work or were unproductive immigrated to neighboring lands, then they would place an unfair burden on the citizens of those lands. For any lord to take in those kinds of immigrants would be a mark of incompetence. The reputation he’d gain for being a humane and merciful ruler probably wouldn’t outweigh the political consequences.

“Besides, people in this world can’t really afford to commit to humane policies,” I said.

“Only activists can make a living as humanitarians, right?” said Touya. “And people like that don’t even exist here, so...”

“What even happens to all of the people who don’t have anywhere to go?” Yuki asked.

“Based on Earth’s history, it’s likely that their numbers get whittled down by wars and reckless attempts to develop uncolonized lands,” Haruka replied. “We find it unpleasant to contemplate the possibility of war, but I’m fairly sure that the residents of the slums would appreciate the opportunity. They’d be provided with food, and they might even be able to win a better future for themselves with feats of valor.”

The reality was heartbreaking, but life in this world was far from easy. In this kingdom, people enjoyed a certain amount of freedom to travel, so adults had the option of working as adventurers before they ended up at the bottom of the proverbial hole and found themselves in a slum like the one in Mijala, but I had no idea how many people were actually able to escape that fate.



Per our contract, our client covered our lodging and meals at an inn, but that only applied to breakfast and dinner during our time in Clewily; the inn we were staying at didn’t offer lunch. Still, our lunch expenses hadn’t ended up being too bad, and now that we’d discovered that the food in Clewily was actually quite good, we were looking forward to choosing new places to eat every day.

And even if we weren’t getting three meals a day, this was a high-end inn catering to nobles. I was fairly sure that bodyguards would never be provided with meals meant for nobles, but I held on to the hope that the food would be even better than what we’d had at restaurants in Clewily.

My party waited for dinner to arrive in our rooms. About an hour had passed when the inn staff knocked on our door and delivered our food. Room service was the only available option due to the inn’s clientele, but even rooms for bodyguards were quite spacious, and there was a table that everyone could sit around. We were grateful that, thanks to these accommodations, we could simply relax and enjoy meals among ourselves.

White bread, soup, and wine had been set on the table for us. Then there was

the main dish, which was something none of us had expected.

“Fish, huh? But it doesn’t look like stewed fish,” said Haruka.

Yuki and Natsuki froze in fear when they saw the main course.

“O-Oh, fish?” said Yuki. “N-No...”

Clewily was downstream of the Noria River from Sarstedt, hence Yuki’s and Natsuki’s reactions.

“Well, this smells good, so it’s probably fine,” said Touya. “Actually, the fish smells kinda sweet to me.”

My nose was unable to detect any sweet smell, but the fish did look quite decent. In fact, it looked kind of similar to a meunière dish. The fish was whole, about twenty centimeters long, and didn’t appear to have been deep-fried. However, it looked like it had been lightly fried in some kind of powder; I suspected it was similar to the Tatsuta style of frying that was popular in Japan.

“Let’s try it,” said Haruka. “If the taste is unbearable, we do have our own food in our magic bags.”

“I-I suppose you’re right, Haruka,” said Natsuki. “Surely this won’t be *too* bad considering that lunch was decent...?”

Everyone sat down. I decided I would start with the fish, so I picked up a knife and sliced into it. There was a crunchy sound, and a sweet fragrance wafted through the air. It wasn’t something I could properly describe due to my limited knowledge and poor vocabulary, but it was kind of similar to the smell of cinnamon, which was probably why Touya had described it as sweet earlier.

Natsuki had started with the fish as well. “Oh, hmm. I believe this is somewhat similar to long pepper.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. “Huh? What’s that? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Long pepper is a seasoning that’s used in Okinawa. It’s not commonly used, but it has a wonderful aroma. And the taste...” Natsuki cut off a piece of fish and put it in her mouth, then stopped talking for a moment, as if the taste was too strong.

“I-It’s really spicy!” Metea reached out for one of the cups on the table, but it was full of wine. Haruka was sitting next to Metea, so she hastily placed the cup somewhere else before handing Metea a cup of water. Metea downed the entire cup in one gulp, but she stuck her tongue out, panting; clearly water wasn’t enough.

I had tried a bite of the fish around the same time as Metea, and it was indeed spicy. However, it was more similar to the numbing spiciness of sansho pepper than something like chili pepper. Still, nothing about the smell had led me to expect that the fish would taste spicy at all, so it had caught me completely off guard.

“This is a rather novel taste, but it’s not bad at all,” said Natsuki.

“Mm. It’s edible. Honestly, I kind of like it,” said Yuki. “It is spicy, though. Metea, try putting a little bit of fish between two pieces of bread and see how that works for you. If it’s still too spicy, we’ll give you something else.”

“Okay, I’ll give it a try.”

“What about you, Mary?” Yuki asked. “Are you doing okay?”

“It’s a bit spicy, but I can handle it.”

Haruka had prepared some water for Mary as well, and she was drinking in between bites of the fish, which she’d put between slices of bread as Yuki had suggested. Metea was still a little kid, so the spiciness was probably just painful for her. Of course, there was no reason to force yourself to eat spicy food, so...

“The fish is good, but it tastes way too different from how it smells,” declared Touya.

“Yeah, I agree. My brain is all confused,” I said. “Uh, Natsuki, is long pepper also spicy?”

“No. It’s also known by the name of island pepper, but it’s not too spicy.”

“Well, the aroma and the spiciness could also be the results of different seasonings,” said Haruka.

Touya nodded. “Oh yeah, good point. You can throw cinnamon and chili peppers into the same dish.” He paused, grimacing. “That would usually end up

sucking ass, though.”

“Cinnamon itself isn’t sweet, but the word makes me think of desserts,” said Yuki.

“I imagine this fish would be even better if it had the aroma of sansho pepper too,” said Natsuki.

“Yeah, sansho pepper goes so well with fish,” I said. “Eels too.”

If it was possible to find sansho pepper here in Clewily, then I really wanted to bring some home with us for grilling eels.

“I wonder about the cooking method—did they simply sprinkle it with some kind of flour and fry it?” Haruka mused. “It’s definitely not butter...”

“Yeah, I think it was vegetable oil,” said Yuki. “The cook probably poured the oil over the fish as they fried it.”

“The fish doesn’t taste as strong as a meunière dish,” said Natsuki. “In fact, I think it goes down a little more smoothly.”

After confirming that the fish was all right, we settled down and enjoyed our dinner. The soup was light and refreshing after the oily fish, and the bread was soft and easy to eat as well. The wine was very bitter, so we didn’t enjoy that, but all of us aside from the sisters drank what we’d been served after Natsuki mentioned there was a good chance it was an expensive vintage. None of us got drunk, so the alcohol content must’ve been low. However, Haruka ended up draining the cups that were meant for the sisters, and the tips of her ears got a bit red as a result. She also got pretty giddy, which was an extremely rare sight, so maybe she was a *little* drunk.



“Hey, Nao, wake up.”

“...Huh?”

The next morning, my peaceful sleep was interrupted by someone jostling me. When I opened my eyes to see who it was, Touya’s face coalesced in my vision.

“What do you want, dude? We don’t need to train today, right?”

This quest had required us to cover a lot of distance each day and rotate watches at night, so everyone was sleep-deprived. As a result, we had decided that we would cancel morning training while we stayed at the inn and that everyone was free to wake up whenever. Haruka and Natsuki usually rose earlier than me, but I looked around and saw that they were still asleep in their beds. The sun was visible outside the window, but it wasn't very high in the sky, so it must've been quite early in the morning.

"I can't believe you're up this early today, dude." *We're not going to be able to perform at our best if we don't catch up on sleep while we can, Touya.* I pulled my sheets up, fully intending to return to sleep, but Touya ignored me and tugged on the sheets like a kid begging for attention.

"This is very important, Nao! I found something at the morning market that looks like rice."

On pure reflex, I jumped out of bed and raised my voice. "Seriously?!" I immediately clapped a hand over my mouth and looked around the room again, but the girls had just stirred slightly in their beds; it seemed I hadn't disturbed their sleep.

"Whew." I lowered my voice and whispered, "So you brought some back with you, right?"

He awkwardly shook his head. "Well, uh, I thought it would be better to talk stuff over with the girls first, so I held off on buying any."

"You dumbass! It could already be sold out by now!"

"Nah, I don't think we need to worry about that. There was a ton in stock, and it seemed like shipments are pretty common. Anyway, c'mon!"

"Yeah! Let's go!"

I was more than willing to get out of bed and right to work if it meant acquiring rice. I swiftly changed into my clothes and followed Touya to the morning market, but...

"This is supposed to be rice?"

"Probably. You understand now why I hesitated to buy some, right, Nao?"

“Yeah. I’m not sure what to think of this.”

We were standing near a stall in the corner of the market. A couple of sacks of rice hulls were lined up in front of us. The hulls were different in size from the rice we were familiar with and looked more similar in shape to japonica rice than indica rice, but much bigger and longer. They were also much thicker; each hull had a width of around one centimeter.

“Now that I’ve seen them, honestly, they look more like beans than rice,” I said.

“Yeah, good point,” said Touya.

After we milled the hulls, the final product would presumably be smaller, but I could only really imagine rice hulls the size of azuki beans. I found the prospect of eating a whole bowl of this kind of rice to be a bit intimidating—but it wouldn’t matter as long as it tasted good. *Is this really rice, though? I mean, I’m pretty sure this plant belongs to the family Gramineae, but...*

“Oh, hey, you’re back, huh? You end up deciding that you want to buy some?”

The man managing the stall appeared to be in his thirties. The other sacks were full of grain too, so maybe he was a merchant who specialized in cereals.

“Nah, I brought a friend to discuss things,” said Touya. “How are you supposed to eat this stuff, anyway?”

“Hmm? Most people just crush and simmer them. They end up mighty dense, so it’s an acquired taste, but it’s useful for viscous-type dishes. You’re meant to remove the hulls first, though.”

*Thick and viscous, huh? I wonder if people use it in dishes similar to rice porridge.*

“Can I take a grain to try it?” I asked.

“Yeah, sure, feel free.”

I picked up one grain and peeled off the hull. The inside did look similar to brown rice. As I continued scratching the bran layer with my fingernail, a translucent rice grain gradually appeared.

“This is definitely what we thought it was apart from the size,” I said. “How

much does it cost, sir?”

“Five large silver coins a sack.”

The sacks were probably twenty to thirty kilograms, so that wasn’t too bad. I thrust my hand into a sack and mixed around the grains, but I couldn’t find any sand or rocks, so it wasn’t just a layer of product on top of a sack full of padding or defective goods.

The merchant chuckled when he noticed me inspecting his wares. When you bought from a stall, it was standard procedure to confirm the quality of the product yourself, but...

“Relax, nobody would dare try to trick customers in this city. If the authorities get on your case, you get a stiff fine *and* you get chased out of the city.”

“The laws here are that strict?” I asked.

“Yep. There are surprise inspections from time to time too. And the inspectors pretend to be normal customers, so I can’t swap between high-quality goods for show and low-quality goods for sale.”

*Man, it sounds like it’s really easy to do business in this city if you’re an honest merchant.*

“All right. Let’s buy some to bring back with us. We’ll discuss what to do with the others,” I said. “We’re not the ones who can cook, so there’s no point in us worrying about the specifics.”

“Yeah, good point. We can afford to take a loss like this even if it doesn’t end up working out.” Touya handed the merchant five large silver coins. “We’ll buy one sack.”

The merchant took the coins, then tied up the sack of rice I’d examined and tossed it to Touya. “Cheers!” The sack looked quite heavy, but apparently the merchant was pretty strong by dint of his trade.

“By the way, do you have any other types for sale?” I asked.

“Indeed I do. The sack you just bought happens to be a type that has shorter grains. The longer grains are around twice the size. Give me a moment—should be around here.”

The merchant picked up some colanders that appeared to be serving as lids for other sacks. The grains inside definitely looked twice as big as the ones we'd just bought. The difference in size was comparable to that between azuki beans and soybeans.

"Can I check these sacks too?" I asked.

"Go ahead. The three sacks here are all different types."

There were three sizes: long, medium, and short. I took a grain of each and peeled off the hulls. The long ones were faintly white inside, but otherwise, all three varieties were more similar than different. In fact, the apparent whiteness of the long grains was probably just an optical illusion due to their greater size.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"Sure, why not? We can afford to buy these too," Touya replied. "How much will these sacks cost?"

"Same as the last—five large silver coins each. Those have got less inside than the first, mind."

By number of hulls, the sack of short grains contained about as much as the first sack we'd purchased, the sack of medium grains contained less, and the sack of long grains contained the least of all. In this world, goods were often sold based on the amount you could buy with large silver coins rather than by the kilogram. One downside to this system was that it made comparing prices harder, but it also made the handling of coins and calculations easier. I assumed that the reason for this system was that coins worth ten Rea or less had been removed from circulation for the most part, and commoners who were capable of mental math were few and far between.

"So that's fifteen large silver coins total? Okay, we'll buy all three sacks." I handed over one gold coin and five large silver coins.

The merchant looked very pleased as he sealed the sacks and hoisted them into the air, but he seemed unsure of whether to hand them to Touya or me.

"Give two sacks to my friend," I said. "I'll carry the last one."

"That so? I guess beastmen are as strong as they say. That's really

something!"

The merchant sounded genuinely impressed; apparently he wasn't prejudiced against Touya's race. He smiled and tossed two sacks to Touya while I picked up the sack of long grains. I had assumed that this would be the lightest one, but it felt like it weighed over twenty kilos.

"Are you really gonna make me carry three whole sacks? I mean, sure, I can handle them just fine, but still."

The three sacks together were probably still less than one hundred kilos. Touya stacked them up on one shoulder and carried them with ease. As a fellow guy, I was kind of envious of his brawn. I could carry another sack if I had to, but...

"I paid three times as much money as you did," I pointed out.

"Okay, when you put it that way, I guess it's fair for me to carry more than you, ha ha!" Touya smiled and nodded in response to my excuse and gave me a thumbs up as if to assure me that he would do his duty.

*I'm pretty sure we'll get reimbursed from the pool of money for shared expenses if the rice ends up tasting good, but there's no point bringing that up at the moment.*

The merchant sent us off with an amiable smile. "Feel free to come back later if you want to buy more! I'm right here every morning!" He was clearly happy that we'd bought so much.

"Sure. We'll definitely come back if we like it," I said.

Touya and I explored the morning market for a bit in search of other bargains before heading back to our inn. When we'd passed through here yesterday around noon, I hadn't seen any stalls, but now there were all kinds lining the street. The two of us didn't visit morning markets as often as the girls, but as far as we could tell, a lot of the foods on sale were things we'd never seen before. It seemed like goods from all over the world flowed freely into Clewily. The stalls were probably only open briefly in the early morning before the stores behind them opened shop for the day. Different merchants were active in the morning and at noon, which was one of the factors that made the city so lively.

“I’m really amazed by the variety of products on offer,” I said.

“Yeah, totally. There are a lot of fruits that we’ve never seen in Laffan.”

In most towns, it was difficult to find fruits that were out of season locally, but there was a wide variety on display here, including some that were out of season. They looked pricey, but the fact that you could find produce like this in Clewily was evidence that local merchants imported goods from all over.

“Oh, there are dried dindels too... Whoa, they’re way too expensive!” I exclaimed.

A single dried dindel was apparently worth two thousand Rea here. The four bags of rice we had bought were worth two thousand Rea total, but there was a huge difference between how many meals each purchase would cover.

“Do you think we’d be able to sell our own dried dindels here for around the same price?” Touya asked.

“Maybe, but do you really think it would be worth it?” I replied. “We’d have to travel all the way to Clewily...”

“...Yeah, you’re right. Not worth it at all.”

We could probably make decent money considering how much we’d earned from dindels last year, but that would be the only upside. If we harvested enough that we’d have a decent amount for our own consumption, then we would probably only earn a few hundred gold coins in Clewily. However, that was without factoring in the time required to travel here and back to Laffan. We could easily earn more money if we spent our time on other projects.

“In any case, I still think we should bring the girls here when we have time,” I said. “We might be able to enrich our meals if we’re lucky.”

“Yeah. There are a lot of different spices, seasonings, and condiments here too,” said Touya. “I bet we could even get them to make curry or something like it.”

“Curry sounds great!” I exclaimed. “Japanese people love curry!”

“Yep. We could even use curry as a secret weapon against any classmates who try to start shit.”

“That’s a great idea! It’d be perfect if we had actual rice to go with it!”

Curry wouldn’t magically turn hostile classmates into friends, but delicious food made everyone happy, so it might be easier to negotiate with them.

“All right, let’s head back as soon as we can!” said Touya. “There’s no point in us guys looking around by ourselves if we’re going to look around with the girls later.”

“Good point.”

We’d deliberately left our magic bags at the inn, so Touya and I were still carrying the sacks of rice on our shoulders. It wasn’t much of a burden for Touya, but the sacks were far from light. I set my sack on the ground, lifted it onto my other shoulder, and then urged Touya, “The rice is kind of heavy too, so let’s hurry.” We set off at a jog.



Holding one of each type of grain in her palm, Haruka gave me a doubtful glance. “So you’re telling me this is rice. And you two bought it for us.”

“Yeah,” I replied, then added, trying my best to convince her, “Aside from the size of the grains, doesn’t it look like rice?”

“I’ve never seen rice like this before,” said Natsuki. “Things like adlay also belong to the family Gramineae, so it’s perfectly natural that larger types of rice should exist, but...”

“Is that the stuff in adlay tea, Natsuki?” Yuki asked. “I’ve never seen the actual grains.”

“I’ve had adlay tea, but from tea bags,” I said. “Are the grains pretty big?”

“Mm. Much bigger than rice,” said Natsuki. “As large as the beads of a Buddhist rosary. They aren’t commonly consumed.”

According to Natsuki, the grains had been used as beads for toys in the past and could also be used to fill bean bags. *Hmm. This sounds completely irrelevant to me. But Natsuki was born into a rich family with a storied history, so it’s no wonder that she knows about ancient customs.*

“Well, the hulls definitely look like rice hulls,” said Yuki. “The kernels look like

rice too, and they're definitely not barley. But the long grains are a bit white, kind of like sticky rice."

It hadn't crossed my mind earlier, but Yuki raised a good point. "Oh, yeah, you're right. I guess the larger grains wouldn't matter if you used this to make mochi."

"Actually, soaking the rice in water and steaming it would be much harder with long grains," said Natsuki. "It might be fine if we crushed the rice, however."

"The medium grains look a bit odd." Haruka carefully peeled off the hull and bran of one of the medium grains and held up the white kernel in the air.

I took a peek over Haruka's shoulder. Sure enough, there was a white kernel inside the translucent grain.

"May I have a look as well, Haruka?" asked Natsuki. "Hmm. This appears to be similar to sake rice."

"I assume that's what you use for brewing sake?" Yuki asked. "The short grains look normal, so do they get whiter from the middle as they get bigger?"

Touya shook his head and casually refuted Yuki's hypothesis. "Nah, they're completely different types of rice. I don't think that has anything to do with it."

It seemed clear that the various kinds of grain weren't simply representatives of the same species that differed based solely on when they'd been harvested.

"Well, they might just be in the middle of evolving or mutating," said Yuki. "I dunno."

"Hmm. I guess it's possible that the original variety had long grains and the shorter ones came about through dwarfing," I said.

Our discussion about rice had been moderately serious so far, but then Mary tilted her head in confusion. "Um, this rice that everyone has been talking about—I've never seen it before, but is it very good? Everybody seems really interested..."

"Yeah, it's delic—"

"Is it really delicious?!" Metea interrupted me, looking excited, but...

“Well, we *hope* it’s delicious,” I said.

A disappointed look appeared on Metea’s face. “Oh...”

Metea really enjoyed food, but I wasn’t sure if rice would suit the sisters’ taste buds. Of course the rest of us, as Japanese people, thought it was delicious, but even on Earth, there were actually some people who couldn’t stand the smell of freshly cooked rice.

“If it’s good, I definitely want to buy some more, but now that I think about it, we can’t just eat the rice as is,” I said.

Haruka looked like she had mixed feelings. “Mm. Things like rice hullers and rice mills don’t exist in this world. Should we try making some?”

“I mean, we didn’t bring any tools with us,” said Touya. “I could probably put something together if we were back at our house in Laffan, but how do the machines even work?”

“People in the past milled rice with wooden mortars and pestles,” said Natsuki.

“Oh, yeah, I’ve seen that on television.” Specifically, I had seen a show in which idols did farmwork to promote agriculture. We couldn’t make a wooden mortar and pestle here in Clewily, however. Simon-san would probably have no problem making one for us back in Laffan, but...

“Well, if we’re going to make a machine ourselves, then we should make a rubber roller rice huller,” said Haruka.

“A rubber roller... Those rub the grains together to peel off the hulls, right? That sounds pretty easy to make,” I said.

According to Haruka, rice passed through rubber rollers rotating at different speeds, and the resulting friction tore off the husks. We could probably create a difference in rotation speed by adjusting the roller gears. A wind-up rubber roller sounded simple enough in structure, so it probably wouldn’t be too hard for us to make something like that back home.

“Anyway, the problem is what to do here,” I said. “I feel like it’d be way too much work to husk all of this by hand...”

“Yeah, no, dude, that’s a bit much,” said Touya.

Peeling one or two husks was one thing, but if we wanted enough rice for tasting or cooking, that would require a lot of time and effort. The long and medium grains probably wouldn’t be too bad, but I had a feeling that I would lose my mind if I had to husk the short grains manually, and in addition to the husks, we also had to remove the bran. The only method I was familiar with required you to stuff brown rice into a bottle and poke a stick inside over and over, but...

“If we polish it too, that’ll require a lot of patience and hard work,” I said.

I sighed as I thought about the difficult task ahead, but then Mary hesitantly raised a hand. “Um, Met and I can take care of this if you want. Those are the kinds of chores children are meant to do.”

Metea seemed motivated too, undoubtedly because the work was related to food. “Yeah, I’ll work so hard!”

“Oh, um...”

It sort of made sense to me as a side job that could be done at home, but I felt uncomfortable at the thought of making kids do work that I myself didn’t want to.

“Well, if all seven of us work on the rice that we have here, then I’m sure we’ll be able to produce enough for one serving of each kind within a reasonable amount of time,” I said.

Haruka nodded. “Mm. Three hundred of the long grains should be enough. If we double that number based on size, then the total would be thirty-three hundred... Actually, shall we drop this idea?”

We had long grains, medium grains, and two types of short grains. Haruka had rapidly calculated the total number of grains we’d need, but the final number seemed to have killed her motivation.

“If we divide that by seven, each person should only have to handle around five hundred grains,” I said. “Assuming it takes ten seconds to peel one grain, then that adds up to about an hour and a half. Yeah, maybe we should just drop this idea.”

*My motivation is gone too. It isn't that expensive, and I don't really mind if it ends up tasting mediocre or even bad, so it should be fine if we just buy a lot here and think about what to do with it later, after returning to Laffan. Hmm...*

"Oh, come on, don't give up that easily!" Yuki interjected. "An hour and half will feel like nothing if we just chat while we work!"

"...Really?" I asked.

"Yeah, really! This is the kind of thing that ends up not being as bad as you expect once you give it a try!"

"Well, if you say so, then okay," I said.

Each of us scooped up small portions of the four types of rice, then started to peel them. We stopped a few times for breakfast and some short breaks, but we finally finished about two hours later. We'd probably only spent one hour actually hulling the rice, however.

"This was easier than I thought it would be," I said.

"Mm. The hulls were actually quite easy to remove," said Haruka.

"Yeah, most of it comes off if you just rub the grains together in both hands," said Yuki.

We had gotten more efficient once Yuki discovered that method, so we'd decided to prepare enough for two servings of each variety, but we'd still finished much faster than our initial estimate.

"Next, we'll remove the bran and polish the rice," said Natsuki. "Let's use a colander."

"A colander? Aren't you supposed to grind the rice by poking it with a stick?" I asked.

"That would certainly work, but it would take more time, and the grains might break due to their large size. It should be fine if we simply toss the rice into a metal colander and rub it against the wire mesh."

According to Natsuki, some household rice-polishing machines back on Earth had worked that way. We had no idea which was better, the manual or the automatic method, so everyone accepted Natsuki's proposal. We only had two

colanders with us, so we took shifts polishing the rice. The bran fell away, so clearly there was nothing wrong with this method, but the rice broke whenever we accidentally applied too much strength. It took us about two hours total of difficult, boring work, after which we'd finally gotten some white rice for our efforts. The grains were much bigger than the kind of white rice I'd had in mind, however, and had more scraps of bran clinging to them.

"We're finally done, huh? Took long enough," I said.

"It's definitely not something you're meant to do by hand," said Haruka. "I have a newfound respect for the people in the ancient world who did it this way."

Even with the aid of tools like mortars, it undoubtedly took a lot of time and energy. In fact, I wasn't sure if you would actually gain more energy from eating rice than you spent preparing it. However, my ancestors had survived thanks to rice, so everything had worked out in the end.

Touya seemed excited at the prospect of finally eating rice. "Nice! Now we just have to cook it and eat it!"

Natsuki, however, quickly dashed his hopes. "Oh, no, we have to soak the rice in water first. It wouldn't take too long for rice of the size we're familiar with, but when it comes to long grains like these, I think it would be wise to allow them more time."

"Seriously? Ugh..."

*Hmm. Now that I think about it, there were some tools back on Earth that purported to cook rice in no time at all, but most of them came with the disclaimer that you had to soak the rice for a few dozen minutes before actually cooking it. Plus, the length of time you had to soak the rice wasn't included in the cooking time written on the package. I also remember seeing some instructions that said you had to steam the rice for a few dozen minutes afterward, so the total amount of time required wasn't as short as advertised. Anyway, we don't have a rice cooker here, so I guess we'll have to spend a decent amount of time prepping the rice.*

"It would be better if we had something like a pressure cooker, but if we're going to cook rice in a normal pot, then we definitely need to soak it," said

Haruka. “The question is, for how long?”

“The grains are all different sizes, so I dunno,” said Yuki. “If they absorb water at the same rate, then it might just depend on the distance to the center of the kernels, so I think we should let them soak at least four or five times longer than usual.”

“Well, things like soybeans are meant to be soaked overnight,” said Natsuki. “However...”

“I don’t think we’ll need to go that long,” said Yuki. “How about, like, three hours for the long grains?”

“That’s way too long!” Touya burst out. “Can’t you just finish this process instantly with magic, Haruka?”

Yuki’s estimate made perfect sense to me, but I also understood why Touya wasn’t willing to wait that long.

“I’m not capable of doing something like that on a moment’s notice,” said Haruka. “Besides, I can’t recall seeing any spells that we could use for this purpose in any of the grimoires we own.”

“Man, mages back in the past were a bunch of slackers!” Touya declared.

“Well, mages are an elite group,” said Haruka. “Most of them probably don’t go to the trouble of making their own meals when they can just hire other people to cook for them.”

I could come up with plenty of spells that would be useful for daily life, but only from the perspective of people like household servants, and most servants weren’t capable of using magic, besides which most people who were capable of using magic would find better jobs, so there probably weren’t many mages out there trying to develop spells like that. It was possible that some people developed practical spells as a hobby, but the spells wouldn’t become well-known that way, hence, perhaps, the fact that we hadn’t seen any in our grimoires. If the internet existed in this world, it would have been easy to share information about unique and convenient spells on a wiki, but that wasn’t the case.

“Well, we don’t have a spell that can soak the rice for us, but we do have

Accelerate Time,” I said. “That’ll save us *some* time, so no more complaining, Touya.”

“Mm. We might be able to cut down the amount of time required by half or even a quarter, so I bet it’ll be no problem if we cook them in order from small to big,” said Yuki. “It should be easy if Nao and I work together.”

Accelerate Time was a spell that we rarely used in combat, but we did occasionally use it for dishes that the girls had to boil or stew. The spell could reduce the amount of time you had to wait for heating, soaking, and steaming, so it was actually pretty useful.

“Sure, we can try that,” said Haruka. “Let’s do this step-by-step.”

“Mm. We need to start by washing the rice,” said Natsuki.

Given that this inn catered to nobles, rooms for maids and bodyguards had simple kitchenettes attached. We shifted operations to this room’s kitchenette and washed the rice in bowls. The bowls themselves were Touya’s creations; they were made of white iron and thus very similar to stainless steel. White iron was so expensive that it wasn’t possible to find bowls like these at stores catering to ordinary citizens.

“Oh, hmm, this rice isn’t really changing color even after I’ve washed it a bunch,” I said.

“Commercially available rice tends to not have much residual bran,” said Yuki. “You can go even further and purchase no-wash rice.”

“That’s because the rice wasn’t polished well, Nao-kun,” said Natsuki. “It won’t taste good if it smells of bran, so do clean it thoroughly, please.”

“Okay. Could we use the Purification spell?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, no,” Haruka replied. “The spell doesn’t work for most food.”

Purification was a super convenient spell—it could even clean vegetables in an instant—but you couldn’t use it to, say, drain blood from a fish or remove just the skin from a fruit. Polishing rice would have been very easy from this point forward if the Purification spell worked on food, but apparently that shortcut wasn’t available. It did, however, work for cleansing our skin of blood

and our clothes of blood and juice. It was kind of strange, but magic couldn't be explained in a scientific way, so there was no point in overthinking it.

"We should wash rice by hand at the very least," said Natsuki. "You can't really call the final product a homemade meal otherwise."

"Oh, I guess that's one way of thinking about it." I personally felt like there was no difference between no-wash rice and packaged precooked rice prepared in a microwave as long as the rice itself tasted good. *Actually, no, on second thought, packaged precooked rice doesn't count. You should at least use a rice cooker if you want something to count as "homemade."*

"I also feel like you have to use your hands for a homemade meal," said Yuki. "Nao, what's your definition of a homemade meal?"

"Hmm. Well, for me, anything can count as homemade as long as it's not something that you just heat up," I said. "I'm not trying to say that prepackaged or instant food is automatically bad or anything like that, but it wouldn't feel right if someone served me stuff like that and called it homemade."

"Does that mean slicing a boiled egg and serving it to you doesn't count, and things like fried eggs or rice balls barely count?" Yuki asked.

"Yeah, more or less. But the best of all is when the cook pours love into their cooking." *I wouldn't go as far as to say that love is the greatest spice there is, but it makes me feel warm inside when I'm eating something that someone made for me.*

"Gotcha. So does that mean you *always* think the meals I make with Haruka and Natsuki are delicious?" Yuki asked with a playful smile.

"Huh? Of course," I replied. "I really appreciate the meals the three of you make."

At that, the girls fell silent and exchanged a series of glances. I was worried that I'd made a poor choice of words, but before I could ask, Natsuki coughed as if to change the topic and reached for the bowl of rice that we'd finished washing first.

"N-Now, then, the short grains should have been soaking long enough by now, so let's cook them."

“Y-Yeah, there’s no time to waste!” Yuki exclaimed.

Natsuki tossed the short grain rice into a colander, then transferred them into the pot that Yuki handed her. These grains were small only relative to the others, however; they were still quite big compared to the rice we knew.

“I’m not sure how long we should cook it,” said Natsuki. “Using the ordinary volume of water should be fine, but...”

“I don’t think we have to worry too much about the cooking time if the rice has been properly soaked,” said Haruka. “Just go with your instincts, Natsuki.”

“That’s a big responsibility,” said Natsuki. She stared at Haruka. “You’re up next if I fail.”

Haruka fell silent for a moment, but she quickly smiled and patted Natsuki on the shoulder. “...Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll succeed, Natsuki!” Maybe Haruka had been thinking about the difficulty of the rice-polishing process?

“I’ll do my best, but don’t get your hopes up,” said Natsuki.

She seemed uneasy, but when thirty minutes had passed, the unique smell of freshly cooked rice permeated the air, so her efforts had clearly culminated in success. The rice looked very soft and glossy and was indistinguishable from proper white rice except for its size. Natsuki scooped the rice into a moderately deep container and placed it on the table.

Touya and Yuki immediately grabbed spoons and extended them toward the rice.

“It’s been ages since I last had rice!” said Touya. “Time to dig in!”

“This looks sooo good!” gushed Yuki.

I took a bite as well. *Oh yeah, this definitely tastes like white rice.* As I chewed it, it didn’t taste particularly sweet—really, it just tasted like cheap rice—but that wasn’t an issue. The only thing that bothered me was the difference in the texture due to the larger grains, but it was still acceptable.

“This is perfectly edible rice,” said Haruka. “I think it would be worth stocking up on this.”

“Yeah, I agree,” I said. “It’s not exactly high quality, but it’s better than

nothing.”

“Metea-chan, Mary-chan, what do you two think of the rice?” Natsuki asked.

“The taste is a bit unique. I guess it’s somewhat good,” said Mary. She sounded like she was trying to be polite.

Metea’s answer was much more frank. “It’s got no taste!”

“Mm. I suppose rice by itself isn’t particularly tasty,” said Natsuki.

“Yeah, rice is a staple food like bread,” I said.

“That makes sense,” said Metea. “Well, it tastes a whole lot better than brown bread...”

But although she’d said that confidently, her eyebrows lowered, and her ears and tail drooped as if in disappointment.

“Nao, Touya, it’s almost lunch, so go out and buy something from a stall in the city plaza,” said Haruka. “Try to look for things that would go well with rice—it’s really not complete without side dishes.”

As Touya and I stood to go, Metea thrust her hand in the air. “I want to go as well!”

“Take Metea with you as well,” said Haruka. She glanced at Mary. “What about you, Mary?”

Haruka must’ve given Metea permission to accompany us because there was nothing left to do here aside from waiting for the rest of the rice to cook.

Mary hesitantly shook her head. “I’ll stay here and observe. We’ll use rice for our meals in the future, right?”

It looked like Mary wanted to sample some stall food too, but her determination to help with cooking was apparently stronger, at least for the time being. *Oh well. We still have four more days left in this city, so I’m sure we’ll get another chance to take Mary with us.*

When I glanced around to see if Metea was ready, I saw she’d already gone to the door without me noticing it. She had her hand on the doorknob and was stamping her foot. Touya and I looked at each other, laughed, and told her to go

ahead.



We bought some street food that we thought would pair well with rice and brought it back to our inn, where it seemed the girls had finished steaming the short grain rice and were almost done with the medium grain rice as well.

“Welcome back,” said Yuki. “Did you guys find anything good?”

“Yeah, I bought some grilled chicken skewers,” I said.

The diced meat on the skewers looked like normal chicken, but they were actually more expensive than things like orc meat. It was flavored only with salt—we hadn’t been able to find any dipping sauces at any of the stalls—but it would still pair well with rice. We had also bought some grilled chicken meatballs that resembled the tsukune common in Japan; the only difference was that instead of being round like typical tsukune, they were wrapped around a flat skewer like goheimochi. We’d never seen anything like this back in Laffan, so it was interesting to learn how much food could vary depending on where you lived in this world.

“I bought some pastries too,” said Touya. “Rice by itself isn’t quite enough.”

Specifically, Touya had bought some vegetables and meat in thin pastry wrappers. It might have been more chic to describe them as tacos or burritos, but they were basically savory crêpes.

“Big bro Touya and Nao bought some food for me too!”

Metea was holding up four pieces of bone-in meat; she’d asked us to purchase some spareribs for her. There hadn’t been any information to indicate what kind of meat they were, but the smell from the stall had stopped both Metea and Touya in their tracks, so we’d ended up buying some.

“Spareribs will be an excellent side dish with rice,” said Natsuki. “The medium grain rice is almost ready, so all of you returned at the perfect time.”

Natsuki lined up some plates on the dining table alongside the food we had bought. She divided the spareribs so that Touya and the sisters each got one, then sliced up the remaining rib and distributed the pieces among everyone

else's plates.

"All that's left is the rice," said Natsuki. "I'll handle serving it as well."

Natsuki took some pots out of a magic bag—the freshly cooked rice, still piping hot. She gave us all equal portions of the two types of short grain rice as well as the medium grain rice.

"All right, everything's ready," said Natsuki.

"Thank you for the food!" everyone exclaimed together.

Our lunch looked delicious, but there was one thing I had to check before anything else: I took a bite of the short grain rice. *Hmm. This one isn't as sticky as the first type that I tasted earlier. I wonder if it's a different type of rice or if the girls just cooked it differently. It has kind of a crunchy texture because of how big the grains are, but I'm okay with that. In fact, I think this would be great for seasoned or mixed rice.*

"Not bad," I said.

I ate some grilled chicken and drank some water as a palate cleanser before turning to the medium grain rice. *Hmm. This rice looks kind of crumbly. Did the girls cook it wrong somewhat? I guess there's only one way to find out.* I tossed some of the medium grain rice into my mouth. The grains were soft on the outside and very sweet, almost like melted rice in a porridge. The middle had an unusual chewy texture, though. *This isn't really suitable for everyday consumption, but it tastes pretty good, so I think it'll probably work well if the girls use it in porridge dishes—or if they figure out a better way of cooking it.* I tried out the burritos and spareribs next, and soon, the last variety of rice, which had the largest grains, was ready. Natsuki distributed it among our plates.

"Whoa, I'm not sure what to say about this," I said.

"It looks super sticky," said Yuki. "It's almost like the rice has fused with our plates."

Natsuki had been forced to use a second spoon to scrape the rice off of the first and onto our plates. I took a bite, and it was really sticky...or maybe gooey? But once you adjusted to that, it wasn't bad.

“Reminds me of melted mochi,” said Haruka.

“This variety should probably be steamed,” said Natsuki. “It’s good to know that we can use it to make mochi, however.”

We finished the remaining street food, marking the end of this food-tasting event, which had doubled as our lunch. I was very glad that I’d finally gotten the chance to eat rice for the first time since we arrived in this world, but the amount hadn’t been enough to satisfy me. Anyway, the girls regularly made dishes that reminded us of Japanese food, so it wasn’t like I’d burst into tears of joy. That said, I might have cried if we hadn’t already invented our soy-inspired inspiel sauce.

“I think we can conclude that only the short grain variety is suitable for use as normal rice,” said Haruka.

Now that we’d finished cleaning up, we were relaxing on our beds again. Everyone nodded in agreement with Haruka, but it seemed that the sisters had a slightly different opinion. Apparently they were willing to eat rice as part of a meal, but they weren’t particularly eager to eat it for every meal. That would probably be true of most people in this world. Overall, it sounded like the sisters were fine with anything as long as their meals included meat.

“Can we stock up on the long grain rice for mochi? It’d be nice to have mochi for the new year,” said Yuki.

“Mm. The medium grain rice might prove useful as well, so let’s buy some more,” said Natsuki. “I’m willing to pay with my own money.”

“No, rice falls under shared expenses, so please don’t worry about that, Natsuki,” said Haruka. “You said you bought this rice at the morning market, right, Nao? It must be closed for the day by now.”

“We might be able to find rice in stores, but the stall where we found this had already been taken down when we went to get street food,” I said.

I had dropped by to check earlier, but all of the morning market stalls had disappeared. They’d been lined up along one of the main streets, but at noon, they were taken down and the regular stores opened. I was fairly certain that the stalls only had permission to operate during the morning; otherwise, they’d

block access to the stores.

“We can look around some stores if we really want to, but I think it’s fine to just wait until tomorrow morning,” said Haruka. “I’d feel safer buying the same types of rice from the same stall.”

“Mm. I’d prefer not to have to mill the rice again just to taste it,” said Natsuki.

“All right. Let’s wake up early tomorrow to visit the morning market,” said Haruka. “I’m looking forward to it after what you guys said about all the different spices, seasonings, and condiments you saw.”

I asked the question that had popped into my head while I was browsing the stalls. “Oh, um, Haruka, do you think you girls could use those spices to make curry?”

Haruka fell silent for a moment. She put a hand to her chin, looking troubled.

“I’ve used curry powder out of a tin before, but I’ve never tried making the powder from scratch,” she said at last. “All I know is that you need turmeric, cayenne pepper, and cardamom...”

“You also need cumin and garam masala,” Yuki chimed in.

Natsuki immediately added, “Actually, Yuki, garam masala is itself a mix of spices. Many different spices go into it—nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, and black pepper...”

“Oh, really? I had no idea!”

“It contains chili powder too. On the other hand, allspice, in spite of its name, is actually a single spice, not a mix.”

Haruka and Yuki nodded, seeming very impressed at that bit of trivia, but I had no idea what Natsuki was talking about. “Black pepper” and “cayenne pepper” were the only words in there that I’d recognized. *Actually, wait, turmeric is what Japanese people call ukon, right? I remember seeing a store back in Japan with a giant sign outside that said they only sold dried ukon roots. I wonder if the owner was actually turning a profit. I think I’ve seen cinnamon in stick form too. It looked like a piece of wood rolled up, so I guess cinnamon is basically thin bark. Anyway, just the names of the spices aren’t going to help*

me. There's no way I could possibly gather all of that stuff myself.

"Cloves have a very distinct appearance, so I'm sure you'd recognize them right away," said Natsuki.

Haruka and Yuki both chuckled.

"Yeah, of course," said Haruka.

I was a bit confused and asked them to elaborate. The girls explained that cloves were shaped like little nails, and you were supposed to stab them into other ingredients. *Seriously? I had no idea that such an easy-to-use spice existed.*

"Nutmeg, cardamom, and cumin are all seeds, so we can only distinguish them based on their scent," said Natsuki. "Or rather, I ought to say that there's no guarantee we'll be able to find the same spices in this world. We'll have to look for spices that are similar in terms of scent and taste."

"Well, there are lots of different kinds of curry, so I'm sure we can make something similar enough as long as we aren't aiming for one specific kind," said Yuki. "Honestly, this might be a bit of a stretch, but anything spicy and fragrant basically counts as curry, right?"

"That's kind of ridiculous, but I also kind of agree," said Touya.

"Yeah, same here," I said. "There are a lot of ways you can approach curry."

Most of the varieties of curry roux that you could buy in Japan were essentially identical in flavor, and yet if someone had asked me what curry was made of, the only answer I could've come up with was "spices." The smell of curry that we were familiar with as Japanese people was just the smell of curry powder made by well-known brands and manufacturers. I had heard before that people in India prepared homemade spice blends for curry, so curry there undoubtedly tasted very different.

"Are you talking about something delicious?" Metea asked, sounding very curious; she must have realized we were talking about food, but...

"We're talking about something that *might* be delicious," said Haruka. "It's a little spicy, however."

Metea crossed her arms and shook her head. “I don’t like spicy food!”

Metea sometimes acted more mature than her actual age, but she still had an ordinary kid’s palate. Just yesterday, she’d been unable to eat the slightly spicy fish that the inn had served us.

“Don’t worry—there are sweet variations of curry too,” said Haruka.

The moment she heard that, Metea beamed. “Oh, sweet? I love sweet things!”

Sweet curry, however, would actually be somewhat expensive to make. Apples and honey were the most common ingredients, but both were expensive and hard to obtain in this world. *Hmm. Now that I think about it, we can harvest apples from the Summer Resort Dungeon, right? The apples there have a strong sour taste, but they should still work. We’ll have to buy honey ourselves, but that’s worth it for curry.*

“Well, in any case, we can just stock up on a lot of spices and try making different kinds of curry,” said Haruka. “I’m sure we’ll eventually discover the most delicious variation through trial and error.”

“Mm. We can afford spices now,” said Natsuki.

Spices were by no means cheap in this world, but neither did they cost whole gold coins. In fact, if we got to eat curry, a gold coin or more for the ingredients would be worth it as far as I was concerned; I wouldn’t even mind paying for the ingredients myself if necessary. *That would be a better use of money than burning through dozens of gold coins in just a few hours at a brothel like Touya does. I usually don’t spend much of my own pocket money, anyway.*

My party had enjoyed our time in the city of Clewily so far, but we had no idea that something totally unexpected was awaiting Haruka and me in the near future.

## Side Story—New Food to Eat

One day in winter, my party gathered to deal with something that had been on our minds for a while. Last year, when we went river fishing, we'd caught something that had a flat shell, four legs, and a long neck. Yep, that's right: a softshell turtle. We'd completely forgotten about it until Yuki remarked that winter was the perfect season for hot pot. According to her, convenience stores actually sold more oden at the beginning of winter than during the middle of winter, and the weather around Laffan had just started getting cold, so...

"Yeah, this is the time of the year when you really want some warm food," I said.

"Mm. Last year, we didn't really have the luxury of taking time off to eat hot pot together," said Haruka.

"Our house had just been completed," Natsuki pointed out, "so I think we were distracted by relief at the fact that we finally had a place we could call home in this world."

"Yeah, none of us were really in the mood for hot pot," said Touya.

Around this time last year, my party had been working very hard to earn money for our house. We had barely put together enough in time; if we'd been even a little bit slower, we probably would have been forced to winter at an inn. The Slumbering Bear had served us well, but all of us agreed that we could only truly relax in a home of our own.

When Metea saw our reactions, she lifted a hand to her chin and furrowed her brows in thought. "I bet even big bro Touya would end up with an upset stomach if he ate a normal pot. So now I'm sure there's a special kind of pot that you can eat!"

She looked around at us with a smug expression, as if she was absolutely confident in her reasoning. It was true that some dining halls used hard-baked bread for bowls, and there were foods that were shaped like pots, like tart

shells, but...

"Um, Metea, hot pot actually refers to a way of cooking and eating food," I said.

"...Really?"

"Really. It's a way of cooking lots of different foods in a simmering broth," said Haruka. "Everyone gathers around the pot to eat."

My answer hadn't seemed to satisfy Metea, but Haruka's made her face light up. "Everyone? That sounds fun!"

"Lots of different foods? Hmm," said Mary. "Does that mean you don't have to eat the same thing every time?"

"Yeah, you're pretty much free to pick what you want to cook and eat," Yuki replied. "There are some standard choices, but we can make all sorts of things now, like sukiyaki hot pot and chicken hot pot!"

We'd have to make some substitutions, but we could obtain things similar to the chicken, beef, and seasonings that were familiar to us. The girls were all really good at cooking, so I was certain that any hot pot they prepared would be great. There was also something I was concerned about, though.

"Mm. We can get a lot of good ingredients, but vegetables are an exception," said Haruka.

"Ugh. Right, the produce here isn't that great," said Yuki.

One benefit of hot pot was that you could eat a lot more vegetables than you would with a normal meal, but vegetables in this world were far from delicious. It wouldn't have been an issue if they were just bland or lacked umami, but a lot of them were actually bitter—and not very palatable to kids.

"I don't mind even if we don't have vegetables!" Metea announced.

*Nah, Metea, I'm sorry, but no vegetables at all would be way too unhealthy.* The girls exchanged glances and laughed, then nodded.

"Well, rather than searching for vegetables that resemble the ones we know, let's prioritize finding vegetables that won't ruin the flavor of the other ingredients," said Haruka.

“Yep. There’s no point in going out of our way to find something that looks like napa cabbage if it doesn’t even taste good,” said Yuki. “Anyway, what kind of hot pot should we go for? Chicken hot pot? Wild boar hot pot? There’s also the option of sukiyaki hotpot, but that would be pretty extravagant...”

“I don’t know, but they all sound very delicious!” Metea’s eyes shone with joy as she covered her mouth with both hands.

*Mm, all of the choices that Yuki brought up sound mouthwateringly delicious —oh, I need to cover my mouth too.*

“Any of those options would work, but we may as well take advantage of this opportunity to carry out inventory reduction on our magic bags,” said Natsuki. “Food inside the bags won’t go bad, but there are things we’ve neglected for quite a while.”

Haruka nodded. “That’s a good point. There’s a lot of food that we don’t have a reason to eat on a regular basis.”

I had no idea what they were talking about. Touya didn’t seem to either, but Yuki tilted her head and put a finger to her chin, so clearly she got it.

“A giant salamander, some eels, and a softshell turtle, right? I think the softshell turtle would be the best for hot pot, but...”

“Yes, that’s right, Yuki,” said Natsuki. “We may as well take advantage of this opportunity to try all of them.”

We had originally decided to save the eels we’d caught because we hadn’t had soy sauce at the time. We hadn’t had a similar reason to hold off on cooking the salamander and turtle, but we’d ended up leaving them in our magic bags too. I had more or less forgotten about them until now. In a way, magic bags were almost too convenient. The girls had, however, already gotten a couple of meals out of the catfish we’d caught around the same time.

“Oh, right, now we have inspiel sauce that tastes kinda like soy sauce, plus sugar,” said Touya. “Isn’t this the wrong season for eel, though? Sure, we caught them a long time ago, but still.”

Japanese people traditionally ate eel on a midsummer Day of the Ox. That was probably what had popped into Touya’s mind, but Natsuki shook her head.

"People in Japan often eat eel in the summer as a result of a campaign by a certain copywriter. Eel season actually lasts from autumn to winter. Assuming eels in this world are the same as eels on Earth, the ones we caught last year were in season."

"Well, all that matters is that they taste good," I said. "There's no point catching more eels if these ones taste bad. If they just aren't fatty enough, we can adjust the time of year when we catch them. Anyway, we need to taste them before jumping to any conclusions."

Yuki nodded. "Yeah, definitely. I hope they're good. I guess I'll go get them."

She walked away and returned shortly with the magic bag containing the things we'd caught last year. She searched inside of the bag, then took out two sealed buckets and one large leather bag. Living things generally couldn't be stored inside of magic bags, but through experimentation, we'd discovered a loophole that allowed us to preserve live fish, reptiles, and even amphibians. We had frozen the giant salamander when we caught it, but the others were still alive...

"Unyah!"

Mary had casually lifted the lid on one of the buckets, and she'd immediately leaped backward, her tail standing up straight. Inside the bucket was a living creature: the softshell turtle. If you didn't know otherwise, its flat shell and long neck made it look like something that wasn't meant for human consumption.

"A-Are we really going to eat this...?"

Mary's reaction was perfectly normal, but Metea didn't seem intimidated at all. After she looked into the bucket, a surprised look appeared on her face.

"Well, it looks strange, but I bet big sis Haruka and everyone else can make anything taste good. You shouldn't be such a picky eater, big sis. We're lucky we don't have to worry about food anymore."

"Ugh. Y-You're right, but..."

"Tee hee. I wouldn't go as far as to say we can turn *anything* into a great meal, but I'm sure this softshell turtle will turn out delicious," said Haruka. "Oh, Metea, don't stick your finger into the bucket! It's dangerous!"

Metea was curiously watching the turtle swimming around in the bucket. She'd been extending a finger to poke its shell when Haruka stopped her. "Really?" she asked.

"Really," said Haruka. "Softshell turtles have very powerful jaws, and they can extend their necks quite far, so they're actually fairly dangerous."

"We saw it easily bite through a branch as big around as your thumb," I said. "You've gotten pretty strong, Metea, but you still shouldn't try your luck against a turtle."

All of us had been shocked when the turtle had bitten through that branch. By now, we'd leveled up enough that our fingers were probably stronger than the average branch, but there was no reason to test that theory.

"Th-That's very dangerous!" Metea interlaced her fingers as if panicked. She gave Haruka a worried look. "Is it really safe to cook?"

Haruka smiled and shook her head, then glanced at the rest of us. "We'll kill it before we cook it, so it'll be fine. All right. What should we start with?"

"Hmm. How about eel and giant salamander for lunch and turtle hot pot for dinner?" Natsuki suggested.

"Yeah, that sounds good," said Yuki. "When I think of hot pot, I think of dinner!"

We lugged the giant salamander and the eels, themselves quite massive, to the kitchen. The sight of them lined up on the kitchen counter was pretty impressive.

"Uh, can we actually prepare this stuff?" I asked. "I don't know about the eels, but I assume nobody here has ever handled a giant salamander before, right?"

"I don't have any experience preparing eels," said Haruka. "You don't either, do you, Natsuki?"

Commoners like Haruka and I didn't often get the chance to handle live eels. The Furumiya family was wealthy and well-connected, so if any of us had done this before, you'd think it would have been Natsuki, but she nodded and said, "No, I don't. But with the Disassemble skill, it shouldn't be too much trouble. All

of us have leveled it up quite a lot by now, after all. As for the giant salamander...I think we can just slice it up and have Touya-kun use his Appraisal skill to see which parts are edible. Right, Touya-kun?"

"...Probably?"

Touya nodded, but he didn't sound very confident. In most cases, the Appraisal skill could tell us whether something was edible or not after we sliced it up, but the level of the skill made a difference, so in a sense, the results were dependent on Touya's own knowledge.



The Appraisal skill would still provide some information even if the user tried to appraise an object that they knew nothing about, however. It wasn't powerful enough that it could expand a small hint into a wealth of information, but it was still helpful for making inferences. Likewise, the Help Guide would display the words "Animal (Edible)" if used on something like a tusk boar, but this function was limited to commonly known animals; you couldn't, for example, check whether something like a bind viper was edible, because bind viper meat wasn't common enough that the average butcher kept it in stock.

"Eels are a very safe choice," said Natsuki. "We can check them with the Help Guide and just discard everything apart from the flesh and livers."

"Let's eat the bones too!" Yuki looked excited. "I've never eaten them before, but you can make the bones into crackers, right?"

Natsuki chuckled and nodded. "Ah, yes, I forgot about that. I suppose we can keep the bones as well."

"All right. Let's start filleting the fish," said Haruka. "It basically didn't cost us any money to acquire them, so we have nothing to lose."

"Yep! Also, I prepared something we can use!" Yuki produced a cutting board that looked like it was almost as long as I was tall and set it on the kitchen counter, then took out a large stitching awl with a sharp, shiny tip.

Yuki laughed as she grabbed an eel as long as my arm. "Oh, this is a lively one. It might slip, but here goes!"

Yuki's voice was cute; her actions, not so much. She firmly pressed the eel down on the cutting board, then stabbed it through the eyes. *I never expected to see a stitching awl used for something like this...*

Mary seemed bewildered. "Wh-What?! I-Is that really how you're supposed to do it?"

Yuki nodded as she held up a yanagiba knife. "Yeah, but I just followed somebody else's example. Eels are slimy and slippery, so if you don't kill them first— Oh, Nao, Touya," she said, turning toward us, "can you guys go prepare a charcoal fire for us?"

“S-Sure, we’ll go get it ready,” I said.

“Y-Yeah, let’s get going, Nao,” said Touya.

We headed out the back door of the kitchen, and I created a grill with Earth Magic before throwing in some charcoal and igniting the fire. Touya fanned the flames, and by the time the charcoal was burning nicely, Haruka had emerged from the kitchen with some skewered eels on a tray and a pot full of dipping sauce.

“How’s it going? Is everything ready?”

“Yeah, more or less. Is this okay? I tried to copy the kinds of grills that were common in restaurants back in Japan...” I’d made it long, thin, and deep so that we could lay the skewers across it and cook the eels high above the intense flames.

Haruka inspected the grill, nodded to herself, then laid the eels across it. “This is my first time as well, so just let’s give it a try. I’ve heard there’s an art to it, but...”

“Sure, mastering a skill like that could take a lifetime, but it’s not like you’re a professional eel chef, so I won’t complain,” I said.

Shortly after we’d placed the eels over the fire, they began to drip fat, producing fire and smoke as well as a juicy sound.

“They certainly appear to be fatty enough.” Haruka fanned the charcoal as she periodically flipped the eels and poured dipping sauce over them. Granting that I had no idea how to cook eel, Haruka looked pretty good at it. A pleasant smell had begun to drift out over the fire.

“Dang, they look awesome.” Touya’s ears were twitching. He swallowed.

“Yeah. Also, Haruka, the sauce you’re using tastes like soy sauce, right?” I asked.

“Mm. We’ve added all sorts of things to the inspiel sauce base, including sugar, to get the right flavor.”

“Man, I can’t wait to try them,” said Touya. “I’m really looking forward to it. Are they ready yet?”

“Not yet. Calm down, Touya,” said Haruka. “This is a rare opportunity, so we should wait until they’re perfect.”

When Touya heard that, he had no choice but to wait, though he continued to stare at the eels. His ears were twitching, and by the time Haruka stopped fussing over the eels, so was his tail.

“Okay, that should do it, I think,” she said. “I don’t really know what I’m doing, but I have a gut feeling that I shouldn’t let them go any longer.”

“...That would normally sound like a joke, but you have the Cooking skill, so I trust you,” I said.

“Yeah, we trust you one hundred percent! Time to try—”

Touya reached out for the skewers, but Haruka slapped his hand away. “We’re all going to eat these together,” she admonished him.

Touya and I both nodded, and Haruka laid the eel skewers on the tray, then went into the house. We hurriedly cleaned up the grill before following her. Inside, eel liver slop, bone crackers, and grilled eels had already been set out on the dining table for everyone.

“Welcome back, Nao-kun, Touya-kun,” said Natsuki.

“Everybody’s here now,” said Yuki. “Time to eat!”

Metea waved her hands around. “Big bro Touya, big bro Nao, hurry up!”

When we sat, all of us folded our hands.

“Thank you for the food!” everyone said together.

The next second, we all reached for the food. Natsuki tried the eel liver while Yuki gnawed on some bone crackers, but I was determined to try the eels themselves first. *Mm, delicious. The fragrant skin and soft, fluffy flesh are perfect. So is the sweet-and-sour sauce. If nobody told me, I would never guess that this wasn’t actually soy sauce.*

“These are great!” Touya declared. “I just wish we had some rice to go with them.”

“Yeah, I completely agree,” I said. “I kind of want to go on a journey in search

of rice.”

Now that we had access to Japanese food, I was starting to crave rice. Up to this point, we’d been consuming substitutes, like barley gruel and barley rice, but nothing could match the perfect harmony of soy sauce and white rice.

“The eels turned out much better than I anticipated,” said Haruka. “I guess we can call these true glaze-grilled eels.”

“Yeah, definitely!” said Yuki. “I can’t believe that this was actually your first time grilling eels, Haruka!”

“They’re quite fatty,” said Natsuki. “Incidentally, I’ve heard that there are some places in Japan where chefs steam the eels. Perhaps we can try that next time.”

*Oh, right, there are some recipes for glaze-grilled eel that require you to steam the eels. Well, I’m sure they’ll taste great no matter how the girls cook them, so I’m looking forward to it.*

Neither Mary nor Metea had ever experienced eel before, but they looked very happy as they ate, so they must’ve found it surprisingly tasty.

“I didn’t think this fish would taste so good,” said Mary. “The sauce is very good too.”

“Eels taste very good even with how they look!” Metea had a huge grin on her face as she polished off her plate. “The bone crackers are crispy and delicious too!”

Next, Metea tried the eel liver, but...

“Hmm. This tastes like something grown-ups would like!”

It sounded like she didn’t enjoy the liver as much, but she’d refrained from describing it as yucky, which was a sign of maturity in itself.

“Everything tasted awesome. I just wish there was more,” said Touya. “I’m nowhere near full.”

The moment those words were out of his mouth, Yuki leaped to her feet as if she’d been waiting for him to say something like that.

"We've still got the giant salamander. All we've done so far is slice it up, so you go check it for us, Touya."

"O-Oh, sure. Giant salamander, huh? Let's see..."

I followed Touya to the kitchen and saw that the girls had dissected the giant salamander and lined up the various parts. The sight spooked me a little; it was almost like they had conducted an autopsy.

"Uh, this part is edible. This part over here is good too. Oh, this part is no good..."

Touya pointed at one part after another. As it turned out, only a few were worthless. *Man, I really hope that "edible" means it'll taste good, not just that you won't die from it.*

"I'm surprised by how clean everything looks," I said.

"Yeah. Natsuki took care of the salamander, but the eels weren't too hard to fillet either," said Yuki. "I'm not sure if it was thanks to the Cooking skill or the Disassemble skill, though."

"Oh, right, all of you have leveled up your Cooking and Disassemble skills a lot," I said.

The giant salamander was much smaller than a lot of the animals and monsters that we'd slain, but the Disassemble skill still proved its worth here. While I was chatting with Yuki, Touya finished identifying the edible parts and Natsuki discarded the inedible parts. *There's still a lot left over, huh?*

Natsuki had a slightly troubled expression as she glanced over the remaining parts; thoughts similar to mine must have crossed her mind. "All right, we can rest at ease now, although there's rather a large difference between being able to eat something and actually wanting to eat it. I've never eaten a giant salamander before, so I suppose we'll simply have to do our best."

"Mm. Let's go with something simple and sauté it," said Haruka. "Then we'll have a taste."

We had no choice but to try the giant salamander for ourselves, so Natsuki slowly carved it up, and Haruka worked with Yuki to sauté it. If I had just been

watching Haruka and Yuki, I'd have assumed they were cooking something completely normal, but the sight of Natsuki carving up the giant salamander right next to them made me lose my appetite a bit.

"Here you go," said Haruka.

"Salt is all we put on it!" said Yuki. "That way its own pure flavor will stand out!"

*Uh, I don't think you should act like you're serving us some fancy dish, Yuki. None of you tasted this for yourselves before offering it to us, did you?*

"...Well, it doesn't smell bad," I said.

"Yeah, it doesn't have a fishy smell," said Touya.

"It looks okay too," I said.

"Yeah, the flesh looks white and normal," said Touya.

"...Wanna go first, Touya?"

"Nah, you can go first. There's no way you'd say no to food that Haruka and Yuki cooked for us, right?"

*Ugh. Yeah, you're right about that, Touya. And now they're staring at me, so I don't have a choice. But I still remember what all of this looked like in salamander form, so I've gotta muster a lot of courage.*

"...Okay, I'll go with this first." Haruka had cooked the flesh, so I snatched a piece of that. "You can have the other one, Touya." I pushed the organs, which Yuki had cooked, toward him.

"Huh?!"

I had a feeling that the flesh was less risky. Still, there were a lot of different organs, so I probably had to eat some eventually. I stuck a fork into a piece of flesh that was as thick as one of my fingers, then brought it to my mouth.

"Whoa!"

I had expected the giant salamander to have a light, plain flavor, like chicken breast, but it was actually quite juicy—not as juicy as regular meat, but umami spread through my mouth as I chewed, so it was actually pretty good. It had a

subtle smell that combined well with the flavor. The name salamander evoked sansho pepper for me, but it didn't actually smell peppery; this was just its natural smell. The scent might have been off-putting if it were any stronger, but the faint aroma improved the taste.

I smiled with genuine joy when I realized I'd made a safe escape. "This tastes really unique. It's actually way better than I expected."

Touya glared at me. "Damn it, you chickened out and went the safe route. Meanwhile, I'm stuck with the offal... I sure hope my Appraisal skill won't let me down. Here goes!" He closed his eyes and lifted the offal sauté to his mouth. "Hmm? Hmm..."

Touya made some weird noises as he tilted his head. He didn't look like he was in pain or anything, so it probably wasn't disgusting, but...

"Tell us what you think," said Haruka. He still hadn't said a single word, but it was like she refused to wait any longer.

"...It's okay, I guess? I mean, it does taste pretty good. It's kinda like fish liver," Touya said at last. "Doesn't seem like the kind of thing you eat a lot of, though."

"Yeah, offal is more of a delicacy," I said.

Delicacies like mullet roe, salted squid, and salted sea cucumber entrails were only meant to be consumed in small amounts. Foie gras was served with steaks, but it was so fatty that you couldn't consume a lot—not if you cared about your health.

"I bet this offal could be delicious and easy to eat depending on how you cooked it," said Touya.

"I see," said Haruka.

Touya's reaction inspired me to try some of the offal, but none of it was particularly great. "All of the different parts taste pretty much the same. The reward for capturing giant salamanders was a few dozen gold coins, right? That seems like way too much."

Yuki laughed. "Well, the cost of expensive ingredients isn't, like, a direct

measure of how good they taste. There was stuff back on Earth that was only worth a lot because it was so rare, so higher prices don't necessarily mean that something will taste better."

Great food usually wasn't cheap, but it was true that price didn't necessarily correlate with taste, and good cheap food also existed.

"Yeah, that's a good point," I said. "If someone asked me which tastes better, caviar or minced horse mackerel with miso, I'd totally say the latter."

The horse mackerel had to be fresh and fatty, though. In fact, setting aside rarity, horse mackerel was worth more to me than tuna just as a matter of personal preference.

Natsuki giggled at my statement, though. I was a bit curious about her opinion, since she undoubtedly had plenty of experience with fine dining back in Japan.

"Foie gras and truffles are good, but neither is something that I would want to consume daily," Natsuki said at last. "They're best eaten every now and then, so I agree with Nao-kun, if only with respect to regular meals."

"Does that mean it would be better for us to sell giant salamanders instead of eating them ourselves?" Yuki asked.

"I'm down for that," Touya replied. "I mean, sure, I wouldn't mind eating some occasionally, but..."

"Yeah, definitely. It's a different story if there's a way to cook them to taste really good, though," I said. "Giant salamanders count as a delicacy, so it might be a good idea to ask Aera-san the next chance we get."

We had all sorts of other delicious foods to eat, so it would be a waste of money to eat giant salamanders ourselves if we could find a buyer. Currently, at least, I wouldn't be willing to pay a few dozen gold coins just for the opportunity to eat giant salamander, so...

"Very well. I suppose we can just try selling the majority of the salamanders we catch," said Haruka. "For now, let's finish cooking what we've already prepared here. Touya, Nao, the three of us are going to taste this and think about what else we could do with it, so please go and wait for us in the dining

room."

After the girls deep-fried the giant salamander, it actually tasted decent enough. I wouldn't have minded eating some now and then. We ate it with bread to finish off lunch, but after just a few hours, I found myself really looking forward to the hot pot dinner to come.

When the time came, the girls plopped a bucket down in front of us. Inside was a softshell turtle, apparently still energetic despite the lack of water; I heard it scratching the walls of the bucket. We'd already cleaned it, so all that was left was to cook it, but...

"Nobody here has cooked a turtle before, right?" Haruka asked.

"Nope," Yuki replied. "And Natsuki's the only one who's eaten turtle."

I, of course, had no idea how to cook turtle. Softshell turtles didn't look very tasty at all, so I was impressed by the courage of the Japanese people who were willing to try eating them.

"I only have some vague memories, but I'll do my best," said Natsuki.

"Be careful, big sis Natsuki!" Metea exclaimed.

"Don't worry, Metea-chan. Softshell turtles can't bite you as long as you pay attention to where you grab them."

Natsuki smiled as she swiftly removed the softshell turtle from the bucket and placed it on a cutting board. It was massive—its shell was easily over forty centimeters wide—but that wasn't an issue; our cutting boards were quite big as well due to the fact that the girls had to use them in a big kitchen. Unnecessarily large kitchen tools and utensils would normally have been too unwieldy to clean, but the girls were all quite strong, besides which they had the Purification spell, so they'd placed custom orders for oversized cutting boards.

"It still looks really big to me," I said. "Wouldn't a smaller turtle be easier to handle?"

"Not exactly. We'll have to sort through its internal organs, and larger ones are better in that regard," said Natsuki.

“Oh, good point,” I said.

According to Natsuki, most parts of a softshell turtle were edible. However, they weren’t mammals, so it wasn’t easy to identify their different organs. If a larger one was easier to separate into parts and cook, that, in turn, would make it easier to decide whether it was worth catching more.

“Okay, let’s prepare the turtle,” said Natsuki. “Nao-kun, could you please pin it down for me?”

“Sure.”

I pressed down on the turtle’s shell so it couldn’t escape the cutting board. It stuck its head out in an attempt to intimidate us, but Natsuki firmly grasped its neck and stretched it out.

“Here goes!”

Natsuki’s voice sounded just as cute as Yuki’s voice had earlier, when she was preparing the eels, but she sliced off the head without the slightest hesitation, and the sight of blood spurting from the stump of its neck was far from cute.

The rest of us regarded the dead turtle in silence. *I mean, sure, we’ve killed a lot of animals and monsters for food, but somehow it’s still upsetting to kill something you’ve never killed before...*

“We don’t need turtle blood, so let’s dispose of it,” said Natsuki.

“Oh, right, some people drink the blood,” said Touya. “Do you know anything about that, Natsuki?”

Natsuki’s hands halted, and she cocked her head. “You can apparently mix the blood with alcoholic beverages like sake, but we don’t drink alcohol, and it supposedly doesn’t taste particularly good. Do you want to try it out yourself?”

“Oh, it doesn’t taste good? In that case, I’ll pass.”

“What kind of blood *would* taste good? I can’t imagine that,” I said.

Blood wasn’t generally suitable for human consumption. We always made sure to drain the blood from the game that we hunted.

“Well, there are things like blood sausages, so it’s not necessarily bad in all

cases,” said Natsuki.

“Blood also happens to be one of the components of breast milk,” said Haruka.

“Breast milk...” My eyes wandered toward Natsuki’s chest for a brief moment, but I hastily averted my gaze.

Yuki smirked at me. “Heh, I didn’t know you were curious about *that* topic, Nao.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Nao-kun, but I’m not yet capable of producing breast milk,” Natsuki said with a laugh.

I blurted out, “Um, nah, I was just thinking that I don’t remember what breast milk tastes like, that’s all!”

I genuinely hadn’t been thinking of anything sexual, though. It was just that Natsuki’s breasts, although not exceptionally large by any means, were larger than Haruka’s and Yuki’s. Yuki’s were a bit on the small side, and Haruka’s were slightly smaller than Yuki’s, but I wasn’t sure if that was just because she’d become an elf. Haruka had mentioned before that she now felt more physically comfortable with her body as a result of the change; apparently she wasn’t bothered by having a smaller chest than she’d had on Earth.

“I don’t remember what breast milk tastes like either, but I’ve heard that it doesn’t taste very good,” said Haruka. “It has a lot of lactose in it, but it’s not very sweet...”

*Uh, Haruka, it’s super awkward listening to you calmly talk about breast milk. Please, enough...*

“Well, in any case, you can have the first drink once I’m capable of producing some myself,” said Haruka.

“You better be ready to take responsibility when the time comes, Nao,” said Yuki.

“Yeah, of course, I won’t run away from—never mind.” With Haruka and Yuki both smiling at me in a teasing way, I had almost replied to them without thinking, but I hastily changed the subject. “Enough about this! Let’s get back to

softshell turtles!"

*Ugh, I hope they didn't get the wrong idea...*

"Tee hee. Very well. The blood has stopped, so let's continue," said Natsuki.

The softshell turtle had been positioned upside down over the sink, and Natsuki, still smiling, carried it back to the cutting board. It wasn't flailing around anymore, so I stepped back to watch from a distance.

"Next up is to remove the shell," said Natsuki. "I think all we have to do is insert a knife between the calipash and the hard sections."

Softshell turtles had rich deposits of collagen around the perimeters of their carapaces. Natsuki separated the shell with ease using the knives that Tomi had made for us, which were very sharp.

"Okay, I should be able to remove the shell now... There we go."

The turtle's innards were now visible, but they were clustered together so densely that I found myself confused. "So which parts are edible?"

"Most of the internal organs are edible," Natsuki replied. "I'm fairly sure that you're not supposed to eat the bladder or gallbladder, but I don't know how to identify them."

"We need to be really careful when discarding bladders," said Yuki.

Whenever we gutted creatures we'd slain, we paid close attention and removed things like bladders, intestines, and digestive organs. If we damaged them, they'd release urine and feces, and back when we were less experienced, we'd had to discard some spoiled game as a result. Most of the animals and monsters that we routinely hunted were large, and mammals' internal organs weren't too confusing, so we had gotten used to them fast enough. Reptiles, however, were outside our area of expertise.

"Turtles are reptiles, so it should have a cloaca," said Haruka. "If we work backward from there, then..."

"This should be it, right?" Natsuki asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Haruka replied. "Let's remove the intestines as well."

“The intestines are technically edible, but I suppose we can discard the digestive organs as a precaution,” said Natsuki. “Let’s slice through the calipash, and then...”

It was awkward watching beautiful girls like Haruka, Yuki, and Natsuki working together, pointing at the slightly grotesque internal organs of a softshell turtle. Regardless, it sounded like they’d been able to find the bladder. Thanks to the Disassemble skill, they safely removed that plus the intestines and tossed them into a garbage bin.

“Next is the gallbladder,” said Natsuki.

“Gallbladders store bile, so it should be connected to the liver,” said Haruka.

“The liver should be this part here. It’s large enough, at any rate,” said Natsuki. “Then the gallbladder should be *this* part over here. It has a different color...”

The organ that Natsuki removed was smaller than I’d expected. It was round and blackish, and she discarded it right away.

“The rest should be edible,” said Natsuki. “Touya-kun, could you please confirm that with your Appraisal skill?”

After a quick check, Touya nodded. “Yep, they’re all good.”

Mary and Metea were wagging their tails.

“Really? This doesn’t look very tasty at all,” said Mary.

“I dunno about this,” said Metea.

“Tee hee. Just be patient and look forward to the final result,” said Natsuki. “Next, let’s cut it up.”

Natsuki sliced off the legs and the calipash before removing the remaining internal organs. There were now a lot of unfamiliar parts lined up on the board. “Next, we need to wash these parts... Ah, yes, we don’t need the nails, so let’s discard them as well.”

As Natsuki was discarding the nails and washing the rest of the turtle, Yuki pointed at one piece in particular. “What’s that yellowish thing over there?”

"I believe those are eggs. We seem to have caught it at a time of year when it didn't have many, but they're supposedly quite delicious," Natsuki replied. "You can eat them plain or with salt."

"Eggs? Gotcha," said Yuki. "So now do we just cook it?"

"No. We still need to blanch the carapace and legs and peel the skin," Natsuki replied. "It will smell bad if we skip those steps."

"Really? I'm surprised you know so much about this, Natsuki," said Yuki. "Didn't you say you've never done this before?"

"Mm. I knew in theory how to prepare a turtle for cooking, but the Disassemble and Cooking skills are the main reasons this has gone so smoothly."

Natsuki boiled some water and briefly blanched the carapace and the legs, then removed them from the water and began to peel off the skin. The turtle still didn't look too good, but it was at least starting to look edible.

"All right, the turtle is now ready to cook," said Natsuki. "Next, we need a clay pot—and *only* a clay pot will work."

The shallow pot that Natsuki produced was only moderately large by our standards but still significantly larger than anything my family had used back in Japan. Of course, we had been a family of three, and now I was living with a family of seven, including three big eaters—Touya, Metea, and Mary—so we definitely needed a bigger pot.

"I didn't know that we had one of those," I said.

"I bought this one at the same store where we got plates and the pots for making inspiel sauce," said Natsuki. "Apparently they aren't much in demand in this world, but there were some on sale."

"So normal pots don't work for turtle?" I asked.

"Mm, that's correct," Natsuki replied. "If you cook turtle hot pot multiple times in the same clay vessel, it supposedly absorbs the flavor and makes dishes more delicious."

"Oh, so it's, like, the kind of thing that happens over time?" *I guess the metal*

*pots we ordinarily use wouldn't work.*

"Mm. I've never tried it myself, but supposedly even water tastes better when boiled in a clay pot that's absorbed a lot of flavor over time," said Natsuki. "However, the gaps have been filled, so I don't think it'll absorb much flavor."

"Huh? What do you mean, gaps?" Touya asked.

"When you first begin using a clay pot, you're meant to cook things like porridge to fill up the gaps in the clay," Haruka explained. "It makes the pot harder to break, but we don't have any rice, so..." She glanced at Natsuki as if to imply that she should continue where Haruka had left off.

"Yes, we used flour as a substitute for rice," Natsuki finished.

"Clay pots apparently last longer that way," said Haruka. "But bear in mind that I've never owned one before, so I don't know how true that is."

"Still, that makes sense," I said.

Most high school students would never need to purchase a clay pot, so they wouldn't have the experience of damaging one because they'd failed to prepare it correctly.

"First, let's use the carapace and the bones to make some broth," said Natsuki. She poured some water into the pot and brought it to a boil, then tossed in the carapace and bones and let them simmer.

"High heat is apparently best for softshell turtle hot pot. I've heard that some chefs use coke ovens, but our stove is a magical device that Haruka and Yuki made, so it can reach equally high temperatures," said Natsuki. "That said, the pot itself wouldn't withstand such extreme heat, so I'm not using anything near maximum temperature."

In fact, Haruka and Yuki had recently upgraded our magical stove. At this point, it was almost too advanced and high performance. With adequate mana input, it could boil water in an instant, but that would undoubtedly have been too powerful for a normal clay pot to withstand. Thus, Natsuki had gone only slightly higher than high heat, and we had to wait a bit for the broth to cook. In time, the water turned cloudy and the fat floated to the top.

“We can discard the carapace and the bones once the soup is ready. After that, we’ll need to season the soup with salt and herbs, then simmer the flesh and organs of the turtle,” said Natsuki. “I do rather wish we had some Japanese cooking wine...”

“Yeah, I totally agree,” said Yuki. “Western grape wine doesn’t really go with Japanese cuisine.”

“We could distill our own alcohol, but that would be pointless,” said Haruka.

I was perfectly satisfied with the delicious dishes that the girls cooked for us, but it sounded like they weren’t satisfied with the limited variety of seasonings available to them. We couldn’t produce Japanese wine ourselves, however. *Hmm. We can get potatoes and wheat in this world, so would it be possible to make some Japanese-style vodka? I don’t know if vodka can be used as a substitute for cooking wine, though...*

“Okay, it should be almost ready by now,” said Natsuki. “Please go set the dining table with chopsticks and plates.”

“Okay,” I said.

The rest of us left the kitchen and set the table, and soon after, Natsuki brought out the hot pot, which she placed on the potholder that Yuki had laid out. Honestly, the bits of turtle that were visible inside the pot didn’t look all that appetizing. For one thing, I wasn’t a fan of organs, and for another, it was weird seeing the legs sticking out of the pot as if something had drowned in it. I would have hesitated to try it if someone hadn’t told me beforehand that it was worth it. The sisters both blinked a couple times as they stared at the pot, so they were probably having similar thoughts.

“I kept the flavor light, so feel free to use dipping sauce if you want something stronger,” said Natsuki. “Now, let’s begin.”

“Thank you for the food!” the rest of us said in unison.

But nobody reached out for it right away. Still, softshell turtle hot pot was a delicacy, and Natsuki had made it specially for us, so it probably tasted good. *Hmm...*

“I’ll guess I’ll try the meat first,” I said. I wasn’t brave enough to try the legs

first, so I grabbed an unidentifiable chunk of meat with my chopsticks and tossed it into my mouth. “Oh, this really does have a nice, light flavor.”

Haruka, having gotten a piece for herself, covered her mouth in surprise, then nodded at me. “Mm. It has some umami as well, but it goes down easy.”

“I’m going to try dipping the calipash in ponzu sauce,” said Natsuki.

“Yuzu ponzu is so good for dipping stuff that was cooked in a pot,” said Yuki. “And we still have way more yuzu than we could ever use.”

The dipping sauce the girls had prepared was a variant of inspiel sauce that they’d tried to get as close to the taste of soy sauce as possible. It also contained a little yuzu; yuzu were too sour to eat, but we’d harvested a huge number from our yard, and they’d served as a helpful additive to the girls’ cooking.

Natsuki dipped some of the calipash in ponzu sauce and, upon tasting it, smiled to herself. “Mm, nice and jiggly.”

*Ugh, I still don’t want to try it out. It looks too weird and unfamiliar to me...*

“...Is it really that good? Okay, I’ll try it out!” said Metea.

“I-I’ll try some out too!” said Mary.

The sisters cautiously reached for the turtle as if emboldened by the fact that the rest of us appeared to be enjoying our food. Once each of them had tried a bite, they both blinked in surprise and immediately began to pile turtle onto their own plates. The softshell turtle had been quite big, but given that there were seven of us, there wasn’t much meat available to each person, especially considering certain people’s big appetites, so the contents of the hot pot disappeared in no time, leaving only the broth.

Touya had been completely silent this whole time. He drank some of the broth with an air of regret, as if he wanted more food, but then he raised his voice in surprise.

“Dang, this broth is delicious!”

“Whoa, you’re right!” said Yuki. “It’s not, like, super complex, but I really like it!”

Having heard those rave reviews, I scooped some broth into my own bowl and took a sip. “Oh, you guys weren’t exaggerating at all. This really is delicious.”

“This would probably make an excellent rice soup—if only we had rice,” said Natsuki.

“It’s a shame that we don’t,” said Haruka, “but this broth is quite good in its own right.”

I completely agreed, but I did wish I could have some rice soup made from this broth.

“For right now, let’s just drink the broth with some udon noodles,” said Yuki. “All we really need to do is add water and seasoning.”

Yuki added several servings of udon noodles to the rich broth, which we proceeded to enjoy. Once we were all completely full, we let out a collective sigh of contentment.

Touya lay back in his chair and rubbed his belly. “Dang, that was even better than I expected. Thanks, Natsuki!”

Natsuki favored him with an elegant smile. “You’re quite welcome. It was a learning experience, so I’m glad that it turned out well.”

“I wanted to eat a bit more,” said Metea.

“Mm,” said Yuki. “It’s so good I wish we could eat it regularly, but preparing the softshell turtle was kinda hard, right?”

“Indeed. It’s rather a lot of work compared to the amount of edible material you get out of a single turtle,” said Natsuki. “If all we want is a large volume of meat, orcs and picows are better options.”

In preparing a softshell turtle, you had to discard a lot of parts as well as blanch and peel the skin. In contrast, all you had to do with orcs was open their stomachs and dispose of the contents. True, you also had to spend time skinning them and separating out the edible organs, but orc liver alone was more food than all of the edible meat you could get from a softshell turtle. The ratios of effort to reward were very different.

"I suppose this is a luxury that we can only afford occasionally given the time commitment," said Haruka.

"Softshell turtles are really delicious, though," said Mary. She glanced at Natsuki and Haruka, looking a little hesitant, but she eventually spoke her mind. "Um, could you teach me how to prepare a softshell turtle? If it's too much of a hassle, then I could do it."

"Hmm? Well, I could certainly teach you if you'd like, Mary-chan," Natsuki replied. "Did you really enjoy the hot pot?"

"Mm. So did Met, I think." Mary turned around to glance at her sister, who nodded vigorously.

"Yeah, it was really delicious! The meat was good, and I liked the udon noodles too!"

"Gotcha. I guess we'll have to lay some more traps the next time we visit the river," said Yuki. "It would be too much time and effort to actually catch turtles, but it's fine if we just let traps do the work for us, right?"

"Mm. Softshell turtles are reptiles, however, so we'll have to make sure that the traps don't drown them," said Haruka.

It was actually possible for turtles to drown. The traps we'd used to catch eels and crabs last time had been completely submerged, so a softshell turtle wouldn't have been able to reach the surface to breathe.

If we wanted to catch softshell turtles, then we needed either a large cage with the top above water or a fixed shore net with space at the top. Unfortunately, both options seemed difficult to make. Last time, we'd caught this turtle without a trap thanks to the Scout skill.

The girls started discussing what kind of trap to use, but it wasn't something that any of us knew much about. I stared into the empty clay pot and contemplated the issue. *Will we really be able to catch some more turtles with traps? If that doesn't work, we may have to catch them ourselves...*

## Chapter 3—A Noble Wedding Ceremony

Late in the afternoon, Arlene-san came to visit us in our room. “Would you happen to have a moment?” she asked.

According to our contract, we were free to rest during our time in Clewily. The sisters hadn’t been asked to spend time with Illias-sama, so we’d assumed she was very busy, but...

“Of course,” said Haruka. “We don’t have any particular plans.”

Flexibility was important for adventurers. We couldn’t just tell Arlene-san, “We’re not on the clock right now,” so we welcomed her in and offered her a chair.

“Thank you very much. We’ve managed to gather some intelligence, so I felt it would be appropriate to share it with your party,” said Arlene.

“Intelligence? You mean about the ambush that we ran into on the way here?” I asked.

“That’s correct,” Arlene replied.

That was the only information they’d plausibly share with us. *Actually, though, do we as bodyguards really need to know about the assailants’ backgrounds? I’m somehow kinda nervous about this.*

But despite my trepidation, Arlene-san proceeded to tell us what the House of Nernas had learned. “Having spent some time gathering information, we are now in a position to say there is a very high chance that the Yupikrisa Empire had a hand in this,” said Arlene.

“The Yupikrisa Empire? That’s the country directly south of the Lenium Kingdom, right?” Haruka asked, tilting her head in confusion. “I’ve heard we aren’t at war with the empire. Have relations deteriorated to the point that they’d attack Illias-sama on the road?”

As far as I was aware, the Yupikrisa Empire was just a hypothetical rival for

now. It made no sense to me that they would sneak into a place far from the border and try to attack the child of a minor noble.

Even if they'd succeeded in kidnapping Illias-sama, I wasn't sure how valuable she would have been to them. The kingdom would never have agreed to meet any of the empire's demands in exchange for a mere viscount's daughter, nor could the empire have gotten much ransom out of Viscount Nernas. In fact, it would make more sense to me if the Holy Satomi Sect had hired some skilled assassins to kill Illias-sama.

"To put it bluntly, they had no need to target our house at all," said Arlene. "It seems we were only attacked because there was a high likelihood of success even for a small group of assailants."

Arlene-san went on to explain that some of the other wedding guests had been attacked en route as well, in each case by a small group of assassins. All were representatives of smaller houses with only a few weak bodyguards.

"Not even the empire could easily infiltrate a foreign nation using large numbers of soldiers," said Arlene. "It's likely that their objective was simply to obstruct the wedding."

"I see. How, though?" Haruka asked. "The Barony of Dias doesn't border the Yupikrisa Empire."

"True," Arlene replied, "but the family of the bride is at odds with the empire."

According to Arlene-san, the bride's father bore the title of Baron Aesi. Small border disputes periodically broke out between his domain and the Yupikrisa Empire. The Barony of Aesi and the Barony of Dias were physically quite far apart, so it wouldn't have been easy for Baron Dias to send reinforcements to his future in-laws in the event of an emergency. However, the Aesi domain was located downstream of the same river that flowed by Clewily. In addition, the House of Dias was very wealthy, so it could easily afford to provide the House of Aesi with matériel by river transport. Such a situation was completely unacceptable for the Yupikrisa Empire, so it made sense that they'd tried to ruin the wedding.

"But is it really possible to stop a wedding by attacking the guests?" Natsuki

asked.

“Yeah, that doesn’t really make sense to me either,” said Yuki. “It might be a different story if the empire attacked the groom or the bride, but...”

Viscount Nernas was just the ruler of the lands adjacent to Baron Dias’s. It was obvious from the state of the highway that trade between the two domains was not particularly high volume, nor did the viscount seem to be particularly close with Baron Dias, so I was fairly confident that the wedding wouldn’t have been canceled even if Illias-sama had been murdered.

“Given the opportunity, the Yupikrisa Empire would unquestionably have attacked the bride and groom, but the House of Dias has the means to hire uncommonly strong bodyguards, and their household troops are not only strong but seasoned as a result of the border skirmishes with the empire,” said Arlene. “Thus, this probably represents the second-best option for the empire. And the assaults have served a purpose, even if they failed to halt the wedding.”

According to Arlene-san, there was a good chance that the empire would be satisfied as long as the assaults served as a stepping stone for future foreign policy moves. From the perspective of the victims, it was absurd reasoning, but the nobles who had lost kin in the ambushes would probably bear grudges against the Barons Dias and Aesi as a result even if they understood deep down that the Yupikrisa Empire was at fault.

“...Um, what happened to the other nobles who got attacked?” I asked.

“Two were slain. Neither was the head of a family, however, so it could have been worse,” Arlene replied. “Another suffered serious injuries, and a large number of that individual’s bodyguards also died.”

“Yikes.” Touya sounded genuinely spooked upon hearing the number of dead.

“The House of Nernas would undoubtedly have met the same fate had your party not been present.” Arlene-san bowed her head. “Please allow me to express our gratitude once more.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” I said, waving my hands in a panic. “We simply did what we had to do as bodyguards. And besides, we didn’t manage to capture

any of the assassins..."

We had managed to inflict a serious injury on one of the ambushers, but two of them had gotten by us and engaged the household troops. If it had been more than two, our charge would probably have been in danger. *Man, we could have done a lot better. That's nothing for us to be proud of.*

The girls nodded in agreement with my words. It seemed like they had some questions on their minds.

"I'm surprised you managed to uncover all of this information," said Haruka. "I don't imagine anyone was able to extract a confession from the assassins..."

"We had to take into consideration all of the available information in order to arrive at this conclusion," said Arlene. "It seems that there were parties that succeeded in slaying some of the assassins, but there was no proof of their affiliation to be found on their persons, so it isn't possible to lodge a diplomatic protest."

*Whoa, some people actually managed to defeat those guys? Maybe we could have if we'd been willing to take bigger risks, but Touya and I weren't able to accomplish much, so even if Natsuki had been able to fight alongside the two of us, it probably would have been a close fight. Were those assassins veterans of actual wars?*

"It's a shame that it's not possible to lodge a formal protest, but I suppose that means the chances of being attacked again on our way back are quite low," said Haruka.

"Indeed," said Arlene. "Normal bandits and monsters might be a different story, however."

"That should be no problem," I said. "Even if we encounter bandits, I doubt they'll be anywhere near as strong as those guys."

*Man, I shudder to imagine bandits as strong as the agents of the Yupikrisa Empire. I hope there aren't any bandits like that out there. Or maybe I should say, I'm pretty sure that anybody that strong could easily earn a living without resorting to banditry...*

Haruka sighed to herself, then asked, "What was the other matter you

wanted to discuss with us, Arlene-san?” Haruka asked.

“Huh? There’s more?” Touya asked.

Touya sounded surprised, but Arlene-san was technically our boss for the duration of this assignment, so I was pretty sure she wouldn’t have dropped by just to satisfy our curiosity about the ambush.

“None of the information that you’ve provided so far qualifies as ‘need to know,’” Haruka observed. “Political conflicts are irrelevant to us as adventurers.”

“Quite right. But the information that I’ve provided thus far is necessary for you to understand what comes next.” Arlene-san seemed pleased that Haruka had intuited she had more to say, and she nodded to herself, then continued, “I would like to request your party’s assistance. We’ve barely managed to save face by repelling the assassins, but the fact that we were attacked is an issue in its own right.”

Arlene-san went on to explain that the real problem at hand was the fact that the Yupilksa Empire had assessed the House of Nernas as an easy target; it would be bad if this caused other nobles in the Lenium Kingdom to look down on the viscount. The ideal solution would have been to resolve this matter at the wedding ceremony—simply attending would have been more than sufficient—but by chance, the viscount’s representative was a young girl, not even ten years of age, so between that and the news that her retinue had been attacked en route to Clewily, Illias-sama might attract negative attention.

“Illias-sama does not yet have the requisite air of dignity, but nothing can be done about that in time for the wedding,” said Arlene.

“Yes, she’s still too young,” said Haruka. “What would you like us to do?”

“If you would accompany Illias-sama to the ceremony, you would have the utmost gratitude of the House of Nernas,” said Arlene. “And you will be compensated for your trouble, of course.”

*Oh, so that’s why she gave us all that info, huh?* We had the freedom to turn down Arlene-san’s request given that it wasn’t part of our initial contract. Arlene-san had apparently decided it would be difficult to convince us to attend

the wedding ceremony if we were completely in the dark.

“Um, couldn’t you and Vira accompany Illias-sama, Arlene-san?” Haruka asked, sounding confused. “What about Ekart and the soldiers?”

Arlene-san lowered her eyes and shook her head. “We accompanied Illias-sama as maids, so we cannot attend the ceremony. As for Ekart and his subordinates, I believe the trouble should be obvious: they are ill-suited as guests in a formal setting.”

“I’m pretty sure that applies to us as well, though,” I said. “We don’t know anything about how to address nobles...”

“You would merely have to stand at Illias-sama’s side,” said Arlene. “I think it quite unlikely that the noble guests will speak to you. Our objective is simply to let the other guests know that the House of Nernas has high-rank adventurers at its disposal.”

“I feel as though we ought to remind you that we’re only Rank 5 adventurers,” said Natsuki.

Arlene smiled with an air of total confidence. “I assure you that is no trouble. And in any case, your party contributed to the revitalization of Laffan’s economy...”

*Well, we did furnish a fresh supply of precious wood, and Laffan did seem a little livelier afterward, but...*

“...And helped put an end to a cult that had incited public disorder, in addition to which you even captured the ringleader yourselves...”

*Well, we got lucky on that one—we just bumped into Satomi. I guess we did help suppress the riots, but it was really the army that organized everything...*

“...Discovered a new dungeon...”

*Uh, we went inside an abandoned mine that happened to be a dungeon. And everybody already knew there was an abandoned mine, so it’s more like we rediscovered it.*

“...And explored it yourselves, reaching a deeper point than any previous explorers.”

*I mean, we were the first people to explore the dungeon, so of course we set the record.*

“Doesn’t all of that suggest you are competent and experienced adventurers?”

*Sure, everything you’ve said is technically true, Arlene-san, but you only brought up the most flattering stories. It sounded like you were trying to be misleading! Honestly, you could have worked for the news back on Earth.*

“...Well, I guess we should leave the choice to you, Arlene-san,” I said. “Do you want all of us to attend the wedding?”

“No, Nao-san. I would like to request your presence...and Haruka-san’s.”

“Just Haruka and me?” I pointed to myself and her.

Arlene looked directly at me, then nodded. “That’s correct.”

“If you want an adventurer who looks intimidating, Touya might be a better candidate,” I pointed out.

“Bluntly, the two of you are quite attractive,” said Arlene. “That is why I singled you out.”

*Whoa, I didn’t expect you to be that blunt, Arlene-san. Touya was a pretty handsome guy by normal standards, and Yuki and Natsuki were cute too. But apparently elves like Haruka and me were considered to be in a different league —though I wasn’t really conscious of being super attractive; if someone had described me that way, my response would just have been “Yeah, I guess so, huh?”*

“As elves, the two of you can also act as a deterrent even while unarmed,” said Arlene, “though I don’t imagine anyone will try to make a move at the wedding itself.”

*Oh, so another reason you want us is because we can use magic, huh? Touya can fend for himself with just his fists, but I guess elves are well-known for their magical abilities.*

“We understand now. Thank you for explaining,” I said. “So, guys, what’s the plan?”

"Well, I mean, you and Haruka are the ones who'd have to go, so feel free to decide on your own," said Touya.

In contrast to Touya's carefree response, Natsuki sounded wary. "If we agree to let Arlene-san spread information about our careers as adventurers, then we're certain to attract attention. The downsides of that attention will affect Meikyo Shisui as a whole, Touya-kun."

"Yeah, it wouldn't be good to stand out too much," said Yuki. "Our policy as a party is to play it low-key."

Arlene-san immediately addressed Natsuki and Yuki's concerns, however. "Given your party's high level of competence, I believe it may well be impossible for you to avoid standing out, at least if you plan to remain in Laffan. You have yet to attract attention because it has only been a year since you began working as adventurers, but..."

"You know all that?" Yuki asked.

*You know, now that I think about it, the House of Nernas also knew that we were the ones who captured Satomi, so they probably gathered information about us to make sure that we were suitable bodyguards for Illias-sama.*

"You might be able to avoid drawing attention to yourselves by shifting operations to a different town with a larger population of high-rank adventurers," Arlene continued, "but to be clear, such an outcome would be undesirable for the House of Nernas. Thus, I am in a position to offer you assurances. We will take care of any difficulties that should arise as a result of your higher profile."

"I see. I'm not sure if we should say this to your face, Arlene-san, but if we can't avoid becoming famous, then it would be better for our party to earn the favor of a noble house," said Haruka.

Haruka had been pretty frank, but Arlene-san didn't seem to mind; she simply nodded. "I appreciate your candor, Haruka-san. It makes things easier for me as well."

"Well, I still feel the same way," said Touya. "Nao and Haruka can decide what to do. They're the ones who are gonna have to do all the work."

"I agree," said Natsuki.

"Nao, Haruka, good luck!" Yuki exclaimed. "This will probably be your only chance in your whole lives to go to a noble's wedding!"

*Yuki, you sound like you really want us to attend the wedding. Are you asking us to satisfy your own curiosity about what it's like?*

Metea cocked her head. "Can you eat delicious food at a wedding?"

Arlene-san smiled and shook her head.

"Unfortunately, it will prove rather difficult to enjoy the food. The food served will certainly be sumptuous, but..."

*Yeah, I guess nobles wouldn't be stingy about food at a wedding ceremony. I know it won't be my job to stand around eating, but it's a shame I won't be able to enjoy the food considering how good everything in Clewily has been so far.*

"What do you think, Nao?" Haruka asked.

"Well, I'm kind of down for this. We probably won't mess up if all we have to do is walk behind Illias-sama," I replied. "We don't have any clothes that would work for a wedding ceremony, though."

"Fear not," Arlene replied immediately. "The House of Nernas will supply everything you require."

It sounded like she was determined to make sure that I wouldn't change my mind.

"O-Oh, really? In that case, I guess I can't think of any other problems," I said.

"Well, if you don't have any other objections, I don't mind either," said Haruka.

"Thank you very much!" Arlene exclaimed. "Come, let us go and have your clothes made!"

Arlene-san immediately seized our hands. As she led us out of the room, her grip felt very firm.



Once Arlene dragged Nao and Haruka away, the other members of Meikyo

Shisui were left on their own.

An exasperated remark escaped Touya's lips. "...Man, they disappeared in a flash."

"In a flash!" Metea echoed.

Yuki nodded. "I guess Arlene-san really wanted them to attend the wedding."

Natsuki breathed a sigh of relief. "That being the case, it's fortunate that they consented before the situation could take a turn for the worse."

"Do you really think so?" Mary asked, cocking her head in confusion as she looked up at Natsuki. "Arlene-san is a nice person, so I don't think there was any need to worry."

Mary probably didn't find Arlene intimidating because they'd been traveling in the same carriage on the way to Clewily. However, Natsuki laughed awkwardly and shook her head.

"True, she's not a bad person, but she's still a maid in the employ of a noble. People who wield that kind of power don't hesitate to resort to schemes or dirty tricks if necessary."

"Mm. If the House of Nernas didn't care about mutual trust, they could even have spread rumors about us before we arrived," said Yuki.

Nao's party had been worried about attracting undesirable attention, but there had been no guarantee that the House of Nernas would share their concerns. The viscount could have spread malicious rumors about them, thereby coercing them into accepting the viscount's protection as a condition of preserving their peaceful way of life. Under those circumstances, they would have had no choice but to take this quest on whatever terms Arlene offered it. If they had refused, they would have been forced to submit to all of the disadvantages of noble patronage with none of the advantages—although Nao's party would never have made such an irrational decision.

"We could have tried to negotiate for a better reward, but if it proves unsatisfactory, we can ask Diola-san for help," said Natsuki. "But I rather doubt we'll have to worry considering how well we've been treated so far."

"Yeah, totally," said Yuki. "We're even staying at an inn for nobles."

Most nobles wouldn't have paid for adventurers they'd hired as bodyguards to lodge at an expensive inn, and they certainly wouldn't have covered food expenses. Back at Mijala, Haruka and Natsuki had been assigned to Illias's room, but during their time in Clewily, everyone had been allowed to spend their time as they pleased. There was no need for them to serve as bodyguards for the duration of their stay, so neither was there any need for them to remain in the inn. Other adventurers would probably have felt jealous if they'd learned of this arrangement.

The House of Nernas had good reason for providing Meikyo Shisui with preferential treatment, however. Above all, it was better to have Nao's party around in order to ensure the safety of the viscount's daughter. It was unlikely that assailants would attempt to attack the inn, but in such a situation, the fact that the viscount's daughter could simply rush into the room where Nao's party was staying constituted a significant advantage. Strictly speaking, there was no need for Meikyo Shisui to serve as bodyguards during their time at the inn, but the House of Nernas was well aware that if Illias had to take refuge in their room, they wouldn't turn her away.

The fact that Nao's party could swiftly respond to sudden requests was another reason the House of Nernas had allowed them to stay at the same inn as Illias during their time in Clewily. Moreover, the reward the viscount had offered—namely, rights to the dungeon—had no monetary value, with the result that the House of Nernas had more money to spare. As a result of the incident in Kelg, the viscount remained unable to spare much manpower, but that, too, had left him with excess funds, which he'd made use of to furnish Nao's party with lodging and other amenities. The viscount was the sort of noble who wouldn't hesitate to spend more money if it meant that Nao's party would work harder to protect his daughter.

"I do kinda feel bad for Nao and Haruka," said Touya. "This is probably gonna suck for them."

"Well, Arlene-san said that all they needed to do was stand still," said Yuki. "I'm pretty sure that the other guests will try to talk to them, though. I mean, who wouldn't be interested in talking to a beautiful pair of elves standing

behind a ten-year-old girl? I would be super curious!"

"Mm. All sorts of men and women will probably want to talk to them," said Natsuki. "I don't imagine anyone will casually flirt with them, but..."

Despite her words, Natsuki sounded somewhat worried, but Touya just chuckled. "You're gonna jinx them, Natsuki. You think some lecherous noble is gonna try to talk dirty to Haruka and make Nao mad?"

"That's definitely a cliché in fiction," said Yuki. "I dunno if Nao would get mad for real."

Yuki was well aware that Haruka was very important to Nao, but she was also aware that Nao was a calm and rational guy. Given the risks involved in yelling at a noble, Nao would probably restrain himself as long as no one crossed certain lines.

"I suppose there's the possibility of a problem occurring if Haruka acts coldly toward a noble who's trying to flirt with her," said Natsuki. "Actually, on second thought, Nao-kun would probably intervene calmly before things progressed to that point, just as he's done before when people have tried to harass Haruka."

"Yeah, most guys tended to back off when me and Nao stepped in front of her," said Touya.

Only a fool would assume that a girl would hang out with him after he beat up the guys who were with her. But although fools like that were rare, they weren't completely nonexistent, so it wasn't a risk that could be completely discounted.

"It's actually a breach of etiquette if you ignore the person that the servants work for and talk to them directly," said Metea.

"...Really? That's how it works for the nobility?" Yuki asked.

Metea nodded with absolute confidence. "Yep! That's what I learned!"

Natsuki glanced at Mary for confirmation, but Mary didn't seem quite as sure of herself; she simply shook her head.

"Oh, was that in the lessons that Illias-sama taught us? I don't remember anything like that," said Touya. "What about you, Natsuki?"

“I don’t have a perfect memory,” said Natsuki. “I might be able to find the information if I check my notes, yes, but I don’t remember learning that rule either.”

Natsuki had gotten good grades in high school, but she was a diligent student rather than a savant; it wasn’t as though she was exceptionally good at memorization or could instantly comprehend new information. In contrast, Haruka was much closer to a natural genius; she was the type of person who could get good grades even without studying.

“Well, anyhow, that’s reassuring to hear,” said Yuki. “As long as Illias-sama acts like a wall in front of them, everything should be fine, right?”

“It’s true that Illias-sama is a noble, but I don’t think it’s right to expect too much from a child,” said Natsuki. “Rather, let’s hope that Haruka can take care of everything. She seldom makes mistakes, after all.”

“Yep. Besides, there’s nothing we can do about it one way or another,” said Touya, “so there’s no point in worrying.”

Unfortunately for Nao, nobody seemed to have any particularly high expectations for him.

“Hmm. I guess this means that we probably won’t get to hang out with Nao or Haruka for the rest of our time here,” said Yuki.

“Will they not have any time to rest?” Mary asked.

“I feel bad for big bro Nao and big sis Haruka,” said Metea.

“They gotta work, so there’s nothing we can do about it,” said Touya. “Let’s enjoy our free time and brag to them about it once we meet up again.”

Metea seemed a bit confused. “Um, is that really okay?”

Natsuki, Touya, and Yuki exchanged a brief series of glances before nodding with ambiguous expressions on their faces.

“Well, like Touya said, there’s nothing we can do about this, so yeah,” said Yuki. “I don’t think we need to brag to them once everything’s over, though.”

“Mm. We don’t know if they’ll have time to explore the morning market, so we should investigate it ourselves and buy any good ingredients that we come

across," said Natsuki. "Then we could at least make some delicious food for them."

The sympathy Metea had felt for Nao and Haruka was instantly overwritten. "Delicious food! I'm looking forward to the morning market tomorrow!"

Clearly Nao and Haruka were unfortunate in more ways than one.



When Haruka and I followed Arlene-san out of the inn, she led the two of us to the entrance of a store located along the main street. It was an apparel store and, based on its appearance, a fairly fancy one; it didn't seem like the kind of place commoners would be welcome. Back on Earth, I'd sometimes tagged along with the girls when they went shopping, so I'd gotten used to entering slightly pricey boutiques and places like that without any hesitation, but I nevertheless felt intimidated by the store in front of me. However, Arlene-san pulled me through the doors, so none of my trepidation ended up mattering.

At first glance, the interior of the store did indeed resemble a parlor for upper-class customers. There were no clothes on racks, and the only pieces of furniture were a couple of large tables and sofas. In fact, it didn't look like an apparel store at all, but there were some spaces partitioned off by curtains; presumably customers could change clothes behind those.

"It's my first time in a place like this," I said. "I guess this is more like a tailor's shop, huh?"

"Your first time? I'm surprised to hear that. Everyone in your party wears well-made clothes," said Arlene. "I did notice that your clothes were rather unique in style, but surely they were expensive?"

"Oh, we made those clothes ourselves," said Haruka. "It's something like a hobby for us."

Arlene regarded us with mouth agape for a moment. "Did your party perhaps pick the wrong profession?" She nodded to herself as if she'd recalled the value of the red strike ox milk bottles that we'd delivered to the House of Nernas. "Ah, yes—please forgive me for that remark. Your party can undoubtedly earn more as adventurers given your level of ability."

It was true that you could earn more money by making clothes than as a greenhorn adventurer, so Arlene-san's initial impression wasn't mistaken by any means, but that was assuming you were able to open a tailor's shop. First, most aspiring tailors had to find masters who would take them in as apprentices, and then they had to train for a considerable length of time before they obtained permission to open their own shops. It was far from an easy profession.

An elderly female clerk appeared from the back of the store. She smiled as she approached us, then hesitated, looking back and forth between Arlene-san, Haruka, and me before focusing her attention on Arlene-san. "Welcome. How may I be of service today?"

As Arlene-san had said, Haruka and I were wearing decent clothes, but they were different from the kind of clothes that nobles wore. In contrast, Arlene-san was wearing attire befitting the servant of a noble house. The clerk must have assumed that it would be better to address her instead of us.

"I would like to request a set of clothes for these two," said Arlene. "They need formal clothes for the wedding that is soon to be hosted by the House of Dias."

"Being as there are only two days before the ceremony, this will have to be a rush order, so there will be a surcharge. Is that acceptable to you? I should add that intricate designs will not be feasible on this timescale..."

"A conservative design is perfectly fine, but please use high-quality materials," said Arlene.

"Very well. Please take a seat for a moment."

At the clerk's bidding, we sat on a sofa, and a young male clerk immediately approached me, while a female clerk approached Haruka. They showed us a few pictures and began to explain the designs on offer.

"This type of formal wear is currently en vogue. You may freely choose the color of your trousers and coat, but most nobles eschew flashy colors; those inclined to stand out instead make use of decorative fabrics."

The first picture he showed me depicted trousers, a vest, and what looked very similar to a frock coat. Instead of a necktie, a long, thin piece of cloth was

wrapped around the neck like a scarf. It draped down and was tied at the chest. You probably wouldn't have looked too odd even wearing it on Earth. According to the clerk, current trends favored patterned fabric for the lining of vests and coats as well as detailed embroidery. All of this was supposedly a way for people to flaunt their wealth. In the past, it had been popular even for the outsides of coats and trousers, but that trend had faded very quickly; it was simply too ostentatious. There was no need for guys to wear attention-grabbing clothes, especially since girls looked a lot better anyway, so it made sense to me that the trend hadn't lasted very long.

*Man, I'm really glad that formal clothes in this world don't include stuff like breeches, tights, and thick scarves.* I was perfectly willing to conform to the standards of this world, but I would have felt kind of uncomfortable if the norm here had turned out to be something I considered embarrassing; everyone in my party apart from the sisters would probably have laughed at me.

"This style of vest is currently en vogue..."

The clerk continued explaining the fine points of fashion, but I just nodded and pretended to listen. I ended up asking him to choose the clothes he thought would suit me best, but he insisted that I choose a decorative fabric myself, so from the options he presented to me, I picked a length of blueish cloth. I didn't feel like my preference was really important here; I normally never wore formal clothes, and at the wedding, it would be other people who'd be judging them. As long as a professional made the choices for me, they'd probably look acceptable to most people. Even if the other guests did think I looked weird, I wouldn't really mind, because I wouldn't have chosen my own outfit. It wasn't like I prided myself on my fashion sense anyway.

Given that I'd left the design to the clerk, everything was over once he'd finished taking my measurements. He quickly retreated into the back of the store to begin working on my clothes, and I sat and waited for Haruka while sipping on some tea that one of the other clerks had brought me. I'd been pretty sure that Haruka didn't know much more about formal clothes in this world than I did, but it seemed that instead of being passive like I had, she was talking with both her clerk and Arlene-san.

"I believe this would look better on someone with your figure."

"Wouldn't this cloth be a better match for Haruka-san's blonde hair?" Arlene asked.

"I prefer this one for my neckline," said Haruka. "As for the sleeves..."

"You are rather tall, so the skirt shouldn't be too wide."

I had only been shown a few pictures, but there were dozens scattered on the table at Haruka's side. There were also several shiny pieces of cloth; presumably they'd be used for her clothes. *Okay, I'm gonna pretend that I don't exist and try to stay low. It'll be a hassle if Haruka asks for my opinion.* If someone asked your opinion about clothes, it was important to choose something that they liked, not something that you thought looked good. Haruka and I had known each other for a long time, so she wouldn't sulk if I made the wrong choice, and I could simply choose based on my own preferences, but Haruka would probably end up spending a lot more time trying to make a decision if she felt like my choice wasn't a perfect fit.

Of course, I could also save her time by making the right choice, but that would be no easy feat. It would be a different story if Haruka had bad taste, but the girls in my party had good fashion sense, so by the time they'd narrowed their options down and asked for input from Touya or me, the remaining outfits all tended to be equally good. With that in mind, it was best just to avoid situations in which I had to make a choice, but my ability to do that depended somewhat on the girls' whims, so I'd failed, on plenty of occasions, to avoid getting dragged into giving my opinion.

By the time Haruka finished discussing her options with the clerk and Arlene-san, I had finished my fifth cup of tea as well as the snacks that the clerk had offered me with my second cup of tea. I was about to ask one of the clerks if I could use the bathroom when Haruka approached to get my opinion. For once, it was pretty straightforward. As a result of our discussion earlier, we'd already eliminated all of the worst and most awkward fashion trends in this world, and I'd already heard Haruka's own opinion, so all I had to do was make a choice that suited her tastes. The last thing I wanted was for her to ask, "Which do you like better?"

Thus, she and I arrived at a decision easily, and once the clerk had taken

Haruka's measurements, we were done dealing with our outfits for the wedding. However, unfortunately for us, we couldn't simply hang out until they were ready. We were on our way back from the tailor's shop when Arlene-san informed Haruka and me there was more work to do. "I'm terribly sorry about this, but it is now necessary that the two of you learn basic etiquette."

"...I guess this means we can't just stand behind Illias-sama and do nothing," I said.

"Had the viscount been able to attend the wedding, he would have been able to handle everything; in that case, there would have been few demands upon you beyond your presence," said Arlene. "However, as Illias-sama will be attending in her father's place, I would deeply appreciate your assistance."

I sort of wanted to complain that this was different from the job we had initially agreed to, but then I hesitated. A girl who wasn't even ten years old was giving it her all, so...

"I'd personally like to help Illias-sama if we can, but do you really think we'll be helpful after mere days studying, Arlene-san?" Haruka asked.

"A little polish is better than nothing," Arlene replied. "And in any case, you need only appear presentable for a single day."

*Yeah, when you put it that way, it doesn't sound too bad. Really, the time we'll spend at the wedding itself will be more like half a day.* There were only a limited number of problems that could come up in that context, so as long as we memorized the proper etiquette for those situations, things would probably work out. Plus, I still remembered some stuff from when we'd attended Illias-sama's lessons back in Pining.

"Okay, I'll give it my best too," I said.

"Thank you very much," said Arlene. "I deeply appreciate your cooperation."

When we returned to the inn, Arlene-san led us to Illias-sama's room. It wasn't exactly opulent, but it was larger and considerably more luxurious than my party's room.

"Haruka-san, Nao-san, I apologize for making more work for you," said Illias, looking apologetic.

Haruka smiled at her. “Please, don’t worry about it. We made the choice to take on this job.”

I nodded and smiled too. “I’m not a hundred percent sure what I’m doing, but I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you very much,” said Illias.

I honestly felt downright anxious, but there was no way I could tell Illias-sama that.

“No noble with any sense of decorum will try to address either of you out of the blue, so everything ought to be fine as long as Illias-sama plays her role,” said Arlene. “Please do your best, Illias-sama.”

Illias-sama looked at her feet. “...Will I really be able to do it?” she asked nervously.

“You’ll have to rise to the occasion,” Arlene replied. “And in any case, there are still two days left, so don’t worry.” She smiled, then bent down to whisper something to Illias-sama.

I didn’t catch most of what Arlene-san whispered, but I heard Mary’s and Metea’s names, and instantly, a determined look appeared on Illias-sama’s face. Arlene-san seemed satisfied by that result. She stood upright and turned to address us again.

“Now then, should a noble attempt to address the two of you, it will likely be for one of two reasons. The first would be to gain your allegiance as highly competent adventurers and convince you to move operations to their domain.”

“I honestly don’t think we’re good enough to be worth poaching,” I said.

“But consider the role played by rumors,” said Arlene. “Vira is currently engaged in spreading flattering stories about your party.”

*Oh, is that why Vira-san isn’t here right now?!*

“Are you sure that’s all right?” Haruka asked.

“So she’s exaggerating how competent we are?” I asked.

“Mm. Candidly, the House of Nernas needs other nobles to overestimate your

party,” Arlene replied.

*Oh, right, I do remember hearing something about this before. Hmm. Well, I hope Illias-sama can handle any nobles who approach us.* I glanced at Illias-sama, and she smiled and nodded, radiating confidence.

“It shouldn’t be any great trouble. It is only natural that a noble house should seek to prevent highly competent adventurers from leaving its domain,” said Arlene. “Illias-sama can protect you as long as you stay near her side.”

“Mm. I will certainly put a stop to any such inquiries,” said Illias. “It would be a terrible loss for the House of Nernas if we could no longer see Mary and Metea.”

*Uh, Illias-sama, what about Haruka and me? I kind of wish you’d mentioned us. Sure, I know that you really like the sisters, but...*

“The second reason that a noble might approach you is potentially more sensitive,” said Arlene. “Namely, one of the guests might address you as a single man or woman.”

“Um, what do you mean by that, Arlene-san?” Haruka asked.

“To put it simply, someone might ask for your hand in marriage.”

“Huh? Vira-san is spreading rumors about our skills as adventurers, right?” I asked. “It doesn’t make any sense to me that someone would *propose* to either one of us.”

*The other guests are nobles. There’s no way any of them would want to marry an adventurer, right? Sure, some of them will bring along servants who are commoners, just like Illias-sama is bringing along Haruka and me, but I seriously doubt any of those servants will wander away from their masters to talk to us.*

But Arlene-san shook her head. “In fact, high-rank adventurers make perfectly acceptable prospects for low-rank nobles. Vast swaths of this kingdom remain uninhabited, including the western reaches of the Viscounty of Nernas,” said Arlene. “Moreover, it is possible for adventurers to gain noble status. For that reason, nobles do, on occasion, use events like weddings to forge relationships with adventurers.”

Arlene-san explained that the kingdom could bestow noble titles upon skilled adventurers and appoint them the lords of uncharted territories in order to expand the amount of land under royal authority. High-rank adventurers usually had the resources and skills necessary to clear untamed lands of monsters, and even if they failed, they would simply be stripped of their titles and everything would return to the status quo. Either way, the kingdom had nothing to lose.

"It is sometimes worthwhile for low-ranking nobles to marry even adventurers who have no hope of gaining titles of their own," said Arlene. "More to the point, the two of you are both elves—and both quite lovely."

Haruka grimaced at that characterization. During our time in this world, our race had yet to attract unwanted attention or cause us any trouble, but it was starting to feel like that wouldn't last. *Man, the thought of being popular doesn't make me happy if there's a catch. Is the blessing I just got from Advastlis-sama actually working? It's supposed to make me a bit luckier, but I haven't noticed any effects! I mean, sure, the same applies for the XP blessing I got beforehand, but still. It's really hard to tell if the blessings actually work or not since we can't deactivate and reactivate blessings for purposes of comparison. Oh well.*

"Affluent though Baron Dias may be, he is a baron and, as such, does not belong to the uppermost echelons of the nobility," said Arlene. "Thus, most of his guests are minor nobles. Adventurers would be perfect targets for their advances."

"'Perfect' certainly isn't the word I'd use," said Haruka. "Is there any way you can help us avoid that kind of entanglement entirely?"

"Hmm. Well, I don't imagine the other nobles will approach married people, at least not with so many onlookers," said Arlene. "Haruka-san, Nao-san, are the two of you in fact married?"

The two of us accidentally spoke over each other. "N-No, I haven't even thought of marriage—"

I turned and stared at Haruka when I realized that we'd said exactly the same words. She was looking right back at me, and her cheeks and ears were a bit flushed. I averted my eyes in embarrassment.



Illias-sama clapped, beaming. “Oh, my! I thought as much! That’s wonderful!”

Arlene-san backed her up. “I think the two of you are a perfect match.”

*Um, we haven’t told each other about our feelings, so marriage isn’t exactly on the agenda yet.* I glanced at Haruka again, and she blushed even harder after our eyes met.

“Oh, it all makes sense now,” said Arlene.

“What do you mean, Arlene?” Illias asked.

“You see, Illias-sama, they’re a shy, sweet couple. They do like each other, but neither of them has yet found the courage to take the final step.”

“Oh, really? I wonder if that means we should try to help them advance their relationship,” said Illias.

*Arlene-san, please don’t explain things to Illias-sama right in front of us! Also, Illias-sama, you shouldn’t say stuff like that out loud!*

“Considering the delicate nature of your relationship, I would recommend that you choose matching decorative fabrics,” said Arlene. “Nao-san chose a piece to wrap around his neck. Haruka-san, you can wrap a piece of the same design around your waist.”

“...I’m fairly confident that I can guess the meaning of dressing like that, but please tell us so I can be sure,” said Haruka.

“It’s something that married or betrothed couples do,” said Arlene. “It is exceptionally rude to talk to such couples when they are standing beside each other. No noble worthy of the name would dream of doing such a thing.”

“...What do you think, Nao?” Haruka asked.

“Well, we don’t really have a reason to say no.”

“I figured you’d say as much,” said Haruka. “All right, Arlene-san.”

There were no downsides to Arlene-san’s suggestion; it would actually help us. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Arlene-san and Illias-sama were grinning at us as we nodded at each other, but that wasn’t really a reason for us to object.

“Very well. I shall inform the tailor. Now then...” Arlene-san looked at Haruka, Illias-sama, and me for a moment, then smiled. “Let’s make use of dinnertime to learn proper table manners. We cannot afford to waste any time.”



Over the next two days, we endured a cram session alongside Illias-sama, with Arlene-san teaching us the fine points of etiquette. The lessons were quite painful for me, especially since I was just a Japanese high school student who’d only ever had to worry about speaking a bit more politely than usual around older people. *I gotta say, though, seeing a girl who isn’t even ten years old doing her best makes me feel a lot of pressure.*

Haruka wasn’t familiar with the things we were learning either, but she was the kind of person who only had to be taught a new skill once, and she didn’t seem like she was struggling to keep up at all. During the lessons we’d sat in on before departing from Pining, I had felt like we were observing in a classroom, but Haruka had diligently listened and taken notes, so I had no one but myself to blame for my struggles now. I had assumed at the time that none of the information would ever be useful to me...

*I guess I’ll study harder next time if I ever get another opportunity.* Meanwhile, the other members of our party were enjoying two days of vacation. I asked if any of them wanted to join Haruka and me in studying, but they turned me down with the reasoning that they didn’t want to hold us back. Vira-san took part in the lessons from time to time as well, at which point they would turn into something like one-on-one sessions with a private tutor, so it was kind of true that we did better with fewer students. However, I wasn’t completely convinced by the excuse everyone had offered me, especially since I’d seen them smiling as they headed out to the morning market, obviously planning on enjoying a delicious lunch outside.

Meanwhile, Haruka and I ate a simple meal brought by Vira-san. The options for takeout were limited, so lunch wasn’t as good as the otalca I had eaten the other day. However, Illias-sama had to eat the same thing, so I couldn’t complain. I wasn’t sure if Natsuki just felt bad for us, but she told us later that they’d bought a lot of different ingredients at the morning market and that we could look forward to new delicious food. That became a source of motivation

for me. *Natsuki, Yuki, you're gonna make some curry once we get home, right? Please don't let me down!*



At last, the day of the wedding rolled around. It had been over a year since I had applied myself to studying anything, but now my hard work was finally over. The last thing I'd exerted this much brainpower on was studying magic, but that was different; it was something I'd had to learn in order to survive and earn a living. In comparison, I hadn't been nearly as efficient about studying etiquette, but Arlene-san had told me that I'd earned passing marks—just barely—so it sounded like I'd be fine. Our rush order from the tailor shop had been completed and delivered on time, and my outfit was actually pretty comfortable. Vira-san helped me get everything on, and she had told me that it looked good on me, so it was probably fine. I had yet to see what Haruka's dress looked like. It should be fun to see.

“Nao, are you ready?”

I had finished getting dressed relatively quickly, so I was sitting on a sofa waiting for Haruka when she emerged from behind some curtains.

“Whoa...”

It looked like Haruka's dress had been made of silk with a faint blue sheen. I wasn't very knowledgeable about dresses, but Haruka's looked pretty much like what I'd been imagining; later, Haruka told me it was similar to what we would have called an I-line dress back on Earth. Around her waist was a swath of decorative fabric that matched the one around my neck, and her skirt reached all the way to her ankles. There were patterns—elegant but not showy—embroidered on the hem, and the shadows of its folds complemented the simple design nicely. Her shoulders were completely covered, and her sleeves were three-quarter length. The V-neck exposed a shiny, expensive-looking necklace.

“Where did that necklace come from?” I asked.

“Oh, this? I borrowed it,” Haruka replied. “I was told that it would be bad not to wear any accessories.”

"Yeah, I guess it would seem like something was missing if you didn't have anything around your neck," I said. "I noticed there's some embroidery on your dress too. I'm surprised the tailor was able to do all of this for us in just two days."

"It's impossible to make a dress like this from scratch in two days," said Haruka. "They simply adjusted parts that they had in stock. But as you can see, the hem of my dress didn't really need much adjustment."

According to Haruka, the upper part of a dress needed fine adjustments to match the wearer's body, but the skirt only had to be adjusted for length. The tailor's shop had parts in stock that had been embroidered ahead of time in case a customer needed a dress on short notice. A very expensive dress would be made from scratch and meticulously sewn, and it would take a lot longer than two days.

"So, what do you think?" Haruka sounded pretty confident even as she asked me.

"O-Oh, um, yeah, it looks good on you." I managed to force out the kind of compliment I wouldn't usually have been able to utter. "Y-You look very pretty, Haruka."

*Ugh, I didn't think it'd feel this hard to tell a childhood friend that she's pretty.*

"R-Really? Th-Thanks."

I wasn't the only one who was embarrassed; Haruka turned away, blushing. She really did look pretty, though. Her long, blonde hair was usually tied up or braided, but it was freely flowing today, and her slender figure struck me as objectively beautiful. *Elves really are the pinnacle of beauty, huh? I kind of wish I could take a picture of her and hang it on the wall of our house.*

I continued to stare at Haruka, but she kept her face turned away from me as she resumed the conversation at hand. "I-I was asked if I wanted to change the color of my dress to match the decorative fabric, but there wasn't enough time. But the dress itself has a light blue sheen that looks very close to white, so it doesn't look weird, right?"

"Y-Yeah, it looks good," I said.

The blue decorative fabric around my neck served as an accent color, but Haruka looked like she'd aimed for a higher degree of color coordination. Her dress was very light in hue, so the intense blue color of the decorative fabric would make a strong impression.

Being much younger than us, Illias-sama giggled even as she complimented us. "Your formal clothes look very good on both of you. If you stand right next to each other, no noble will dare to flirt with either of you."

Haruka and I exchanged a glance and an awkward laugh.

"You look cute as well, Illias-sama," said Haruka. "Your dress looks good on you."

"Thank you very much." It seemed she wasn't completely satisfied, though. "I wanted to wear a dress that would make me look more mature, but..."

It still looked good on her, though. The skirt only reached down to her knees, and it was a bit wide, so as she'd said, it wasn't really the kind of thing a grown woman would wear, but given her age, this style would probably make a better impression on others.

Vira-san appeared to inform us that it was time to head to the wedding. "Your carriage awaits. Is everyone ready?"

"Yeah, we're good to go," I said.

Haruka and I were the only members of Illias-sama's retinue who would actually accompany her to the wedding; Arlene-san, Vira-san, and the troops under Ekart's command would escort us to the venue, but the maids had to remain on call nearby, and the soldiers had to guard the carriages.

Standing outside on high alert didn't sound like an easy job, but I didn't really feel that bad for the soldiers; they were grinning as they looked at us, after all. Anyway, the two of us had to remain more focused for an extended period of time. It was true that we wouldn't have to stand out in the cold, but we would be on our feet the whole time, and we might also have to deal with troublesome nobles. Delicious food and drinks would be served, but I didn't really anticipate being able to relax and enjoy them. *Yeah, I definitely think we're the ones who'll suffer more. Ugh...*

I urged Haruka to follow me out of the room, but unexpectedly, I found the rest of our party waiting for us in the corridor outside. *Oh, actually, I remember hearing the girls having a good time as they talked about dresses, so I guess they're here to see Haruka's dress.*

Yuki was momentarily speechless after seeing Haruka, but then she clasped her hands in awe. “Whoa. It’s even better than I expected. You look awesome!”

“Mm. The dress looks very good on you,” Natsuki said with a smile. “Your clothes look nice as well, Nao-kun.”

The sisters were also impressed.

“You look like a princess, big sis Haruka!” said Metea.

“Yeah, you look very pretty!” said Mary.

When she heard that, Illias-sama pouted. “Metea, Mary, what about me?”

“You also look cute, Illias-sama,” Metea replied.

“Mm. Your dress looks very good on you, Illias-sama,” said Mary.

“Thank you. I’m pleased to hear that.”

I felt like Illias-sama had put a certain amount of pressure on the sisters, but she smiled and seemed satisfied by their responses. And it was true that Illias-sama looked very cute.

“Nao, as long as you keep your mouth shut, you’ll look kinda like a young, handsome noble,” said Touya.

“Are you implying that I have a sharp tongue, Touya?”

“Nah, I just mean the whole way you act,” Touya replied. “You’re not super attentive, right? If you were actually a handsome young noble, then you would have Haruka’s arm right now...”

“Ugh...” I’d been trying to banter and gotten hit by a counterattack that shook me to the core. *I guess you’re right, though. I might be wearing different clothes, but I’m still the same person inside.*

Haruka smiled at me. “Are you not going to take my arm, Nao?”

“Um, well, let me make sure first,” I replied, glancing away. “What do people

usually do in these situations, Arlene-san?"

There was no shame in asking about something I was genuinely clueless about. I was just a commoner, after all.

"Well, the two of you can rest easy for now, but it would be a good idea for Haruka-san to gently place her hand on Nao's arm once you enter the venue," said Arlene.

"Would something like this suffice?" Haruka stood next to me and placed a hand on my arm.

"Whoa," said Yuki. "I'm kind of annoyed by how good you look together."

"Mm. They're as pretty as a painting, just as one would expect of elves," Natsuki said. "Outwardly, at any rate."

Yuki nodded at us. With the phrase "Outwardly, at any rate," Natsuki had nonchalantly implied that she agreed with Touya, but I knew she was right, so I stayed silent.

"I kind of want to make my own dress after seeing this," said Yuki. "Also, Arlene-san! How much did their clothes cost?"

"Oh, only about this much," said Arlene, gesturing. "It was a rush order, after all."

Yuki and a few others couldn't restrain their gasps when they saw the amount of money that Arlene-san had indicated with her fingers. It would have been enough to cover the cost of building a house. Haruka and Natsuki were the only ones who hadn't reacted at all, but the sisters had casually scurried away from us, probably fearful of damaging our clothes. I was even more scared as the one actually wearing them. *The food at the wedding is going to be served buffet style, right? Will I really have to hold food and drinks even if I'm not going to consume them? Ugh, I don't want to think about this...*

Yuki's face was twitching. She forced a smile, then shook her head and said with a laugh, "I think I'll pass. Until I actually need a dress."

Arlene-san nodded. "Mm, that would be wise. It would be a waste if you were to outgrow the dress."

I'd had the impression that the House of Nernas was poor by noble standards, but clearly they didn't hesitate to open their purses when they had to. If Arlene-san had been granted the authority to spend that kind of money, it was possible that she actually occupied an important position within the viscounty. *But was it really necessary to spend that much on our clothes just to save face? Sure, the House of Nernas probably deemed it necessary, but still. I guess this means they'll really want their money's worth out of us, huh? Man, I wish I were completely clueless. Just thinking about this makes me really nervous!*

"G-Good luck, Nao," said Yuki. Still wearing the same forced smile, she patted me on the shoulder and gave me a little pep talk. "Normally, I'd tell you to take it easy. But I guess you probably can't, so..."

*Look, I have a good idea of what's going through your mind right now, but you won't get my clothes dirty just by touching them. I'm wearing them, after all. You're acting way too scared.*

"I'm sure everything will be all right if you hold your head high and act confidently," said Natsuki. "The key to success is to move slowly and speak slowly, so you'll be fine as long as you don't rush or panic."

"Go eat a lot of delicious food!" Touya put in.

"Good luck!" the sisters exclaimed together.

*I appreciate the advice, Natsuki. As for you, Touya...are you trying to make me feel less nervous by cracking a joke? I really hope so, dude. I took a deep breath to calm myself, then led the way to the carriage.*



Wedding ceremonies in this world seemed a lot simpler than I had assumed. They were pretty similar to weddings on Earth, although there were a few major differences. First, the bride and groom, accompanied by close relatives, made their vows in the temple of the god to whom they were devoted. Since Illias-sama, Haruka, and I were all outsiders, we weren't permitted to join in this part of the ceremony, and Arlene hadn't described it during our lessons, so I had no idea what it would even be like.

After the vows came the wedding reception. That was the point from which

our participation would be required. All the guests had to gather at the mansion of Baron Dias to hear the bride and groom speak, then everyone could enjoy a buffet-style dinner until darkness fell. The guests could eat and drink while chatting, but I wasn't sure if that applied to Haruka and me as bodyguards. Luckily, there wouldn't be any dancing, so all in all, it could have been worse.

The ceremony would last for an entire day. Apparently, despite the fact that Baron Dias was quite wealthy, this was the longest wedding a baron could manage. Poor nobles had to scale down their weddings even further, whereas higher-ranking nobles would host longer receptions or even extravagant festivals that the townspeople could join in. Weddings on that scale generally included dancing, so if Arlene had asked our party to attend such an event, we might have declined. *There's no way we could have learned how to dance in just two days. Come to think of it, was there a Dance skill back when Advastlis-sama gave us that list to choose from? That would probably be necessary for a girl trying to build a reverse harem, but it isn't really relevant to me.*

We had arrived outside of Baron Dias's mansion and were walking toward the reception venue when Haruka said, "Nao, your arm."

"My arm?"

"Hold out your arm," she urged me.

"...Oh, right!" I hastily obeyed, and Haruka laid a hand on my arm.

"Nao, don't be uncouth," Haruka told me with a glare. "Of course, the opposite extreme is bad too..."

"Sorry I don't have any experience with this stuff." *Did Haruka want me to take her arm right after we got out of the carriage? Now that I think about it, I immediately went to walk behind Illias-sama, but Haruka was walking a bit slower. Sure, she caught up to me right away, but...*

"It seems the two of you are quite close," Illias said with a giggle.

"Yeah, kinda," I said.

*Ugh. Please don't tease us. We're not dating, so it's hard to take this from a girl much younger than me.*

"I just wish Nao were a bit more considerate around women," said Haruka.

Illias-sama smiled at Haruka. "But wouldn't you feel worried if Nao were *too* good with women, Haruka-san?"

Haruka hesitated a moment before replying, "Well, true, I can't deny that, but..."

"In that case, it seems to me that everything's fine. Even if Nao-san isn't the best with women, you can just tell him everything he needs to know," said Illias. "Now then, we've arrived at our destination. Let's all do our best."

"Of course," Haruka and I replied in unison.

While Illias-sama was chatting with us, she'd had a relaxed smile, but now she looked focused—and a bit nervous. Haruka and I adopted serious expressions as we entered the reception room. It was much larger than I had expected; it was smaller than a high school gym back on Earth, but there were more than one hundred guests gathered inside. The ceiling was twice the height of a normal room's, so it didn't feel cramped in the slightest, but the space was almost entirely filled with tables.



A number of people turned to look at us when we entered, but other guests continued to pour into the room behind us, so we weren't the center of attention for long. Still, I was a bit troubled to realize that Haruka and I had drawn the gazes of about half of the other guests. On the one hand, that probably meant we'd already fulfilled the role that Arlene-san had asked us to play, but on the other hand...

"Let's head to a corner," said Illias.

"Very well," I said.

Illias-sama's only objective today was to show up and create the impression that there were no chinks on the viscountcy's armor. She would have to find clever ways to handle any nobles who made snide remarks to her or tried to probe into the ambush we'd suffered en route to Clewily, but beyond that, it wasn't necessary for her to stand out, so we swiftly moved from the entrance to a spot near one wall.

Food and drinks were lined up on the tables scattered across the room, but most of the guests had thus far refrained from touching them. Some had plates and glasses in their hands, but they didn't have forks, so it was obvious that they had no intention of eating yet. In fact, I saw a few guests handing the plates and glasses back to the waiters without having eaten anything. It all seemed like a huge waste to me.

"Let's go get some food first," said Illias. "Nao-san, Haruka-san, it would be a good idea for both of you to hold plates as well."

It was good manners to avoid talking to people who were carrying food, but it was bad manners to keep holding a plate the entire time... All of these rules were such a hassle. Illias-sama casually took a plate from a nearby table and stacked it with an assortment of foods, then asked one of the waiters to bring her a light drink. According to Illias-sama, a light drink usually had low alcohol content, but if it was a child asking, the waiters would bring something completely nonalcoholic.

After filling our own plates, Haruka and I followed Illias-sama's example and ordered drinks as well. Although we'd also ordered light drinks, what the waiters brought us clearly contained a little alcohol, so it was probably a good

idea to limit ourselves to a single sip each; we couldn't afford to get drunk and commit a serious faux pas.

Illias giggled again. "I was confident the two of you would stand out."

"Oh, I suppose I wasn't imagining things earlier, then," said Haruka, sounding a bit perplexed.

"Mm." Illias-sama smiled and reassured her, "Either one of you would attract attention alone, but standing together, you're quite a sight."

Despite the fact that we'd moved into a corner to avoid attention, I could still feel the gazes of the other guests on us; they were making me a little nervous.

"Oh, by the way, feel free to eat and drink if you want to as long as you stay by my side," said Illias.

"...I'm afraid I've lost my appetite after you told us how much we stand out, Illias-sama," I said.

Under the circumstances, there was something frightening about the idea of eating and drinking without a care. I couldn't imagine enjoying the buffet with so many eyes on us.

It seemed that Haruka felt the same way. "I wouldn't mind having a drink, but I don't particularly want to eat at the moment. I don't exactly have a high alcohol tolerance either..."

"Most people can't get drunk on light drinks, but that is understandable," said Illias. "Would you like me to order a nonalcoholic drink for you, Haruka-san?"

"No, but I appreciate the thought," said Haruka. "Incidentally, I'm a bit surprised by the number of nonhuman nobles here."

The other noble guests had servants as well, and in some cases, it was hard to distinguish the servants from their masters, but about twenty percent of the attendees were beastmen, elves, or dwarves. Thinking back to the character creation process my classmates and I had gone through before being transported to this world, I thought I remembered a halfling race being available, but I had no idea what they actually looked like. Some of the nobles here looked like children, but I had an actual child right next to me, so it was

impossible to say for certain whether the people I'd noticed were halflings.

My Third Eye skill hadn't detected any halflings, but I had no idea if the skill had that capability. In fact, it had misled me on a couple occasions, so I couldn't fully trust it. I was fairly sure that it would have provided me with accurate information if I'd known in advance how to distinguish between all the races of this world, but that wasn't something I'd trained for, nor did my party own any books on that topic.

"Mm. There are plenty of beastmen and elves among the nobles of this kingdom," said Illias. "Only a few dwarves possess noble titles, though. There are about as many dwarves as there are elves in this kingdom, but dwarves aren't really interested in becoming nobles..."

"Hmm. Is the ratio of races among the nobility of this kingdom more or less the same as the ratio among the guests at this reception?" Haruka asked.

"Yes," Illias replied. "Some nobles have argued for increasing the number of nonhuman nobles, but there hasn't been much progress on that front."

"There are still a lot of nonhuman nobles here," I said.

In fact, it was the first time I had ever seen this many nonhumans in one place. The only issue was that most of the beastfolk were middle-aged dudes rather than cute beastwomen. I felt extra disappointed due to the fact that their fur looked very polished and shiny.

*Why aren't there more beastwomen here? Hoping for a bunch of young girls might be too much, but I wouldn't mind looking at some beautiful middle-aged beastwomen either. Kids would probably be cute regardless of gender. Of course, male elves are very handsome, and female elves are very beautiful, but I've already been looking at Haruka for over a year by now...*

"It looks like there's a bear-type beastman here, Nao," Haruka whispered.

"Yeah, I've never seen one of those before," I whispered back. "You can really tell he's a bear from his physique."

The person whom Haruka had indicated with her eyes was much taller than me and almost three times as wide. However, he didn't look overweight in the slightest, so he cut a pretty intimidating figure. *Actually, maybe he isn't a bear-*

*type beastman. It's hard to tell whether the sisters were cat-or tiger-type beastgirls, after all.*

I wasn't confident that I could distinguish between the ears of a bear and, say, those of a tanuki. The tail would probably be easier to identify, but I had no interest in staring at the tail of a middle-aged man. Anyway, I wasn't aware of any animals that you could identify just by looking at their ears. Even dogs had all different kinds, from the floppy ears of a dachshund to the rigid ears of a Shiba Inu. Touya could probably learn the noble's race with his Appraisal skill, but my Third Eye wasn't up to the task.

"Oh, the bride and groom are about to arrive," said Illias.

"Finally, huh?" I said.

It was bad manners for guests to get too lively before the bride and groom arrived, so we had at least been able to relax, but from now on, we had to project a serious image. The main event would be a speech delivered by the bride and groom, after which they would circulate through the room and address each of their guests individually. The guests would be conversing among themselves as well, so some would almost certainly approach Illias-sama. Haruka and I set our glasses and plates on a nearby table, then returned to our initial positions to await the bride and groom.

"I'm nervous," I said.

"It'll be fine, Nao," said Haruka. "I hope so, at least."

*That's not all that reassuring, Haruka!*

Shortly thereafter, the bride and groom entered the room through a different door than we had used earlier. The bride's dress looked fancy and expensive. The groom almost looked like an accessory despite the fact that his formal clothes were undoubtedly just as expensive. The two of them kept their smiles fixed in place as they ascended an elevated platform, from which they raised their hands in salute. We raised our hands in reply, as did the rest of the guests.

The groom had to be in his late twenties, but the bride looked surprisingly young, probably our age or younger. In fact, given that people in this world tended to look older than their actual ages, it was possible that the bride was

actually younger than us. She was cute more than beautiful, so I felt like a simpler dress would have suited her better, but as a young noblewoman, she probably had to wear the fancy dress. It was obvious how much they'd spent on this wedding. The people standing to the couple's left and right were presumably Baron Dias, Baron Aesi, and their wives.

Baron Dias strode in front of the bride and groom and intoned, "Thank you all for coming here today to attend the wedding of—"

I wasn't really interested in his spiel, so I ended up ignoring him. Most of the other guests seemed to feel the same way. They were all smiling, but most of them had probably come out of a sense of obligation rather than a desire to celebrate as such. Anyway, I wasn't in the mood to congratulate the bride and groom after what I had seen in the slums of Mijala. The people in Clewily seemed to lead happy and fulfilling lives, but that only made me more conflicted.

When Baron Dias had concluded his remarks, Baron Aesi began to speak. He seemed like the hot-blooded type and even made a few remarks that could have been called inappropriate. I was fairly sure that the other nobles would disapprove of his language, given that several guests had been attacked on the way here.

None of this was relevant to me, however, so I ignored Baron Aesi as well. Then it was finally time for the bride and groom to give their speeches, which turned out to be rather mundane. They didn't say anything interesting about their upbringing or how they'd met, and once they'd finished speaking, they stepped down from the platform to circulate among the guests.

The custom was for the couple to speak to their guests in order of rank from the highest peerages to the lowest, with nobles of the same rank being ordered based on considerations like their relative importance to the families of the bride and groom as well as geographical proximity. Illias-sama was quite far down the list, so we still had plenty of spare time, but there was a possibility that nobles outside of the wedding party would approach us. After the bride and groom had concluded their speeches, we'd gone to pick up new plates and glasses, so nobody had gotten a chance to corner us yet, but I was certain that things wouldn't remain peaceful indefinitely.

“...For now, let’s just get a little to eat,” said Haruka.

“In this situation? Are you serious, Haruka? I’m surprised by how tough you are,” I said.

“Natsuki gave me some pointers in the event that we have to talk to people we don’t know,” said Haruka.

Specifically, she said Natsuki had told her that the safest topic of conversation was the food and drink on offer here. More general topics, like marriage, children, and physical health, were apparently land mines we had to avoid. And while praising someone’s appearance wouldn’t necessarily result in accusations of sexual harassment in this world, it was better to be safe than sorry.

“What about you, Illias-sama?” I asked.

“Hmm. I suppose I’ll get something to eat too.” Illias was staring at what appeared to be some cakes; her inner child had reared its head. “There are things here that I rarely get to eat back at home.”

“In that case, I’ll go get some for us,” said Haruka.

She picked up a couple servings and placed them on her own plate and Illias-sama’s. Meanwhile, I asked a waiter to slice some meat for me. I was curious about the cakes too, but I was hungry, so meat was my first priority. I was curious about its taste; it looked similar to roast beef.

“Let’s see... Damn, this is delicious!”

The meat was nice and firm. I tasted a touch of citruslike acidity, but perfectly balanced out by saltiness. It did take some chewing, but not too much, and the result was just that the flavor was that much stronger in my mouth. It was so good that I wanted to wolf it down, but of course, that wouldn’t have been acceptable here. It would also have been bad manners to ask for another serving. *Ugh. Who the hell came up with all these stupid rules?! I would have asked for thicker slices if I’d known it was going to be this good, but I guess it’s too late now.* I forced myself to smile even though I was crying inside as I put my plate back on the table and picked up a new one. There were a lot of other foods that looked delicious, but someone laid a hand on my shoulder before I could reach for any of the food. When I turned to see who it was, I found myself

looking at Haruka, who had a scary smile on her face.

“...Oh.”

*Whoops, I almost forgot that I’m not here to enjoy myself. Okay, time to get back to work and pretend that nothing happened.* As I was handing the empty plate I’d just picked up to one of the waiters, Illias-sama set down her own plate. It wasn’t acceptable for a servant to eat before his master.

Right then, as though he’d been waiting for an opening, a young man approached Illias-sama with a smile on his face. He placed a hand on his chest and introduced himself formally. “A pleasure to meet you, Lady Illias of the House of Nernas. I am Zath Tradart, third son of Viscount Tradart.”

“Thank you for introducing yourself, Zath Tradart,” said Illias, placing her hands gently on her skirt. “I am Illias Nernas.”

“May I have a moment of your time?” Zath asked.

“Of course, sir.”

“Thank you kindly,” said Zath. “I heard that you were attacked on your journey here. Are you quite all right? Were you perhaps injured?”

He’d expressed concern, but his face remained so incredibly composed that it was impossible to infer anything about his feelings.

“Thank you for your concern,” said Illias. “Luckily, nobody was injured, including myself, and we successfully defeated the assailants.”

Some of the troops had suffered minor injuries, but there was no point in revealing that information to this guy.

“That’s reassuring to hear. Considering the short distance you had to travel, I suppose you were simply unlucky,” said Zath. “I don’t imagine the House of Nernas has any difficulty maintaining peace and order?”

“None whatsoever,” said Illias. “We were attacked in the marches between the Viscounty of Nernas and the Barony of Dias. I’m sure you understand how difficult it is for any lord to send troops to such places?”

“Of course. Borders are a delicate matter. However, I had been given to understand that such tasks were, shall we say, not the strongest suit of your

household soldiers,” said Zath. “I am perfectly aware that these remarks could be misconstrued as impertinent, but I simply wanted to provide some advice out of the kindness of my heart.”

Illias-sama and Zath Tradart were both smiling, but neither of them seemed to have sincerely friendly feelings toward the other. This must be what conversations between nobles were like: an air of concern but no warm feelings.

“I’m pleased to say our house has no difficulties in that regard,” said Illias. “Fortunately, skilled adventurers work and make their home in our viscounty.”

“I see. May I infer that the elves at your side are two such adventurers?” Zath asked. “I admit I have heard rumors...”

Tradart glanced at us, so we bowed, but there was a skeptical look in his eyes—not necessarily because we were both elves but probably because, thanks to Vira-san, the rumors had been disseminated so rapidly.

“Mm. They are very skilled,” Illias replied. “I can’t be certain what tales you have heard about them, but I’m confident that they can’t be too far off the mark.”

*Yeah, because Vira-san was the one who spread them, ha ha!* But Illias-sama’s smile betrayed no hint that the House of Nernas had played any role in this.

An elf noble suddenly appeared to join in the conversation. “I’m interested in learning more. If I recall correctly, they discovered a new dungeon, did they not?”

Though I couldn’t guess his actual age, he appeared to be almost thirty. He was handsome, like all elves, but his facial features suggested a certain shrewdness.

Illias-sama immediately smiled at the elf. “Oh, what a pleasure to see you here, Sulaivya-sama. Yes, they did discover a dungeon, and our house has reaped the benefits financially.”

*I think you’re going a little overboard, Illias-sama. We definitely contributed something to the viscountcy, but still. Oh well, I’ll keep quiet.*

“How enviable. Adventurers, would you ever consider moving to the Countdom of Sulaivya? As you can see, the House of Sulaivya is an elven house, and many elves reside within our domain. I do believe it would be a very comfortable environment for you.”

Before we could say anything, another noble chimed in. “Say, not so fast! I hear they’ve got beastfolk in their party too, so my lands would work just as well. Your beastfolk friends can’t have had an easy time finding marriage partners in the Viscounty of Nernas, right? Don’t forget about them when you make a decision.”

This latest noble interloper was the beastman Haruka and I had noticed earlier and assumed to be a bear-type beastman. In trying to recruit us, he’d emphasized the matter of race. Clearly a lord’s race made a big difference for those living within his domain.

*Man, I wish these guys wouldn’t stand so close to us.* Since both of them were men, neither the refined face of the elf nor the beastman’s face with its bearlike ears was attractive to me. They were kind of intimidating, besides which I was annoyed that the difference in status between us made it hard for me to turn them down offhandedly. Meanwhile, relatedly, Haruka was hiding behind me. *Just what kind of rumors did you spread about my party, Vira-san? I hope you didn’t exaggerate too much...*

But then Illias-sama slid her tiny body between us and the two intimidating adults. “Forgive me, gentlemen, but I believe both of you are now acting contrary to protocol,” she bravely interrupted them. “These adventurers are currently under the protection of the House of Nernas, so you need to negotiate with my father first before trying to recruit them.”

The two men looked at each other.

“Hmm. I suppose that stands to reason.”

“Yeah, we’ll withdraw for now out of respect for your courage, lass.”

The men smiled and nodded to each other like they’d just witnessed something amusing.

“Fellow elves, should you ever happen to require assistance—”

“Sulaivya-sama?”

“Oh, perhaps now is not the time. Let us speak again on some other occasion, Lady Illias.”

“See you later, lass.”

Haruka and I bowed as the two nobles casually raised their hands in waves of parting and walked away. Immediately, Illias-sama released a sigh of relief.

*Oh yeah, where's that Zath dude? Did he just disappear earlier? I wonder if he was scared because a count suddenly showed up. The beastman noble didn't mention his peerage, but he addressed that elf like an equal, so he must be high-ranking too...*

“We got through it somehow—for now, at any rate,” said Illias.

“You did a wonderful job, Illias-sama,” said Haruka.

Illias-sama broke into a smile. “Thank you. But the two of you must be exhausted, right? Let's eat some food to recover.”

“Okay,” said Haruka.

Illias-sama went to pick up a plate. She could relax for now, but she had to talk to some important people later. *Good luck, Illias-sama! We'll continue to stand behind you like decorative objects!* It seemed that our presence had served to divert attention away from the fact that Illias-sama's carriage had been attacked, but as an unintended consequence, we'd attracted other forms of unwanted scrutiny. When I glanced at Haruka, she seemed to have similar thoughts.

“Do you think the rumors have had the opposite of their intended effect, Illias-sama?” Haruka asked.

“Not at all. Everything has gone precisely according to plan,” Illias replied. “We would rather have other nobles attempting to recruit the two of you than looking down on our family. By recognizing your worth, they're recognizing the viscountcy's power.”

According to Illias-sama, the purpose of the rumors was to convince other nobles that the House of Nernas had highly competent adventurers in its

service. The very fact that people were trying to poach us meant they couldn't regard the Viscountcy of Nernas with contempt—as no more than easy prey for foreign assassins.

The fact that strong adventurers were connected to a noble house didn't necessarily mean that the house itself was powerful, but there seemed to be more value that we'd assumed in ruling over lands where strong adventurers had settled down, and in the ability to hire those adventurers in emergencies. *Thinking about it that way, it makes sense to me, but I feel like that only works if the adventurers are actual high-rank adventurers. We're definitely not strong enough yet, so I don't know how we're supposed to react to invitations from other nobles.*

Illias-sama smiled as if to reassure me that I had nothing to worry about. "Oh, don't worry, the House of Nernas won't cause your party any trouble. And the chances of anyone else approaching you directly are low now that I've declared your party is under my father's protection. We'll take care of things for you."

Illias-sama was definitely a noble despite her young age. After witnessing how she'd handled the other nobles earlier, I knew I was no match for her.

"I'm really glad that the two gentlemen talked to us, however," said Illias. "They saved me a lot of trouble."

"You mean the beastman and the elf you referred to as Sulaivya-sama, right? Who was the beastman?" I asked.

"His name is Ranba Marmont, and he is the current Marquess Marmont."

"Huh? Wait, so he's the head of his house?" I had expected Illias-sama to continue after the words "Marquess Marmont"—maybe with something like "the current Marquess Marmont's son"—but she'd stopped right there.

Illias-sama nodded. "Yes, he is. The person I referred to as Sulaivya-sama is Alandi Sulaivya, son of Count Sulaivya, but Marmont-sama is the actual Marquess Marmont."

"Um, Illias-sama, why would the head of a margravial family attend the wedding of a mere baron?" Haruka asked. "Wouldn't the massive gap between their ranks ordinarily make that unthinkable?"

Haruka's question seemed perfectly logical to me, but Illias-sama smiled awkwardly as if unsure of how to answer. "...As you just witnessed, the marquess is somewhat of a maverick. When I first met him, I was doing my best to hide my nervousness when he suddenly lifted me into the air..."

"Did he really do that?" Haruka asked.

"Yes. It happened just a few years ago."

A friendly neighbor playing around with kids like that wouldn't be too strange, but there was no way the average noble would dare to do such a thing with the child of another noble house. It would be a different story if the two houses were related by blood, but that didn't seem to be the case for the Houses of Nernas and Marmont. A marquess significantly outranked a viscount, so in most situations, the viscount would probably have made a carefully oblique complaint. But Illias-sama said Marquess Marmont's personality was well-known among the nobles of the Lenium Kingdom, and he'd had no ill intentions, so the incident hadn't caused any trouble.

"I suspect the marquess dropped by because he assumed Baron Dias would be serving good food," said Illias. "And it's an honor for the baron to host someone like the marquess, so he would have had no reason to refuse."

When I followed Illias-sama's gaze, I saw the beastman piling his plate high with meat and devouring it on the spot. *Ugh, I'm so jealous! That's the same stuff I tearfully abandoned, but he's ordering and eating a bunch of big slices!*

"I think the two of them jumped in earlier to help us out," said Illias. "They withdrew after failing to recruit you, so that means it'll be harder for other nobles to try the same thing."

Illias-sama reminded us that she'd asked the pair to negotiate with her father, and Ranba Marmont, an actual marquess, had accepted her rebuke. Thus, none of the other, lower-ranking nobles at this wedding would dare attempt to negotiate directly with Illias-sama. It would be a different story if there were nobles present who outranked the marquess, but that would mean a duke or a member of the royal family, and there was no way anyone like that would show up here. Other elven nobles could pretend that they simply wanted to talk to Haruka and me because of our shared heritage, but there had been an elf

among the nobles who'd spoken to us earlier, which also ruled out that angle of approach. Given that the two of them had withdrawn without complaint, Illias-sama was probably correct to suppose that no one would bother us further. Of course, considering Illias-sama's past with the marquess, it might also have been a factor that she was a lovable little girl, the kind adults instinctively doted on.

"Now all that remains is to speak to the bride and groom," said Illias. "After that, we're free to leave."

"Really? Isn't the wedding reception going to continue for a while even after the bride and groom are done greeting the guests?" I asked.

We could technically avoid talking to the newlyweds by stuffing our faces, but that would hardly be acceptable. I wouldn't mind at all, but it would be very bad manners; the only reason Marquess Marmont could act so freely was because of his rank. I, however, was a mere servant and would ruin Illias-sama's reputation if I behaved that way.

"Well, actually," said Illias, "thanks to Sulaivya-sama and Marmont-sama, I was able to emphasize your presence. Now none of the other nobles will act as if ours is a weak house."

I lowered my voice. "Uh, just as a reminder, Illias-sama, we're not soldiers." I had to make certain that she knew we had no intent of serving directly under her father.

Illias-sama just smiled back at me. "Mm, I understand. What really matters is how other nobles perceive the House of Nernas." She was *definitely* a shrewd aristocrat despite her age. "Now, then, it seems the final trial is about to begin."

The bride and groom were walking toward us. Illias-sama set her glass and plate down on the nearest table, then turned to greet them with a smile on her face.

"Luke Dias, Baroness Dias, congratulations on your nuptials," said Illias.

The bride and groom both bowed.

"Thank you for your warm greeting, Illias Nernas," said Luke.

“Yes, thank you kindly.”

It was weird watching a couple of adults bow to a little girl, but as the daughter of a viscount, Illias-sama was a seminoble equivalent in rank to a baron. In practice, her rank was lower than that of a true baron, but as she was attending the wedding in place of Viscount Nernas, she was effectively equal to a viscount in this setting. As a result, she technically outranked Baron Dias; thus, it was perfectly normal for the baron’s son to bow to her.

Noble etiquette was very complicated, but as long as everyone addressed one another with proper deference, everything else would follow. Illias-sama herself had emphasized to us that slightly outranking another noble was no excuse for acting pompous. In a sense, Haruka and I had the easiest job, since we just had to be deferential to everyone without taking rank into consideration.

“I was wondering when you would marry, Luke,” said Illias. “Now it seems you have at last found a wonderful bride.”

“Ah, yes, my duties have kept me too busy for courtship,” said Luke with a laugh. “I am fortunate that my family has forged a connection with Baron Aesi.”

“Being as my father’s viscounty borders the Barony of Dias, I hope we, too, can maintain a strong relationship and prosper jointly,” said Illias.

The two exchanged elegant smiles. I had no idea how sincere they were being. *Now that I think about it, the highway to Clewily was in bad shape, so this was probably no more than an exchange of pleasantries.*

“Your words are reassuring to our house,” said Luke. “Incidentally, I wish to express my gratitude for the valuable gifts that we received at your hand, and I would be greatly obliged if you could extend my thanks to your noble father.”

“Of course. It would be fortuitous for our own house if we could contribute to the growth of the House of Dias,” said Illias.

“Thank you kindly,” said Luke. “No doubt such gifts were difficult even for the House of Nernas to obtain...”

The groom had to be referring to the bottles of red strike ox milk that Viscount Nernas had sent as wedding gifts. When he called them “valuable,” he was probably alluding to their rarity rather than their monetary value. Indeed,

he was watching Illias as if hoping to pry the story out of her, but she brushed off his curiosity and pointed at us.

“It was all thanks to the efforts of these adventurers here. The House of Nernas has benefited a great deal from their service.”

“I see,” said Luke. “I have, indeed, heard tell of their prowess.”

The groom was staring at Haruka and me so openly that I was beginning to feel uncomfortable. The two of us suppressed our reactions and simply bowed in response. His gaze wasn’t lecherous, but neither did it convey any of the friendliness I’d felt from Sulaivya-san and Marquess Marmont; it was the gaze of a coldhearted businessman. Baron Dias was a good ruler, at least by a certain definition, and Luke was unquestionably his father’s son, but if my friends and I ever had to move outside of the Viscounty of Nernas, living in the domain of Marquess Marmont sounded like a more appealing prospect purely in terms of what we’d seen of his personality.

“Hmm. I’m envious that you have such skilled adventurers at your disposal,” said Luke. “It is with keenest regret that I say my father’s barony produces few such warriors.”

“Indeed, it’s far from easy to find skilled adventurers,” said Illias. “But the House of Nernas makes a policy of long-term investments. As my father sees it, there’s no cause to fret even when one sees no return immediately.”

“An intriguing philosophy. I will have to consider it,” said Luke. “So, can the House of Dias expect to see more goods on the market similar in value to the gifts we received?”

The groom’s question sounded like it was obliquely directed at us, but Illias-sama responded without a moment’s hesitation. “I believe that will depend on the state of the highway between Pining and Mijala. Even if such goods can be purchased in my father’s domain, transportation remains an issue. Merchants won’t come if they know it isn’t safe to travel.”

“...Indeed. Now then, I’m afraid that we have to leave, but it was a pleasure to speak to you,” said Luke. “Thank you very much for gracing us with your presence, and we do hope you’ll enjoy the rest of your time here.”

“Of course. Thank you as well,” said Illias.

The groom bowed to us, as did the bride, and the two of them departed to address their other guests. After her initial greeting, the bride had just stood silently at Luke’s side the entire time. I had no idea if, as a woman, she was forbidden to speak or if she was just quiet by disposition. Of course, Haruka and I had been standing there silently too, so it probably didn’t bear much consideration.

Illias-sama had maintained a smile throughout the ceremony, but after the groom moved on to other guests, she let her face go slack, put a hand to her forehead, and breathed a sigh of relief. “I hope I got through that without making any serious errors.”

Haruka gave Illias-sama a reassuring smile, then handed her a drink and a plate. “I think you did a wonderful job, Illias-sama.”

I completely agreed with Haruka. I couldn’t have handled a verbal duel with someone like Luke Dias.

“I should add, despite what I told the groom just now, your party is free to sell the things you obtain from the dungeon anywhere you want,” said Illias. “The House of Nernas *would* appreciate it if you sold them inside of the viscounty, however.”

“Well, as long as Laffan remains a comfortable place for us to live, we have no intention of leaving the viscounty,” I said. “We don’t plan to travel to another town to sell stuff either—that would be going way out of our way.”

Illias nodded. “As long as Laffan remains a comfortable place to live, hmm? Very well. I’ll pass that message along to my father.”

For my friends and me, Laffan was the ideal place to live a peaceful and quiet life. Clewily was a city, so there were all kinds of delicious foods on offer, besides which things like alchemical materials and weapons were easier to obtain, but it probably wouldn’t be a comfortable place for us to live. Of course, another reason we’d stayed in Laffan so long was that we’d already purchased a house there, but regardless, we had no intention of moving as long as the viscount continued governing in the same manner. We would still leave Laffan periodically for trips or quests, but it would remain our home. It was possible

that I would have felt differently if none of my party members were good at cooking, but that wasn't a concern.

"I suppose we can rest easy for the rest of our time here. Really, your party and the recent ambush are the only noteworthy things about the Viscount of Nernas—we're a weak and unremarkable house. I doubt any other noble will go out of his way to talk to us now." Illias-sama sounded relieved as she muttered those rather self-deprecating remarks. It probably wasn't pleasant for her to describe her own house as weak, but it also wouldn't have been pleasant for her if she'd had to engage in diplomacy. So far, all of the potential problems that had arisen had been within expectations, and Illias-sama had been well-prepared to handle them.

She was still a young girl, so it would have been difficult for her to contend with a completely unexpected challenge, but surprises were quite rare at parties hosted by nobles, who were obliged to observe certain mores and manners—at least as long as people like Marquess Marmont weren't among the guests, and the marquess probably wouldn't bother us again for the time being.

"Let's take advantage of this opportunity to eat some delicious food, then take our leave," said Illias. "It would be a waste not to."

"I didn't realize you had such inner strength, Illias-sama," said Haruka, sounding amused.

Illias-sama just laughed. "The last trial is over, so there's nothing else to worry about. I'll have to resume eating simple meals once I return home, so I'd like to enjoy myself while I can."

"Everything here certainly looks good," said Haruka. "Let's pick the foods that look the most expensive to make up for the fact that we got attacked on our way here."

"What a splendid idea, Haruka-san," said Illias. "Food that's hard to obtain in Pining would probably be ideal."

"In terms of price, I think fruits would be the perfect choice," said Haruka, "but I haven't seen any seafood to speak of..."

I also started looking around for anything that interested me. The rest of my party had enjoyed a nice vacation while Haruka and I had been forced to cram for the wedding, so I was determined to enjoy myself and brag about it to the others later. I also wanted to bring back enough information for the girls to replicate the food here, but I was completely clueless about cooking, so I was counting on Haruka to take care of that.

“The sea is far from here, so it’s only natural that seafood is expensive,” said Illias. “Most of what’s available is salty; there’s almost nothing that’s good enough to be served at a buffet like this. It would be a different story for a noble who wanted to flaunt his wealth.”

“I know so little about the sea—is it really that far away?” Haruka asked.

“Yes. As residents of the Lenium Kingdom, we’d have to travel either south or east to reach the sea, but the Yupikrisa Empire is located in the south,” Illias replied. “The Lenium Kingdom and the Yupikrisa Empire do not have good relations, and in any case, the empire has no coastal possessions...”

Illias-sama went on to explain that you had to pass through the empire, then through another country before finally reaching the sea.

“East of here is the Principality of Austianim. As with the southern route, you have to pass through another country before reaching the sea, so the eastern route is also quite long,” she concluded.

The distance was apparently great enough that it took a couple months to transport seafood by carriage, so the associated costs were extreme. Most people settled for local fish given that you could simply catch them in nearby rivers. The fish from Sarstedt had a muddy flavor, but there were some other freshwater fish that were good.

“Nobles who are truly wealthy have seafood brought to them in magic bags, but I don’t know if there’s anything like that here,” said Illias. “I’m not very knowledgeable about seafood.”

“Yeah. In particular, it’s kind of hard to tell when it comes to fish dishes,” I said.

I remained behind Illias-sama as I looked over the food on the tables. There

was an incredible variety on display. I saw some dishes that appeared to contain fish, but I had no idea if it was freshwater or saltwater fish. One way or another, they looked delicious, so I sampled a few.

When I'd first learned the value of these clothes, I'd been spooked, but it had since occurred to me that Haruka could use the Purification spell to remove stains in an instant. I couldn't stuff myself the way Marquess Marmont had, but there was no reason for me to refrain from trying things for fear of spilling sauce on someone. And now that there was no more need to interact with nobles, I'd regained my appetite.

"Oh, Nao, it looks like there's some shellfish," said Haruka. "Do you think that counts as seafood?"

She was pointing at what looked like some kind of bivalves, each about half the size of one of my palms. The word shellfish made me think of seafood, but on reflection, that wasn't always accurate.

"I dunno. It's possible to find shellfish in rivers and ponds too, and it might even be a terrestrial species," I said. "Things like snails are technically shellfish."

"...The way you described it made me lose my appetite a bit," said Haruka.

"Oh, that shellfish is found in lakes," said Illias. "It's quite delicious, but I usually don't get to eat any at home."

*Hmm. I guess that means it must be expensive, huh? Time to dig in!* I placed portions on my own plate as well as Haruka's and Illias-sama's, then took a moment to examine my acquisition. Upon closer inspection, it looked similar to an Asian hard clam that had been cooked on the half shell. There were herbs and what looked like cheese sprinkled on top, and the whole thing appeared to have been grilled or baked in an oven.

"Whoa, this is really rich," I said. "It definitely tastes like a shellfish."

"Mm. It's meaty. It isn't too earthy, and I don't taste any sand either," said Haruka.

The shellfish was rather cold, but I still really enjoyed its rich umami flavor. The adductor muscles had been removed beforehand for ease of consumption, so it was nice that you could eat it with just a fork. Illias-sama seemed to be

enjoying hers too; she had a blissful smile on her face as she ate.

Even by this world's lower standards, haute cuisine was genuinely good, as I already knew from visiting Aera-san's café. In fact, the best food I'd eaten in this world was good enough that I would have awarded it three Michelin stars. Of course, there was also food that was unspeakably bad, but I couldn't be too critical given the cost.

"Time to try something else," I said.

All of us set our plates down as we prepared to select more food, but...

"Oh, to chance upon such a beautiful gem in a place like this! Fate must have brought us together!"

When I turned toward the source of those incomprehensible words, I immediately regretted it. What I saw was a noble who looked like he couldn't read the room—in more ways than one.

From my time at the tailor's, I'd learned that the standard style for men's formal clothes was simple and chic, with vests and lining being the only exceptions. Most of the men here were wearing clothes that matched that description. There were a few exceptions, but even those people had, at most, some embroidery on their coats, all of the same color and not too fancy. In fact, nobody was wearing a fancy outfit as such, I assumed because nobody wanted to stand out more than the bride and groom.

The noble who'd been yelling gibberish was the sole exception. He was wearing purple clothes that were extremely attention-grabbing. The color alone was bad enough, but his clothes were also covered in ostentatious embroidery in many different colors. They looked like the kind of getup you'd expect to see on a juvenile delinquent back on Earth—someone with no fashion sense at all. On top of that, they were unnecessarily sparkly thanks to liberal use of what appeared to be jewels. I suppose you could have called the effect luxurious, but my genuine impression was that the whole ensemble looked cheap and fake.

Even his hair had some purple strands mixed in; he must've dyed it. The guy was weirder than anything I could've imagined, and he was walking toward us with his arms extended and a smile on his face. I almost instinctively stepped forward to protect Illias-sama and Haruka, but that wouldn't have been

acceptable in this situation. As servants, we had to remain behind Illias-sama unless she was in clear danger. But one way or another, it seemed like proper manners would prove futile against this guy.

“Fair lady, may I have your name?”

His behavior demonstrated the same cluelessness as his outfit. He was staring openly at Haruka, an unambiguous breach of etiquette. Haruka and I were here as Illias-sama’s servants. No noble with a brain would have ignored her in an attempt to talk directly to either of us.

That was when Illias-sama stepped forward to protect us. “May I ask that you introduce yourself? Who, pray tell, are you?”

The guy finally turned his attention to Illias-sama. “My name is Pano Gnos, the eldest son of Aare Gnos, who bears the title of Baron Gnos,” he said in an exaggerated manner. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Rather than returning his formal greeting, Illias-sama responded with a displeased expression. “I am Illias Nernas, and I am here today on behalf of Joachim Nernas, who holds the title of Viscount Nernas.”

“Viscount Nernas, huh? I’ve heard that name before,” said Pano. “If I recall correctly, your house rules over the northwestern marches of the Lenium Kingdom, is that right?”

“That’s correct,” said Illias.

She had clearly registered her discontent. Given the difference in rank between a viscount and a baron, the latter’s representative would ordinarily have hastened to apologize. But Pano was the furthest thing from ordinary.

“I see,” said Pano. “But that’s hardly germane here, so please, step aside.”

“...Huh?”

Pano had basically ignored Illias-sama instead of apologizing. She was completely taken aback, and Pano took advantage of the opening to slip past her and stride toward us.

He spread his arms with an absurd flourish and said, “Your hair is glossy and your skin radiant and delicate. I am likewise in awe of your long, slender arms

and legs. For such a jewel to remain hidden in the hinterlands would be a loss to the world entire. Thus I would invite you to—”

I interrupted the stream of nonsense by grabbing Haruka's hand and thrusting her behind me.

Pano glared at me. “Who, pray tell, are *you*? I have no business with you.”

“Do you not see this fabric?” With my eyes, I indicated the fabric around Haruka's waist, which matched the swath around my neck.

Pano cocked his head. “Blue fabric? What of it? Ah, well, I think they look nice enough, but not half so fine as mine, ha ha!”

*Man, don't even compare them, dude. Keep your bad taste to yourself. Actually, wait, that's irrelevant. I'm not wrong about the implication of two people wearing decorative fabric in matching colors, am I?* I felt a bit uneasy due to how confident Pano seemed even now, so I turned to Illias-sama for confirmation, but she was staring at Pano with a look of absolute incredulity on her face. *Okay, I guess I'm not wrong. He's the crazy one.*

“I suppose I'll have to say it again more bluntly,” I said. “The girl behind me is my partner, so I would appreciate it very much if you would keep your distance.”

“...Are you quite certain that a mere servant such as yourself ought to address a noble with such impertinence?”

Pano looked annoyed, but I was pretty sure I was way more annoyed. I wanted to spit out some truly rude words, but that wasn't an option—forget my own status, I had to be mindful of all the onlookers—and I was rapidly succumbing to stress.

I felt somewhat relieved when Illias-sama recovered from her shock and spoke up on my behalf. “A noble should maintain proper etiquette as an example to others. If you continue to misbehave, then I'm afraid that I will have to lodge a complaint with Baron Gnos.”

“Hmm. How much do you want? A beautiful elf girl like this one hardly suits a remote house such as yours,” said Pano. “I can ask my father to pay whatever you ask.”

Once again, Illias-sama had voiced her displeasure quite clearly and Pano had come back with a totally unbelievable response. The perfect noblewoman's smile on Illias-sama's face visibly faltered.

"Money isn't the problem," said Illias. "It seems you lack common sense, Gnos-sama."

My sharp ears had picked up the muttered words "You damn brat," and then Pano launched into what sounded like a threat. "You ought to know, you'll end up with nothing if you're too greedy. There are many other ways to resolve this impasse."

Pano had initially seemed like a friendly young man, if only because of his smile, but now his expression had transformed into that of a thug.

I clenched my fists, but Illias-sama smirked, shook her head, and gave an exaggerated shrug. "I think it would be in your best interests to be more mindful of your conduct. You're much older than me, so you don't have the excuse of being a child."

"What do you—"

Pano looked absolutely furious—Illias-sama had been fairly blunt, if only by the standards of the aristocracy—but...

"Scion of Baron Gnos, do my ears deceive me or did I hear just now that you believe women of my race can be purchased like objets d'art?"

The noble who suddenly interposed himself between us was Alandi Sulaivya, eldest son of Count Sulaivya.

"Who are—"

Alandi was a graceful and slender man, not at all imposing, and Pano didn't seem intimidated; he continued to posture bullishly. It wasn't clear to me whether he had any idea of Alandi's peerage, but regardless, his conduct was beyond idiotic for a noble. Haruka and I had been forced to cram on etiquette, but I was confident I would have recognized Pano's faux pas even if I hadn't learned a thing.

But in the end, Pano's tomfoolery resulted in a powerful grip closing on his

shoulder.

“You’re a bit noisy, young man. Better cool off before you land yourself in trouble.”

The man who’d appeared behind Pano was Marquess Marmont. He was far scarier than Alandi both physically and in terms of his rank; even if Pano didn’t recognize the marquess, I figured, based on the fact that he was dressed like a stereotypical French fop, there was no way he’d be brave enough to feign unconcern in front of someone that imposing.

Marquess Marmont had an intimidating smile on his face as he exerted more pressure on Pano’s shoulder. “Name’s Ranba Marmont. You’re Pano, Baron Gnos’s son, aren’tcha?”

He probably wasn’t using his full strength, but I heard a nasty cracking sound, and Pano grimaced in pain.

“O-Oh, I think I need some fresh air,” said Pano. “Perhaps we could meet at another time to discuss this matter further...”

*Fresh air? You’re the one who stank this place up, dude.* Pano was pale in the face as he scurried away from us and out the door, but I had no idea if it was because of the pain in his shoulder or because he’d just learned Marquess Marmont’s identity. Still, the way he’d glanced at Haruka before fleeing had been obsessive to a disgusting degree, so I remained uneasy. He’d even tried to buffalo Sulaivya-sama, and he’d left without formally greeting or apologizing to Marquess Marmont, so there was no guarantee of him acting rationally in the future. The House of Gnos was a baronial family, so Pano probably couldn’t wield his father’s power against us once we returned to the viscounty of Nernas, but the son’s conduct made me wonder uneasily about the father’s personality.

“What a confounding turn of events,” said Illias. She turned toward our saviors. “Sulaivya-sama, Marmont-sama, thank you very much for coming to our aid.”

Haruka and I both bowed and said in unison, “Thank you very much.”

They had sprung to Illias-sama’s defense at exactly the right moment. Pano

had certainly drawn all the wrong kinds of attention, but even before that, Alandi and the marquess had probably been looking out for Illias-sama. *Do the Houses of Marmont and Nernas have a special relationship? Illias-sama did say she met the marquess for the first time when she was much younger...*

“Think nothing of it. I can’t believe that fellow was here in the first place,” said Ranba. “Never seen him before. How about you, Alandi?”

“The name of Baron Gnos is familiar, but I have never before met someone claiming to be the eldest son of Baron Gnos,” said Alandi. “The baron is, by reputation, a rather trivial person. I never imagined his heir would be *that* awful.”

“Seems we ought to lower our opinions of the baron quite a bit...” Ranba mused. “Well, I never knew the guy in the first place, so it makes no difference to me!” he added with a hearty laugh.

Based on his laughter, the marquess seemed to be telling the truth when he said he’d never heard of Baron Gnos. *So is the baron just some inconsequential noble who doesn’t stand out at all? If that’s the case, I probably don’t need to worry about anything, but considering how his son was dressed, he might have money. Sure, Pano has terrible taste, but all that embroidery must’ve cost...*

“I know nothing of Baron Gnos either,” said Illias. “I’ll talk with my father once I return home.”

“That would be wise. As for the two of you, please feel free to consult the House of Sulaivya should you ever require assistance,” said Alandi. “You need not leave the area where you currently live and work, to be clear. I am merely offering a helping hand as a fellow elf.”

“I can give you kids a hand too,” said Ranba. “Illias seems to trust you, after all. My domain is a ways from the Viscounty of Nernas, but it’d be nice if you could drop by for a visit at least once...”

“The same goes for the Countdom of Sulaivya,” said Alandi.

Based on what the two of them said, it would take us about two weeks to reach the March of Marmont by carriage and three to reach the Countdom of Sulaivya. That meant Marquess Marmont had left his domain for over a month

to attend this wedding. I was wondering whether it was really okay for him, as the head of his house, to be gone that long, but he assured me that his successor was already an adult and fully qualified to take over his responsibilities. In addition, the marquess himself as well as the bodyguards who served him were all mighty beastmen, capable of traveling long distances on foot without strain. Most nobles would probably use carriages to keep up appearances even if travel on foot were an option, but Marquess Marmont apparently rejected carriages as inefficient. It was plain to see why he was well-known as a maverick.

Illias-sama pouted a bit. “Oh, please don’t try to lure away these adventurers after the House of Nernas was fortunate enough to find them. We’ve struggled to convince high-rank adventurers to stay in the viscounty...”

The two nobles both shrugged, shook their heads, and smiled in the way adults would to comfort a child.

“Nah, I would never! But they have a beastman and some beastwomen in their party, don’t they? It’s hard, y’know, for people of our race to find marriage partners. All I wanted to do was give ’em an opportunity.”

*So he’s inviting us to go on a trip to find Touya a spouse? That actually doesn’t sound like a bad idea.* Metea had become confident in her abilities lately, and accordingly, it sounded like she’d moved on from the idea of asking Touya to provide for her. Also, it was true that beastfolk had a hard time finding prospective partners in Laffan. Touya himself talked constantly about wanting to meet a cute wife with animal ears—or, ideally, multiple cute wives—so as a friend, I wanted to help. Of course, it was on him to work hard and save up in pursuit of his dream, but given our income, it probably wouldn’t be hard for him to find at least one wife—as long as he didn’t blow all of his money on brothels.

“Elves face many of the same challenges, though it seems these two have had no such trouble,” said Alandi. “But I must say, ma’am, that you are very fair to my elven eyes. In fact, were you without a partner, I might have asked for your hand in marriage myself.”

Alandi delivered those compliments in a very refined and elegant manner. I was an elf on the outside, but the real deal was something else. Pano had also

praised Haruka, but amazingly, Alandi's words didn't get my dander up.

Likewise, Haruka, who usually hated guys flirting with her, didn't look uncomfortable in the slightest. "Thank you very much for your kind words. I already have someone in mind, however."

"I am well aware," Alandi said with a beautiful smile. He bowed in spite of Haruka's rejection. "The two of you look perfect together. I would be honored if you would inform me when you plan to get married. I will rush to the Viscount of Nernas to congratulate you in person."

"Rush" had to be an exaggeration, but even I was in awe of his manners. *Ugh. So this is what a natural Prince Charming is like...* I was painfully aware that I could never emulate Alandi properly, even if someone expected it of me. I glanced over at Haruka and found she was already looking at me. We locked eyes for a moment, then laughed.

Alandi and the marquess hovered nearby until the very end of the reception, probably protecting Illias-sama out of the kindness of their hearts. A lot of the other guests had witnessed the commotion that Pano had caused earlier, and how it had ended, so no one else tried to talk to us. We had a pleasant time chatting with Alandi and the marquess, and thanks to the marquess piling so much food onto his own plate, we were able to enjoy some ourselves. The last half of the wedding reception ended up being a lot of fun.



The day after the wedding, the other members of our party left the inn to enjoy the last day of their vacation. Tomorrow, we'd set out for the Viscount of Nernas, so Arlene-san and the others were busy preparing for our departure, but Illias-sama was free, so she went to play with Mary and Metea. Clewily seemed to be a very safe city, and Touya, Natsuki, and Yuki were watching over the girls. Anyway, Illias-sama had gotten permission from Arlene-san in advance, so I had no concerns.

Meanwhile, Haruka and I were still wallowing in our beds. I'd wanted to spend some time looking around Clewily with her, but I was totally burned out after the wedding. Admittedly, I'd spent most of the day standing in place, but it had still been exhausting. Thanks to Alandi and the marquess, I'd been able to relax

during the second half of the reception, but I'd still had to be careful with my words, and as a commoner, I wasn't used to situations in which other people constantly had their eyes on me.

Just because I was an elf, I'd attracted a certain amount of attention during our early days in Laffan, but I'd quickly developed a fixed routine as far as where and when I walked around, and Laffan wasn't a very big town, so before too long, people had stopped staring. Anyway, I'd only attracted attention because I was a novelty, so if I'd done anything unexpected, people would have assumed I was just some weird elf. Yesterday, however, my own reputation hadn't been the only one on the line, so I'd been way more anxious.

"Ugh, my whole body is stiff," I said.

"Likewise," said Haruka. "Even my facial muscles are sore."

"Oh, yeah, you forced yourself to smile the whole time," I said.

Haruka's resting face wasn't expressionless by any means, but neither was she the kind of person who looked cheerful by default. Maintaining a smile for the duration of the ceremony had clearly taken a toll on her.

"Man, I can't believe how much of a pain noble society is," I said. "It's like, they have to smile the entire time while stabbing each other with words."

"Illias-sama is still a kid, but I imagine a similar exchange between adults would have gone worse," said Haruka.

I assumed Haruka was referring to the first guy who'd approached Illias-sama; he'd done nothing but belittle her. I couldn't remember his name, but he'd disappeared the moment two high-ranking nobles had shown up, so he was obviously small fry.

"Memorizing all of the manners and etiquette seems like a lot of work," I said, "and nobles probably don't have much personal freedom."

"Marquess Marmont seemed to act without a care for anyone's reactions," Haruka pointed out.

"I'm pretty sure that guy is the exception, though."

Even among all of the noble guests, the marquess had stood out more than

anyone. I was amazed that no one had reacted with displeasure at his unconventional behavior, but in addition to his rank, his personality probably protected him.

“Anyway, I feel like continuing to work as adventurers is the best thing for us,” I said.

“Yes, but only as long as some crazy noble doesn’t try to interfere with our lives,” said Haruka.

“...When you put it like that, I guess we might need the protection of a noble.”

My party could probably defeat a noble and his lackeys in combat, but that would put us in an inconvenient situation. Conflicts between nobles might get written off as “duels” or “disputes,” but if commoners killed a noble, they’d be guilty of murder, no question about it. A situation like that directly threatened the very foundation of feudalism, so it didn’t matter whether the noble in question was evil. If we crossed that line, we’d become enemies of the kingdom as a whole and be hunted down and killed. Only in fiction did ordinary people get happy endings after dealing justice to an evil noble.

“From our perspective,” said Haruka, “the difficulty involved in travel and transportation is actually a saving grace of life in this world. We can protect ourselves by the simple expedient of staying far away from trouble.”

“Yeah, it’s not like nobles can just hop in a car and show up at our doorstep,” I said.

All of the most common modes of transportation in this kingdom were very slow, besides which journeys between different cities were moderately dangerous, so we probably wouldn’t need to worry about Pano suddenly appearing in the viscounty of Viscount Nernas, although...

“Should we hide in the dungeon if it comes down to it?” I asked. “There’s no way anyone would follow us inside, right?”

“That should only be our last resort,” Haruka replied. “For now, let’s just leave it to the viscount to deal with problems like that on our behalf. The issue with Pano arose in the course of a quest that the House of Nernas asked us to

accept, after all.”

“Well, in a way, the real problem was your beauty.”

“My beauty? Is that supposed to sound like a compliment, Nao?”

“I mean, yeah, you’re definitely beautiful.”

I’d liked Haruka’s face back when we were both ordinary Japanese kids, and she was even more beautiful now. As Alandi had said, only someone with weird taste would have seen her as anything less than stunning—and as an elf, he ought to have known.

“I-I see. Thanks.”

Haruka looked embarrassed by my frank assessment, and she buried her face in her pillow. She remained in that position for a while, but she eventually got up again.

“U-Um, Nao, do you want me to give you a massage? You said you’re really stiff...?”

“Huh? Well, I’d definitely appreciate a massage...”

“I figured as much. Okay, lay down on your belly for me.”

My mental fatigue was way worse than my physical fatigue, but I didn’t feel like I could bring that up—Haruka seemed really motivated—so I just obeyed her instructions.

“Here goes.”

She proceeded to hop over to my bed and sit on top of me. I felt her weight on my buttocks, but...

“You feel so light,” I said. “Have you lost weight?”

“Relative to my original body back on Earth? Bathroom scales don’t exist in this world, so I don’t know for sure, but I might have lost some weight. This body *is* a bit smaller. But I should still be strong enough, so just relax and leave it to me.”

Haruka put her hands on my back and began to massage me slowly. *Man, her hands are so soft and warm. They feel really comfortable. She could heal me in*

*an instant with magic, but this feels a lot better.*

“You’re awfully stiff, sir,” said Haruka, imitating a professional masseuse.

“Huh? Really?”

“I’m just joking.”

I laughed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Haruka laughed too as she continued massaging my back and waist. It was very relaxing, in part just because it was Haruka doing it.

“You’ve definitely gotten skinnier, Nao,” said Haruka. “You’re in better shape overall, though.”

“Mm. I feel like I’m a little taller now that I’m an elf, and I’m definitely stronger than before... Hey, that tickles!”

Haruka was gently caressing my triceps. I moved my arms to escape her grip.

“Sorry,” said Haruka. “I’m taller and stronger as well. I’m lighter, but so is my chest, so...”

“As far as I’m concerned, that just means your new body is well-proportioned. It’s not a downgrade at all.”

“I guess that’s reassuring to hear.”

Both of us fell silent for a bit. Haruka continued to apply her weight to my body as she massaged my shoulders and neck. My back had gotten warmer, and now Haruka’s breath was tickling my ears.

“By the way, what made you want to give me a massage all of a sudden?” I asked.

“We’re partners, right? I figured it wouldn’t hurt to act like actual partners,” said Haruka. “You can give *me* a massage after I’m done.”

*Oh, is she referring to what I said when I stood between her and Pano at the wedding reception? She did say something later the same day...*

“Yeah. Didn’t you say you already have a, uh...partner in mind, though, Haruka?”

“Mm.”

Both of us fell silent again. All of a sudden, Haruka’s hands stopped moving and her face was right next to mine. *Man, she looks beautiful even up close.* As her face got closer and closer, I extended my hands, she let her eyes drift shut, and—

There was no knock, but the door to our room suddenly swung open. “Hey, Nao, let’s go get lun—”

As Touya walked in, he and I locked eyes. All three of us froze in place awkwardly.

“I’m gonna go get lunch,” Touya exclaimed, “so I won’t come back for a while! I’ll take the others with me! We’ll all be gone for about two hours! See ya!”

He dashed out of the room and slammed the door behind him. *Dude, you ruined everything! What am I supposed to do now?!*

“Uh...”

“...He said everyone will be gone for about two hours?” Haruka asked.

“Y-Yeah, I think so,” I replied.

“So? What are you going to do?”

Haruka regarded me with a clear gaze. In time, I responded by reaching for her face again.



The last lunch that Haruka and I had in Clewily was just food from our magic bags. When Touya and the others returned, a bit over two hours later, everyone acted the same as usual. *Am I the only one who feels a bit awkward about what happened earlier? But Haruka isn’t acting any different either...*

“Did you buy everything you thought we might need?” Haruka asked.

“We did,” Natsuki replied. “We bought enough rice to last us quite a while as well as lots of different spices. If we give it our best shot, I think we’ll be able to make something that at least resembles curry.”

“We bought all kinds of rare stuff,” Yuki put in. “We might even be able to

grow some spices in our own yard!"

"That should work if some of the spices you purchased are technically seeds," said Haruka. "It would certainly be nice."

"We made sure to select whole rather than husked seeds for that reason," said Natsuki. "Hopefully they'll grow in our garden."

"I got to eat a lot of delicious food!" Metea announced.

In spite of the awkwardness earlier, there was really nothing out of the ordinary about this conversation. They'd remembered to search for curry ingredients, and Metea, it seemed, had gotten to try out lots of street food. Haruka and I had also gotten to try all sorts of different food at the wedding reception, but I still wished we could have enjoyed a peaceful meal outside. The two of us had been forced to spend several days preparing for the wedding, so we'd basically had zero free time to walk around Clewily.

"We spent a ton of money, but that isn't a problem, is it, Haruka?" Yuki asked.

"Well, if you and Natsuki agreed that the purchases were necessary, I don't mind," Haruka replied. But then Yuki handed over the purse containing the money for shared expenses, and when Haruka looked inside, her voice suddenly rose. "Oh, I didn't realize you spent *that* much money. I suppose we'll have to commit some time to adventuring once we get back to Laffan."

"Yeah, we're not getting a monetary reward for this quest, so we'll definitely have to work again," said Yuki.

I was fairly confident that none of my companions would waste money—at least, with the exception of Touya—but it sounded like they had spent a lot on groceries. And speaking of Touya...

"Uh, Nao, sorry about earlier," he said awkwardly.

I just cocked my head and pretended not to understand. "What do you mean? Haruka was just healing me. I was sore all over after having to stand still for so long at the wedding reception yesterday. I was actually kinda confused when you left without me."

"The fact that you didn't chase after me makes it pretty obvious what was

going on, dude,” said Touya.

“...Oh.”

“So, did everything go well?”

“...Again, I have no idea what you’re talking about, Touya, so I’m not even going to answer that question.”

“Come on. We’re bros! You don’t have to hide anything from me, you know? I’m not asking you for a blow-by-blow account, and anyway, it’s not like I need to ask. Just look at Haruka.”

“Seriously?”

“I mean, she’s obviously in a good mood.”

*Hmm. Well, I don’t think Haruka is in a bad mood, but as far as I can tell, she doesn’t seem any different from usual—although I guess my inability to notice stuff like that is something that I need to fix eventually. Man, I’m so far from being a Prince Charming...*

“Anyway, congrats, dude,” said Touya.

“Again, I don’t know what you’re talking about. But thanks.”

Touya shrugged, looking a little exasperated.

We set out for the Viscounty of Nernas early the next morning. Since we’d repaired parts of the highway on our way to Clewily, the journey back went even more smoothly. Rain greeted us when we were halfway home, but that was the only incident that slowed us down somewhat. We all remained on guard, but no assailants appeared, and we safely arrived back in Pining right on schedule.



## Side Story—The Daily Life of Tomi

About a year had passed since I became an apprentice blacksmith under Gantz-san. By now, I felt nostalgic for the days I'd spent with Touya-kun creating shovels, although objectively, we hadn't actually spent that much time on them. Anyway, I was still making shovels; they'd become a major source of income for my master. The volume of sales in Laffan had died down by now, so most of the shovels we made these days were destined for other towns, but unlike weapons, they sold consistently. Sybil-san was apparently pretty pleased with the steady income too.

It seemed like what Gantz-san really wanted was to make weapons, but he couldn't complain. Sybil-san had supported him through hard times, so he worked hard at making shovels, and my job was to help him. An apprentice had no choice but to reply, "Yes, sir!" when his master issued orders. Still, there were times when I wished I could complain.

"...An order for *two hundred shovels*?"

"You got it, kid," said Gantz. "The client wants this order completed as soon as possible, ideally within half a month."

"Seriously? I mean, if that's how it has to be, I'll get right to work, but even one hundred will be a challenge—"

"Oh, by the way, there's another order I gotta see to, so you're on your own with this one, Tomi," said Gantz.

"...Seriously? Where I'm from, inspectors from the Labor Standards Bureau would be knocking on your door!" *Dang, I really wish similar organizations existed in this world!*

"What are you on about? Well, anyway, I'm sorry about this, but I run a weapon shop. I can't turn down orders for weapons from regular clients who pay well."

"Huh? Wait, master, do you actually have customers other than Touya-kun's

party who pay well?!"

After I accidentally let those words escape my mouth, my master scowled. "Course I do! Their party only started buying weapons from me last year! You got any idea how many years have passed since I first opened shop here in Laffan?! If they were my only customers, I'd be out of business by now!"

"Oh, um, I just assumed that you made a living selling weapons to rookies at reasonable prices..."

As far as I was aware, Touya-kun's party were the only customers in the last year who'd bought weapons and armor worth more than a few million Rea. Most adventurers purchased weapons worth tens of thousands of Rea or just dropped by to turn in weapons and armor for repairs. It didn't seem like the kind of business that would bring in a ton of money, and indeed, my shovels had marked a very important turning point for Gantz-san in terms of income. *I can't believe there's actually an order that he'd prioritize over shovels!*

As I stared at my master in astonishment, he awkwardly averted his eyes. "I mean, yeah, you ain't wrong. But I never cut corners even with cheap weapons. 'Sides, there are customers who like those kinds of weapons."

The adventurers who initially patronized Gantz-san's shop generally left for different towns the moment they were strong enough. Most of them presumably purchased new weapons wherever they ended up, but there were a small number who recognized the quality of Gantz-san's wares. Some whose lives had been saved by his weapons would actually travel all the way to Laffan to place orders for new weapons. According to Gantz-san, those few successful adventurers were quite rich, so their purchases had helped him remain in business.

"...But they don't spend as much money as Touya and his friends," Gantz concluded.

"Yeah, those guys don't hesitate even if the price is insane."

My master and I both sighed in admiration.

I'd arrived in this world with the same starting conditions as Touya's party, but there was a huge difference between us now. I was well aware that they

had worked hard to achieve their success, so I wasn't even a little bit jealous; there was no way I could ever have pulled off the feats they had, and I couldn't help but admire what they'd achieved so far.

"They don't hesitate to spend money if it's a necessary investment for their survival," said Gantz. "They even bought weapons and armor for those sisters—stuff the kids would never be able to afford starting out. They never slack off when it comes to training either. They're everything adventurers should aspire to be."

"Yeah, I completely agree," I said. "And they bring in expensive materials too, so they're the perfect customers, right?"

Gantz-san crossed his arms and nodded deeply. "Yep. Out here in the countryside, the chance to craft weapons from fine materials like that usually only comes along once in a lifetime. It's a blacksmith's dream. You ought to be grateful too."

"Yes, sir. After all, no matter how skilled a blacksmith is, it's all for naught if he doesn't have materials to work," I said.

No matter how much I leveled up my Blacksmithing skill, I couldn't make legendary weapons out of normal iron; the best I could do would probably be equal to a weapon made from materials that were better by one tier. That being the case, I was genuinely grateful that Touya-kun's party had given me so many opportunities to make good weapons.

"We've kind of drifted away from the original topic, though," I said. "I understand why you want to prioritize the order for weapons, but couldn't you just turn down the order for shovels or try to negotiate an extended deadline?"

It wasn't like the shop was struggling financially such that we had to take on difficult orders. But although I was confident that my opinion made perfect sense, a troubled look appeared on my master's face.

"Uh, well, y'see, Tomi, the client who placed the order for the shovels is the lord of this viscounty. Would *you* turn him down?"

"...Definitely not."

As a former high school student, the closest analogies I could come up with

for a feudal lord were a demanding parent company or a favored business partner—and really, a lord was way, way more important.

“Course, if I couldn’t have met this order, I would’ve turned it down,” said Gantz. “The lord isn’t an unreasonable man—you can negotiate with him if you have to. But we can make the deadline if we give it our best shot. Help me out here.”

My master even lowered his head as he pleaded with me, so as an apprentice, I couldn’t turn down his request. As a result, I ended up skipping as much sleep as I could for the next half month to work on those shovels.



My master helped me when he had the time, so I was able to finish the shovels by the original deadline. I was completely exhausted afterward, though, so I really needed a break, and as thanks for my efforts, my master gave me a few days off, plus a big bag of coins as a bonus. I was grateful that he wasn’t stingy when it came to compensation, so I thanked him—and then went home and passed out in my bed.

I woke up around evening the next day, and the first thing I did was check my bonus. *Huh? Wait, there’s enough money in here for a small house. I’m pretty sure Gantz-san wouldn’t give me this much by mistake, but is it really okay for me to accept it? Oh well, I guess I’ll just keep it. There’s nothing wrong with saving for the future. I’m single and housework is a pain, so I have no plans to move out of this inn.*

“What should I do today?”

My first thought was to spend some of my bonus drinking with Touya-kun or Nao-kun, but they usually turned me down when I invited them out—neither of them liked the taste of ale, which I personally found to be delicious. They would join me for meals, though, so I could just invite them to join me once I discovered a good restaurant.

*For today, I guess I’ll just drink here at The Slumbering Bear.* I left my room for the dining hall. The moment I arrived, a middle-aged man, already mildly drunk despite the hour, called out to me.

“Hey, Tomi! Been a while.”

“Oh, hello, Bled-san. Yeah, it’s been a while,” I said. “I’ve been busy with work... Just a moment—let me get myself a drink.”

The secret to drinking faster at the Slumbering Bear was to fetch the drinks yourself. If you waited for them to arrive at your table, you wouldn’t be able to drink nearly as much. I kind of hoped the innkeeper would hire a waitress one day, but I couldn’t really complain if the money he saved on labor fees went into the quality of the food here. If you were a regular customer, the innkeeper would personally pour drinks for you, but I hadn’t quite earned that status yet, so I paid at the counter and received a jug of ale, then took a seat at Bled-san’s table.

“Cheers!”

I clinked my mug against his, then poured about half of the ale down my throat.

“Whew, delicious!” I exclaimed.

Bled-san laughed. “So, what brings you here today? You finish an urgent order or something?”

“Pretty much. The deadline was tight, but I somehow got it done on time,” I replied. “Do you ever get orders like that, Bled-san?”

“Nah, not really. We’ve shifted to luxury services and goods for the most part. You pretty much can’t fill rush orders when everything’s gotta be transported to other towns.”

Bled-san was a woodworker specializing in intricate designs. He spent hours carving fine details into the surfaces of furniture, so he probably never had to deal with tight deadlines. I could take it easy too if I were capable of making weapons that doubled as works of art, but I still had a lot to learn before I got to that point.

“How’s the furniture trade?” I asked. “Is it going well?”

“Yeah, it’s booming right now!” Bled exclaimed. “All thanks to the new supply of precious wood we got all of a sudden. I’m pretty sure that I won’t run out of

work for a couple years at least.”

“Oh, really? That’s great.”

Gantz-san’s shop usually didn’t deal in goods made of precious wood, but we did sometimes have to make iron fittings for precious wood furniture, and on even rarer occasions, Gantz-san would make gold fittings and contract out the detail work to a goldsmith. We also frequently got orders for woodworking and carpentry tools. Although Gantz-san styled his store a weapons shop, sales of tools made up a surprisingly significant fraction of his income. Adventurers who bought expensive weapons and armor were pretty rare in Laffan, after all. Really, Touya and his friends were pretty much our only big customers.

“That you, Tomi?” Andrew-san sat down at my table as he addressed me. “Been a while!”

“Hello, Andrew-san,” I said. “I happened to have some free time—I just finished working on a big order.”

Andrew-san worked at the Adventurers’ Guild. He was around fifty years old, which actually counted as elderly in this world. Like Bled-san, he was a regular at The Slumbering Bear, so I knew him pretty well by now.

“What about you, Andrew-san? Have you been doing well?” I asked.

“Nah, ‘bout the same as usual. The only adventurers in Laffan are semiretired or greenhorns who’re here temporarily to learn the ropes. The moment they get stronger, they all head elsewhere, dreaming of success and fortune.”

Andrew-san sighed and shook his head, then turned toward me before continuing.

“Come to think of it, the adventurers you know are a different sort, aren’t they? Bet they’d be able to achieve more if they moved on to another town. Can’t imagine why they stick around these parts.”

Andrew-san shrugged and took a sip from his mug of ale. It seemed like most young people here aspired to move to larger cities even if they were overwhelming, but Haruka-san’s party didn’t seem to care about such things. For us, even “big” cities in this world were more like historical sites you’d see on a field trip back in Japan.

“Is it easier to find success as an adventurer in other towns?” I asked.

“Of course. Just look at the kind of quests that are available here in Laffan. Perfect for greenhorns, but nothing too lucrative,” Andrew replied. “You can earn much more in dungeon cities. And if you want to make connections with the nobility, the only option you have here is the House of Nernas. They aren’t bad by any means, mind, but...”

According to Andrew-san, the House of Nernas did a perfectly adequate job of ruling this domain, but it wasn’t a powerful house, nor was it very wealthy; in that sense, the viscount wasn’t an ideal ally for adventurers.

“Your friends are a special case,” said Bled, “and that’s a good thing for all of us. The new supply of precious wood—that was their doing, wasn’t it”

“...Oh, you knew that this entire time?” I asked.

“Simon-san’s workshop may look like the source, but anyone with a keen eye knows the truth,” Bled replied. “There are a few folks who’re jealous, but that’s no problem. Only a fool would dare stir up the wrath of the woodworkers of Laffan.”

Bled-san explained that all of Laffan would unite to punish anyone who attacked Touya-kun’s party in an attempt to cut off the supply of precious wood. But he added that no one was daring or stupid enough to try anything like that, which was a relief to hear. *Actually, though, I should probably warn Touya-kun’s party just in case. They’ve helped me out a lot. Haruka-san is a cautious person, so she’s probably already aware of the dangers, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.*

“By the by, Tomi, you’re a grown man, aint’cha?” Bled asked.

“Uh, yeah, technically,” I replied. “But I still have a lot to learn.”

“I sure wish *my* apprentices were as humble as you are!” said Bled. “None of them are especially skilled, but they all think that they are! I bet Gantz has a hard time coming up with anything to teach an apprentice as skilled and humble as you!” He laughed and thumped me on the back.

Bled-san apparently had three apprentices at his workshop, but I’d never met them; he didn’t bring them to the Slumbering Bear. He complained about them

to us all the time, but the fact that he was generally drunk when doing so made it hard for me to evaluate how skilled his apprentices really were.

Once, when I'd asked Bled-san why he never brought his apprentices along, he'd yelled that he didn't want to lose his seat here. The Slumbering Bear doubled as a dining hall for people in the surrounding neighborhoods. It was something of a local secret, so I probably would have never discovered it if Touya-kun hadn't told me about it. There weren't many seats available at the dining hall, so I understood why the regulars wanted to keep this place a secret.

Bled-san was still ranting about his apprentices. "They don't even know how to care for their tools! When I was an apprentice, I spent a lot of time just sharpening, y'know?"

*I've already heard all this so many times, Bled-san. I really wish drunk people wouldn't repeat the same stories over and over.* My Drunkard skill helped me stay sober, but it also meant that I had to listen to drunk people while clearheaded. The best strategy was just to nod and pretend to listen, but drunk people would sometimes notice you weren't paying attention if they weren't too drunk, so I had to be careful.

"...Uh, anyhow, we were talking 'bout you, weren't we, Tomi? You got any plans to strike out on your own as a smith?" Bled asked. "It's not like Gantz would be opposed, right?"

"Yeah, yeah," I mumbled, then caught myself and said, "Oh, I mean, actually, I plan to continue working as Gantz-san's apprentice for the foreseeable future."

"Do you, now?" asked Andrew. "I imagine you'd be fine on your own considering how skilled you are."

Andrew-san sounded a bit confused, but I shook my head and explained, "I would probably be fine, but I wouldn't be able to earn much money. Gantz-san told me that I could claim the mincer as my own product, but..."

"You wouldn't have anything else you could sell, huh?" Andrew finished for me. "Mincers are damn convenient for turning meat scraps into a tasty meal, but I don't suppose you could sell a ton of 'em. You'd probably have to sell weapons and armor too, but that would put you in direct competition with Gantz..."

I did have some other ideas in mind, though. One was a noodle-making machine. I had dismissed that idea back when Touya-kun and Nao-kun had first suggested it to me, but on reflection, it wasn't a bad idea. Noodles didn't seem to be that common in this world, but dried noodles were super convenient, and orc meat being so easy to get in Laffan, you could probably make something similar to tonkotsu ramen. Depending on how I approached it, I could probably create demand for noodle-making machines.

Another product that might serve as a decent source of income was an ice cream machine. I couldn't mass-produce something like that, but if I sold just one or two units per year, priced as luxury products, I could probably live a decent life. *Hmm, what else is there? I guess I could also try selling high-quality, made-to-order weapons—*

"I don't imagine you plan on moving to a different town, Tomi?" Andrew asked.

"Huh?" I'd been deep in thought, but I hastily nodded. "Oh, that's right, I'm not going to leave Laffan in the near future. I assume it would be really hard to start a new business in a different town, right?"

"Sure would be, assuming you don't have any connections," Andrew replied. "It'd be a different story in a town with no other blacksmith, but there's usually a reason for that..."

"Ugh. I wouldn't want to end up in a town like that even if I got invited," I said.

*Depending on the place, the previous blacksmith might have fled because of some incident in the past, or it might just be impossible to make a living as a blacksmith there... One way or another, places like that sound like land mines.*

"I imagine you could make a respectable living here in Laffan if you were to divide orders with Gantz, but then there'd be no point in opening your own shop," said Andrew. "It's not as if the population of adventurers in this town will suddenly increase either."

Andrew-san nodded to himself, seemingly convinced of his own reasoning, but Bled-san chimed in with an objection.

“Nah, there is one good reason Tomi might want to become an independent blacksmith. An independent man always has an easier time finding a wife. Any plans in that regard, Tomi?”

“A wife? Well, my race is a bit of an issue...”

“Ah, yeah, it slipped my mind. There are hardly any other dwarfs here in Laffan,” said Bled. “Are there any girls back in your hometown that you like? You make more’n enough to support any girl who’d be willing to come here and live with you, don’tcha?”

“Uh, unfortunately, nobody comes to mind.”

In reality, of course, I hadn’t been born in a dwarf village or settlement. Female dwarfs were apparently a bit short and chubby, but unlike some female dwarfs in fiction, they didn’t have beards. My tastes in girls had changed a bit due to becoming a dwarf, along with a few other factors, but I still wouldn’t have wanted to marry a bearded woman. I’d also learned that they didn’t look like lolis, nor could they be mistaken for children, so certain kinds of guys would be disappointed, but personally, I’d felt relieved.

“Do any adventurers come to mind, Andrew?” Bled asked.

“If you’re asking about female dwarfs, then I don’t think there are any in Laffan,” Andrew replied. “But I don’t work as a receptionist, so I’m not absolutely sure.”

I had yet to see any female dwarfs myself. Adventurers showed up at my master’s store as customers, but most of them were humans.

“I s’pose that means Gantz is responsible for finding Tomi a wife, huh?” Bled-san paused in thought with a serious expression on his face. “Probably won’t be easy.”

*Do masters really have to act as matchmakers for their apprentices? Is that normal?*

“Yep,” Bled replied. “You don’t have any parents living, do ya? That’s when it becomes the master’s responsibility.”

“Um, well, I haven’t even worked for a full year as Gantz-san’s apprentice...”

Bled-san looked extremely surprised at that. “Oh, right, I plumb forgot—you’re so skilled... Well, now I’m not so sure. A master has a responsibility toward an apprentice who started working for him at a young age, no doubt about it, but...”

*Well, I guess it’d be nice if someone helped me find a wife, but it’d also be pretty awkward. And anyway, there aren’t any female dwarfs in Laffan, so it’s not like I have a specific girl in mind. Ugh...*

Unfortunately for me, girls of other races weren’t a realistic option either. I was a former human, so I was definitely capable of feeling attraction to people of other races—the girls in Nao-kun’s party, like Haruka-san, all looked cute to me—but apparently that made me a minority among dwarfs, and the same applied to the other races, so couples consisting of a dwarf and a nondwarf were supposedly almost nonexistent, although mixed couples consisting of some combination of humans, elves, and beastfolk were apparently more common. *Is it a height thing? I sure hope not.* There was the option of moving to a region where dwarfs were more common, but that would be extremely difficult; even moving to another country back on Earth would have been easy in comparison.

Bled-san hastily tried to cheer me up. “R-Relax, I’m sure you’ll meet the perfect girl eventually! Don’t let it get to you!” Apparently he’d assumed that I was crestfallen because I’d gone silent for a moment.

Andrew-san nodded. “Yeah. And I’ll keep an eye out for dwarven adventurers.”

“Thanks! I’m sure I’ll meet someone eventually, yep!”

*Okay, for now, I’m just gonna drink and forget about everything. I have a lot of respect for my master, but I’m pretty sure it won’t be easy even for him to find a dwarf girl, so there’s no point in thinking about it too much. Dwarfs have longer lifespans than humans, anyway, so I can afford to chill for a while. I’ll give it more thought in the future.*

I stood and brought my mug to the counter to order more ale. I had no idea at the time that my assumptions would be proved wrong in much less than a few years.

## Side Story—Jade Wings: Episode 5

We lived in a feudal society, so the local lord was the key factor that determined whether a place was comfortable to live. Knowing that, we'd done some research ahead of time, gathering info about the House of Nernas, and gotten conflicting reports. Some people thought that the viscount was dangerous and the viscount was a tyrant; others thought it was a very comfortable place to live, and the viscount genuinely cared for his citizens. We had been confused by these polar opposite opinions, but when we spent a few days inside the viscounty in a town called Sarstedt, the locals didn't seem all that oppressed.

After doing some more research, we learned that people's opinions of the viscounty depended on the period of time they had in mind. The ones who had a bad impression of the House of Nernas were assuming things were the same as they had been under the viscount two generations ago, and the ones who had a good impression were thinking of the current lord. That was a big relief to learn, and it helped us make the decision to travel onward. Still, we'd never been to Laffan, our final destination, so we were a bit nervous when we entered the town, but...

"This honestly seems pretty peaceful," I said.

"Mm. It has a much nicer atmosphere than Kiura," said Sae.

"Indeed. On the other hand, it doesn't seem like a place where we're likely to earn a great deal of money, but on the other, I imagine it would be a pleasant place to live," said Kaho.

Over a year had passed since we were transported to this world. We had accidentally ended up in some dangerous places a couple of times and survived, so by now, we could kind of judge the atmosphere of a town, and Laffan didn't set off any alarm bells. It felt different from towns full of adventurers, where it seemed like everyone was always in a rush, but it didn't feel like the kind of small community that was wary of outsiders either. Plus, it looked pretty clean.

Kaho was right that Laffan seemed like a pleasant place to live, and my first impression was pretty positive.

“If I had to choose somewhere to settle down and retire, a town like this would be perfect,” said Sae.

“Mm. We yet have our youth, but our strength will decline with the passing of the years, so it would be wise to avoid dangerous towns,” said Kaho.

“Yeah, I agree,” I said. “But first we’ll have to save up for retirement, so it’s important for us to find out whether we can even earn enough money here.”

Our primary objective was to meet the Meikyo Shisui party, but we wouldn’t be able to stay in Laffan for very long if we couldn’t work. Even if you had savings, they’d disappear in no time what with the costs of everyday life.

“True,” said Kaho. “My weapon could definitely use an upgrade.”

“I think Yoshino needs a new weapon first. She’s still using the first one she purchased,” said Sae. “I barely use my weapon, so I don’t need a new one.”

“Hmm. I’m fine with my current weapon for now, but it would be nice to have something better,” I said.

Kaho had started out with a makeshift sword, but the first real greatsword she’d bought was a high-quality weapon made of steel, and it still actively contributed to our adventures. My mace, however, wasn’t all that great. Large monsters like orcs were no match for Kaho’s greatsword and Sae’s magic, so it wasn’t like I really *needed* to use my mace, but I still wanted a good weapon just in case. There was something else that we needed much more at the moment, though.

“To be honest, before we upgrade any of our weapons, I think we should get our hands on better armor,” I said. “We’ve been wearing soft leather armor for mobility, but I don’t think that’s gonna cut it in the future...”

Our main source of income to date had been orcs, so we had prioritized armor that helped us dodge attacks; the plan was for me to heal anyone who messed up. But if we wanted to fight monsters other than orcs, we definitely needed proper armor.

“Hmm. Your logic is sound, Yoshino,” said Kaho. “But what, pray tell, do you have in mind for the next step? Surely you aren’t suggesting something like full plate?”

“You could probably wear full plate armor just fine, Kaho,” said Sae, “but I don’t think Yoshino or I could handle something like that.”

“Nor could I—or rather, it isn’t an acceptable option! Not in the slightest!”

I understood why Kaho hated the idea. She was capable of swinging around a greatsword that was as long as she was tall, so she could probably still move around just fine even in full plate, but it wouldn’t look cute.

“Chain mail should work just fine for us,” I said. “Oh, and we need good boots and gloves. Injuries to the arms and legs can be fatal, after all.”

“Indeed. We cannot explore uncharted territories without first making the necessary preparations,” said Kaho. “I’m not sure when we’ll be able to enter a dungeon, but we should probably be mindful of poison as well. Unlike you, Yoshino, neither Sae nor I have the Poison Resistance skill.”

“Mm. You could treat us with your Cure Poison, but not if we died instantly,” said Sae.

The two of them were completely right. As long as we focused on orcs, we didn’t have to worry about getting killed in one hit, but I had no idea if that applied to other monsters, and anyway, I couldn’t resurrect the dead.

“The one problem with chain mail is that we can’t afford any right now,” I said. “Decent-quality chain mail for all three of us would cost us an unbelievable amount of money!”

“Would it truly?” asked Kaho. “I know nothing of such things.”

“Yeah, apparently the high cost is because it’s hard to get the materials,” I said. “I asked for an estimate of the total cost back in Kiura, and...”

“...And?”

I lowered my voice for dramatic effect, and Kaho and Sae pressed their faces close to mine to hear my next words.

“The cheapest estimate ended up being a few million Rea!”

“Th-That would be enough to buy a mansion!” said Sae.

“And if we want good gloves and boots too, then they’ll cost hundreds of thousands of Rea!”

“In s-sooth? Were we to spend that amount of money, penury would be our only companion thereafter,” said Kaho.

We’d already saved up a decent amount of money, but nowhere near enough to afford that kind of equipment. Armor wasn’t a onetime purchase either; you also needed money for upkeep and repair fees. Weapons and armor were the kind of possessions that constantly drained your purse.

“Anyway, I hope we can earn a decent amount of money here,” I said. “But...”

“I’ve heard there aren’t many profitable quests on offer, so it might be difficult,” said Sae.

“Difficult for a greenhorn, perhaps, but for seasoned adventurers such as ourselves, it may be a different matter,” said Kaho. “Regardless, there’s no point in further discussion. Let’s head to the Adventurers’ Guild to discover the truth for ourselves.”



The Adventurers’ Guild in Laffan seemed like a nice place, although I had no idea how accurate that assessment was; there weren’t many people inside. I wasn’t sure if it was because of the time of the day, but I couldn’t see anyone who looked like an adventurer, and the receptionists didn’t seem to be busy, but none of those were necessarily bad things. The lack of adventurers inside the guildhall could just mean that everybody had work, and the fact that the receptionists weren’t busy meant that we could spend as much time as we wanted asking them questions.

“Unfortunately for us, it seems it is true—there aren’t many quests available here,” said Kaho.

“Yeah. And the quests that are available don’t pay well,” said Sae.

The two of them were inspecting a bulletin board mounted on the wall. As they’d said, there were a few quests available, but the rewards posted were

pretty meager. We weren't rookies anymore, so quests like these weren't really worth our time. I'd already expected it would be like this.

I glanced at the counter for a few seconds, then decided to talk to a receptionist who looked nice. "Hello. Would you happen to have some time to talk?"

The receptionist had been handling paperwork when I approached her, but she stopped and looked up at my party with a smile. "Of course. Is this your first time here?"

Given that Laffan wasn't a big town, she probably knew the faces of all the adventurers here.

"Yes. We arrived today," I said. "We plan to stay in town for a while, so we'll depend on your kindness."

"Greetings," said Kaho.

"Hello," said Sae.

I showed the receptionist our adventurer cards, and she raised her eyebrows slightly after checking them.

"Yoshino-san, Kaho-san, and Sae-san, correct? My name is Diola. It's a pleasure to meet you. But I must say, very rarely do Rank 3 adventurers decide to travel to Laffan."

"Really? This town seems like a nice place..."

"Thank you, but it's exactly as you can probably surmise from the state of the bulletin board." Diola looked pointedly in that direction.

It was true that there was a lot of free space left. *Hmm. Considering the number of quests and the rewards, I guess it's hard for higher-rank adventurers to stick around for any length of time, huh?*

"Mm. May we infer, then, that it is difficult for adventurers to ply their trade in this town?" Kaho asked.

"Not precisely," Diola replied. "It is possible to make a respectable living by gathering materials—or, if you're strong enough, by slaying monsters. But it isn't easy to achieve that level of competence in this town. To be more

specific..."

According to Diola-san, none of the monsters in this area were the right level for adventurers who'd graduated from rookie status. *Is Laffan like a place in a game that only has enemies level 2 and below or level 6 and above? So if level 3 adventurers want to level up efficiently, it'd be better for them to go somewhere else and fight monsters at their level, and then there would be no reason for them to come back in the future, right? Hmm...*

I'd wondered if there might be other things that would attract high-ranking adventurers to Laffan, but apparently that wasn't the case either. Diola-san explained that this was a very rural area compared to the rest of the kingdom. The town had a nice atmosphere, but travel was really hard in this world, so there weren't any good reasons for people to come all the way to Laffan.

"Oh, also, we heard rumors that a dungeon was discovered near here recently," I said. "What about the dungeon—could we make money there?"

I was just testing the waters, but Diola-san shook her head. "Unfortunately, it seems that dungeon isn't a very good source of money, so I doubt that it will attract adventurers. Did your party come all the way here in the hopes of dungeon-diving?"

"It piqued our interest," said Kaho. "We've yet to venture into a dungeon here or elsewhere. What kind of place is it?"

"Um, I'm afraid that for a variety of reasons, I cannot provide you with any details," said Diola. "And regardless, you have to be at least Rank 4 in order to enter a dungeon. Your party hasn't yet achieved that rank, so—"

"We understand perfectly," said Sae. "We were curious because we couldn't gather any detailed information in other towns, so we just wanted to ask about it here."

I couldn't imagine why info about a dungeon would be kept secret, but it was true that we had no intention of entering one in the near future.

Now Diola-san was looking at us with doubt in her eyes. "...To be clear, it would be in your best interests to stay away from the dungeon entirely. The monsters that can be found in the area surrounding the entrance are all very

dangerous. A larger party composed of high-rank adventurers almost died in a battle against just one of them.”

“High-rank? Would that be the Meikyo Shisui party?” I asked.

All of a sudden, the smile on Diola-san’s face looked pasted on. She was still smiling, but it was like that was just a sheet of paper over her real expression.

“I’m sorry, but I am not permitted to speak of such matters.”

*Huh? Was that a bureaucratic response or something? Did she become suspicious of us all of a sudden?*

“D-Do you mean to say we can’t inquire about the Meikyo Shisui party?” Kaho asked.

“Correct. I cannot provide you with personal information about other adventurers.” Diola-san was *still* smiling, but her voice had a businesslike tone now.

We hurried to explain ourselves.

“Um, sorry, we actually happen to be acquaintances of theirs,” said Sae. “It’s Nao-kun, Tomoya-kun, and Haruka-san, right?”

“Natsuki and Yuki ought to be with them as well,” said Kaho.

Diola-san’s gaze got a little softer and less suspicious after we brought up specific names, but now she was looking a little confused. “A human, elf, and a beastwoman?” she asked, tilting her head. “Yours is also a mixed-race party, so it would certainly make sense if there were a connection, but none of them have ever mentioned you that I can recall. Are you really acquaintances of theirs?”

*Oh, so is Haruka on good terms with this lady? A normal adventurer and receptionist wouldn’t talk about personal stuff, right? Hmm...*

“We promise we really are,” said Sae, “but we only talked with them occasionally, so they probably wouldn’t mention us in a casual conversation.”

“Indeed. Nor would we speak of them without a reason,” said Kaho.

“I see,” said Diola. “I understand what you mean, but even so...”

Diola-san stayed tight-lipped. The Adventurers' Guild at Kiura was a lot looser and more open. I wasn't sure if that was because of Diola-san's more professional mindset or if there was something special about Haruka-san's party.

Diola-san thought about it for a little bit, then shook her head. "In any case, I have to confirm directly with the Meikyo Shisui party before I can say anything. They happen to be away from Laffan on a quest at the moment, so I can't convey any information to them."

"Oh, I guess we've got bad timing," I said. "But they are coming back here?"

"Of course," said Diola.

It wasn't unusual for adventurers to move to different towns on a whim, but Diola-san seemed pretty sure that the Meikyo Shisui party would return to Laffan. I glanced at Kaho and Sae for their opinions, and they nodded back at me.

"Okay. We'll just wait until they get back," I said. "By the way, can you recommend any inns? A safe place that serves good food would be ideal, but..."

"I would recommend an inn called The Slumbering Bear," said Diola. "Haruka-san's party stayed there in the past, and it seemed to satisfy their needs, so I'm sure that your party will have a good time as well."

"Hmm. An inn that they found satisfactory ought to be perfectly fine for us as well," said Kaho.

Yep. Some of the cheap inns in this world were really dirty, but we probably wouldn't need to worry about an inn where Haruka-san's party had stayed, so there was only one problem left.

"We'll have to earn money to cover lodging fees," said Sae. "It's important that we find a quest that's an efficient source of money."

"Mm, that's true," I said. "What kind of quests has Haruka-san's party—uh, actually, is it okay for us to ask about this?"

"Yes. It's perfectly all right for me to share information that you could easily discover yourselves," said Diola. "At certain times of year, I seem to recall that

they harvested dindels..."

Diola-san gave Sae a meaningful look, but we didn't know enough about this area to get what she was trying to imply, so Sae just smiled back. But apparently our lack of a reaction wasn't unusual, because Diola-san continued to offer us more info.

"For Rank 3 adventurers, orcs would probably be a good source of money around this time of year. Defeating them requires a certain level of care, but their materials sell well, and you can easily find them in the deep woods."

"Orcs, huh? Well, we have a lot of experience hunting orcs, so that'd be fine for us," I said.

Even if there weren't any good quests in Laffan, we could earn enough money to cover our needs. I breathed a sigh of relief, but now Diola-san was looking at us with surprise.

"Really? Adventurer parties composed of young girls tend to prefer to avoid orcs—although, come to think of it, I heard of a party from Kiura that has come to prominence recently. If I recall correctly, they were called the Orc Ea—"

"Our party name is Jade Wings!" I exclaimed. "That's the official name of our party!"

"Absolutely! We will never accept such a disgraceful name!" said Kaho.

"Please don't tell anyone else about that other name!" said Sae.

All of us had drawn closer to Diola-san to make our opinions clear, and she leaned back a little, then nodded. "O-Oh, very well. Of course, I've heard rumors about your aliases as well—"

*"Those are also unofficial! I don't like mine at all!" I don't know what Kaho and Sae actually think of their aliases, but I really want to get rid of my current one!*

"Is that so, Yoshino-san? If I recall correctly, you are the Angeli—"

I stuck out my hand. "Please don't say it! Rumors can spread easily, so please keep it to yourself!" There weren't any other adventurers inside of the guild building, but even a small leak would ruin things forever.

“V-Very well. If you don’t like your alias, then as an employee of the guild, I won’t use it,” said Diola. “However, adventurers invent aliases for one another, so there’s nothing I can do to stop other adventurers from referring to you by that name.”

“Ugh. Yeah, I figured as much. But can I get a different alias?”

Diola-san gave me a playful smile and proposed an idea. “There are adventurers who give themselves aliases and attempt to disseminate them, but the majority of those attempts don’t end well. Ultimately, such aliases are almost always used by other adventurers to mock the ones who invented them. Knowing that, would you still like to give it a try? It might work if you’re strong enough to earn two aliases...”

I forced myself to smile too as I rejected her suggestion. “U-Um, nah, that would be a bit too embarrassing.”

It would be nice to get a new, less embarrassing alias, but having to use something I’d come up with myself would be humiliating...

“Cast aside your hopes and dreams, Yoshino,” said Kaho. “You cannot escape the alias of Sadist.”

“Why did you leave out the Angelic part?! B-By the way, what aliases have the members of Haruka-san’s party gotten?”

I’d hoped that I wasn’t alone in my humiliation, but Diola-san smiled awkwardly and said, “As far as I am aware, no one in the Meikyo Shisui party has an alias.”

Sae shook her head and shrugged at me. “It looks like you’re alone, Yoshino.”

I ignored her and focused my attention on Diola-san. “Why not, with all the things they’ve accomplished?! Isn’t that weird?!”

I was pretty sure that some of the rumors about them were false, but I was also pretty sure that they’d genuinely done stuff that was rumor-worthy. My party had only become famous in one town, and we’d still gotten aliases out of it. Stories about Haruka-san’s party had spread all the way to other towns, so it made no sense to me that none of them had aliases.

"I imagine it's because they so seldom interact with other adventurers," said Diola. "Other adventurers do respect their strength and accomplishments, but the Meikyo Shisui party isn't precisely popular. They have, however, become very familiar to the people of Laffan..."

"I see." *D-Does this mean that it's up to me to come up with a wonderful alias for them? I'm sure that people will forget about my alias if somebody else's stands out a lot more!*

"...Just to be clear, life in Laffan will become very uncomfortable for you should you make enemies of the Meikyo Shisui party. They do, after all, have numerous acquaintances who aren't adventurers."

Diola-san was giving me a skeptical look, but I genuinely would never have dreamed of antagonizing Haruka-san's party. I shook my head as I desperately tried to explain myself. "O-Oh, ha ha, don't worry—I wasn't thinking of anything like that at all, believe me!"

We were new to Laffan, but we weren't foolish enough to make enemies of local adventurers who were renowned for their strength and skill. Anyway, all of our classmates were potentially dangerous given the kinds of skills that had been available to us, so Haruka-san's party was one of the few groups of people who we could trust based on their personalities. However...

"Lies, Yoshino. Your face proclaims all too clearly that you wish to tarnish others' names as your own was tarnished," said Kaho.

"Mm. She was probably thinking of secretly spreading embarrassing aliases for everyone in the Meikyo Shisui party," said Sae.

"No way! I just wanted to spread some wonderful aliases for them, so—oh."

My allies had both stabbed me in the back, so I ended up accidentally blurting out my honest thoughts.

Diola-san sighed. "I don't imagine teasing would upset them, but it would be wise to avoid doing something unforgivable. It's hard to silence rumors after they have spread."

"O-Oh, ha ha, yeah, I'll keep that in mind," I said. "I've experienced that firsthand..."

I hadn't chosen "Angelic Sadist" for myself, and my party hadn't chosen "Orc Eaters" either, but those names had gotten to be pretty well-known in Kiura. We had tried to spread our official party name—Jade Wings—but we hadn't been very successful.

"Mm. Please do be careful," said Diola. "I will remind you that the Adventurers' Guild has an official stance of neutrality."

*So what you're saying is, the guild will favor adventurers who bring in more profits, right? Okay, thanks for the warning.* All of us nodded firmly to show that we got what she meant by emphasizing the words "official stance."



The inn that Diola-san had recommended to us would have been hard to find without directions. The innkeeper wasn't sociable or friendly at all, and lodging wasn't cheap, but the rooms were big and clean, so we decided to stay there. Beforehand, we'd spent a lot of time walking around town trying to get more information about Meikyo Shisui, but...

"It seems the rumors we heard back in Kiura were, in the main, accurate," said Kaho.

"Yeah," said Sae, "some details were a bit different, but their accomplishments were real."

Specifically, we'd heard that Laffan had been terrorized by a disease and that Meikyo Shisui had leaped into action and cured it. As it turned out, the "disease" had actually been an infestation of mushrooms, and it hadn't affected everyone in Laffan. Also, it was less like Meikyo Shisui had personally "cured" the infestation and more like they'd just accepted a quest to gather the materials for the fungicide. It was a fact that things could have turned out a lot worse if Haruka-san and the rest hadn't been around, though.

The other rumors were pretty similar. A lot of people in Laffan were grateful to Meikyo Shisui. *I guess Diola-san wasn't joking when she said life in Laffan would get uncomfortable if we made enemies of them, huh?* Some people back in Kiura had really adored me, but only adventurers, and I hadn't exactly been happy about the way they'd adored me...

"Did either of you get any other info that caught your interest?" I asked.

"I'm curious about the fact that they apparently pay daily visits to a temple," said Sae.

"Oh, that? I was given to understand that they merely visit a temple during their morning jogs," said Kaho. "It's probably nothing of consequence."

I was a bit surprised—Haruka-san and her friends didn't seem like especially spiritual people—but if they'd gone on morning jogs back on Earth, they might have followed a path that took them by a shrine. In that case, it wouldn't have been unusual for them to make a habit of visiting every day.

"Actually, it sounds like they visit temples frequently even outside of their jogging routine," said Sae. "There were rumors back in Kiura that the Meikyo Shisui party made generous donations to orphanages. This might be related to that."

"Perhaps they came to religion during their time in this world," said Kaho. "A god revealed his presence to us, so it would be natural enough, but..."

"I'm not so sure about that," I said. "They seem like pragmatic people."

But that was just an assumption, since I didn't know them well. It would make sense to me if they were donating out of sympathy for orphans, or because they'd learned that temples could give you blessings with actual effects, like temples in games. Magic existed in this world, so maybe visiting temples had real benefits.

"Come to think of it, we ourselves have yet to pay a visit to a temple," said Kaho.

"Yeah. Should we make a visit tomorrow?" I asked.

"I think that would be wise," Kaho replied. "We have yet to see the interior of a temple, so it wouldn't hurt to visit at least once."

Our residence back in Kiura hadn't been anywhere near a temple, so we'd never had an opportunity or a reason to visit one. Apparently some temples would provide healing for injuries and diseases, but we'd never needed anything like that.

“Okay, let’s go with that plan for tomorrow,” I said. “For now, we should probably go eat dinner—this inn serves breakfast and dinner.”

“Mm. Let’s go at once,” said Kaho. “Trouble might befall us if we’re late.”

“Yep. I don’t want to deal with drunk people,” said Sae.

I didn’t really stand out much, but Kaho and Sae did as a beastgirl and an elf. They hadn’t dealt with any bigotry yet, but during our early days in Kiura, a lot of drunk guys had tried to approach us. Fortunately, they’d been no match for Kaho’s Peerless Strength skill, and after a while, they’d stopped trying to bother us. Actually, though, I wasn’t sure if that was because of how easily Kaho had chased them away...or because our aliases had become well-known.

But nobody in Laffan knew anything about us yet. I didn’t want a repeat of what we’d experienced back in Kiura. It would be best to avoid trouble if we could, so we headed down to the dining hall on the first floor to finish eating before drunk people started to show up.



The first floor of the inn had a pub that also served as a dining hall for the guests. In fact, it seemed like the pub was the innkeeper’s main business; there was a chance that the inn itself was just an extra source of income. Even though the sun had just set, the dining hall was already almost completely full, but other than us, only a few of the customers were actual guests. There weren’t that many rooms available in the first place, but even taking that into account, the number of guests was still small.

But everything sort of started making sense to me after I saw the customers in the dining hall. None of them looked like adventurers, so most of them were probably people who lived nearby—people who didn’t have any reason to stay at the inn. Nobody was drinking at a crazy pace either, so the dining hall had a comfortable atmosphere, and...

“...The other patrons don’t seem to be paying us any mind,” said Kaho.

“Yeah, you’re right,” said Sae. “That’s a good thing, but...”

The other customers had glanced at us when we’d first arrived, so we definitely stood out, but they’d immediately looked away and resumed drinking

like nothing had happened. There weren't any other elves or beastfolk here, so it didn't seem like people would be used to the sight of different races, but...

"Ah, there is one dwarf here," said Kaho. "Is it thanks to him that everyone is accustomed to the sight of nonhumans?"

"Uh, nah, I don't think so," I said.

As Kaho had said, there was a group drinking in one corner of the dining hall, and one of the guys was a dwarf. I was a bit curious about him, but my party knew how uncomfortable it felt when other people stared at us, so I looked away from him and urged Kaho and Sae to move on too.

"Anyway, this works out for us," I said. "We can enjoy our dinner in peace, so let's hurry up and eat."

"Yeah, I can already smell something delicious from here," said Sae. "We may be able to look forward to dinners at this inn."

It seemed like you could sit anywhere aside from the counter, so we talked to the innkeeper and got our dinners from him, then took the food with us to an empty table.

"Th-This looks quite good," said Kaho. "Considering the cost of lodging, my expectations were low, but..."

"There's more than enough too," said Sae. "It looks good, but this might be too much for me."

The innkeeper had served us dinner without so much as muttering a single word. Each one consisted of six large meatballs, two round loaves of nut bread, some vegetables that looked like garlic scapes, and a bowl of soup. There was more than enough food for the money we'd paid, and the food also looked appealing and smelled nice. I had a feeling that our breakfast tomorrow morning would be simpler to offset the cost of dinner, but even something like a bowl of thin soup wouldn't bother me if that was the trade-off for a fancy dinner.

"They serve mincemeat here... We could never get any back in Kiura," I pointed out.

“Kiura always had big slabs of meat from orcs, so—actually, yeah, that is a little strange,” said Sae. “With so much orc hunting going on, there was a lot of meat that would’ve been suitable for mincing.”

Kiura exported a lot of orc meat to other parts of the kingdom, and valuable cuts of meat that were in good shape were probably the best options for that. Sae and I looked at each other as we pondered what people in Kiura did with parts that weren’t suitable for export, but Kaho interrupted us by grabbing a cup.

“Let us save such speculations for another occasion. Food is best when warm!”

“Yeah, that’s a good point,” I said. “All right, let’s celebrate the fact that we made it safely to Laffan. Cheers!”

“Cheers!” Kaho and Sae exclaimed in unison.

We raised our cups and clinked them together. The only thing in them was water, though. We’d all agreed that alcohol was a harmful substance that couldn’t be consumed in moderation, so we would never drink it as long as we could get clean water, and my Purification spell made any water safe to drink.

We had been able to avoid upset stomachs after I’d started using Purification on the water that we got at dining halls and drew from wells. The spell had become an essential part of our daily routine. Kaho and Sae had also learned the Robust skill, so there was probably no need to worry at this point, but there was no good reason for me to stop casting Purification on water.

“Let’s start with the meatballs,” said Kaho. “Mm. They’re not entirely meat, but they’re good nevertheless.”

“Considering the price of meals at this inn, I’d be surprised if the meatballs were actually solid meat,” I said. “Let’s see...”

The meatballs looked like they would be hard to take a bite out of, so I sliced one of them into four pieces and lifted one to my mouth. *Oh, this is a lot softer than I thought it would be, but it still has the chewy texture of meat, and the juices are really flavorful. I think this is orc, but I can taste some vegetables and crushed beans too. Sure, the vegetables and beans are basically padding out the*

*meat, but they're still pretty good. Yeah, I like this.*

Sae ate one of her meatballs and nodded to herself, then transferred the remaining three over to Kaho's plate. "This is a lot lighter than I thought it would be. I still don't think I can eat all of them, though."

Six meatballs seemed like they would be too much for me as well, so I moved one of mine to Kaho's plate. By this point, there was a mountain of meatballs in front of her, but I figured she wouldn't have any problem, and sure enough, she stuck her fork in and ate them with gusto.

The vegetables that looked like garlic scapes were probably a side dish meant as a palate cleanser. They were crunchy, but they didn't have much flavor. The nut bread had exactly the right level of firmness, and the light soup was delicious too. I had asked Diola-san to recommend us an inn that served good food, but this was so much better than I'd expected. There were probably other places that served better food at higher prices, but 740 Rea per night for three people with breakfast and dinner included was super cheap compared to anything we'd found in Kiura or Sarstedt.

"I'd be fine staying here for a while," I said.

"Indeed! I have no reservations whatsoever about this inn!" Kaho was grinning as she set to work on her third meatball. There were still seven on her plate. "This is more than enough to satisfy me!"

Sae had said the quantity was too much for her, but she seemed satisfied with the taste, so we all ended up enjoying ourselves, and we went to bed early to recover from our long journey.



Breakfast the next morning surprised us—in a good way. It wasn't anywhere near as gourmet as last night's dinner, but we got some rye bread with bowls of flavorful soup that had a lot of different stuff in it, so it was actually a satisfying meal. I was kind of worried about whether the innkeeper could actually stay in business serving this kind of food, but it was good for us as customers.

After we finished breakfast, we headed toward the temple that Haruka-san's party apparently visited all the time. We had passed it yesterday when we were

walking around town trying to get more info, so we found it again without any problems. It was a simple stone temple on the biggest plot of land in the general vicinity. As we stood outside, I glanced at Kaho and Sae.

“This is one of Advastlis-sama’s temples, right?” I asked.

“Indeed. You would do well to commit that fact to memory, Sae,” said Kaho. “This is not a theocracy as such, but gods and divine punishment do exist in this world, so one must be careful.”

“I understand,” said Sae. “And anyway, I’m not foolish enough to look down on others based on their faith.”

Kaho and I had the General Knowledge skill, so we knew as much as the average person in this world knew about religion, but Sae didn’t. It probably wouldn’t be a problem, but we gave her some advice before we headed inside.

“Hmm. It’s not lavishly decorated,” said Kaho.

The interior of the temple was simple in an attractive way, just like it looked on the outside. There were some decorative carvings on the pillars and on a pedestal in the middle, which had a statue of a god on it, but they weren’t, like, super elaborate. There weren’t any colorful frescoes or tapestries either. I had been hoping for something more exotic, so I was a bit disappointed, but—

Suddenly, we heard a voice behind us. “Instead of purchasing decorations, money should be used to bring salvation to the people.”

Sae and I hunched our shoulders up on instinct, while Kaho’s tail stood up straight. We turned around to see who had spoken to us and saw a priestess with a gentle smile.

“At any rate, I believe that is what Advastlis-sama would say. Would this happen to be your first visit?”

As adventurers, we were sensitive to the presence of other living beings, but this lady had caught us completely off guard. I tried to calm my racing heart as I answered, “Y-Yeah, we just arrived in Laffan. Nice to meet you!”

“The temple’s doors are open to all. My sincere wish is for it to be a place where people with money to spare can provide for the less fortunate.”

The priestess smiled at us and turned toward the statue of the god, but she was actually looking at a donation box in front of the pedestal. *O-Oh, okay, I get the idea.*

“I-I suppose we ought to pray while we’re here,” said Kaho. “We are, however, unfamiliar with your customs...”

“Feel free to pray however you please. It’s the thought that counts.”

*Whew. I’m glad that we don’t have to pray in any specific way. But is it just me or did she imply that donations matter more than actual prayers? Oh well. I guess it would be disrespectful if I didn’t pray when visiting a temple. I took out my purse and looked inside. I didn’t have much money on me. Hmm. A silver coin probably wouldn’t be enough, would it? That wouldn’t even buy a meal, after all. Instead, I took out a large silver coin. Kaho and Sae were holding large silver coins as well, so it seemed like we’d all had similar thoughts. We glanced at each other to see who wanted to go first, and Kaho stepped forward.*

“I suppose I’ll be the first.”

She gently tossed the coin into the donation box, then closed her eyes and pressed her palms together. She must’ve decided to pray in the way that she was most familiar with as a Japanese person.

But right after she’d started to pray, her tail stood up straight again.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” Sae asked quietly.

Kaho’s eyes snapped wide open. Instead of answering Sae’s question, she just stood there blinking. She took a deep breath, then got close to us so we could whisper.

“...You’ll understand once you pray. Don’t make a commotion.”

“I-If you say so, Kaho,” I said. “I’ll go next.”

The priestess was watching us, so we didn’t have time to discuss things in detail. I copied Kaho and put my hands together, and...

“Your current level is Level 17. You need to gain 6,510 EXP in order to level up.”

I almost screamed in surprise when I heard that voice in my head all of a

sudden, but I somehow managed to keep quiet. *What was that just now?! Or maybe I should ask, how did you manage to not let out a scream, Kaho?! I almost failed to keep mine in, and I at least had advance warning!* I glanced at her, and when she saw my expression, she nodded, looking very satisfied with herself. *Okay, yeah, she definitely wanted to see my reaction.*

I stayed silent and rubbed Kaho's head to get back at her. Sae seemed a bit confused by the way the two of us were acting, but she still decided to pray after me. *Now then, how will Sae react? Oh, she just hunched up her shoulders? Hmm.*

When Sae was finished, she turned around with a smile on her face, but it was obvious that she was trying to hide her shock. Kaho and I put our hands on her shoulders and looked toward the exit to indicate that it was time for all of us to leave.

While we were praying, the priestess must've gone to stand against a wall. On the way out, I said with an awkward laugh, "Um, thank you for your time today."

She smiled kindly. "Feel free to visit again any time you like, and may the gods bless you."

Even as the priestess was talking to us, Sae pushed Kaho and me to hurry us along, and we swiftly left the temple.



All of us stayed silent for a while after we'd left the temple, but then Sae glared at Kaho and burst out, "Gosh, why didn't you tell me ahead of time what would happen when I prayed?!"

Kaho just tilted her head and shrugged. "I enjoyed the surprise and wished for you to have the same experience. To spoil a game is an unforgivable sin."

"We're not in a game!" Sae snapped. "Face facts!"

I nodded deeply. "Yeah, I was really surprised—I almost screamed. Don't play tricks on us, Kaho!"

But Sae glared at me too. "You're just as guilty, Yoshino! You could also have

warned me!"

"I mean, I would have sounded like a crazy person if I'd told you all of a sudden that I heard a voice in my head, right? It would have been really hard to explain things concisely."

"Indeed. Likewise, levels and experience points are topics I could hardly bring up casually."

"I suppose that makes sense, but the reasoning still doesn't sit well with me," said Sae.

*To be honest, Sae, all we could have told you at the time was that something strange happened. It's true that Kaho could have tried to give a better warning than "You'll understand once you pray," but I'm just as guilty, so let's put this topic behind us.*

"More importantly, let's make sure the same thing happened to all of us," I said. "Both of you heard a voice in your heads talking about your levels and experience points, right?"

"Yeah," said Sae "I was told that my level is 17 and that I have around six thousand experience points."

"To be more precise, we were told the number of experience points we need to level up," said Kaho. "At any rate, I was also told that my level is 17. And yours, Yoshino?"

"Yeah, I'm also level 17. We've been adventuring together, so it makes sense that our levels are the same. Anyway, I guess this explains why Haruka-san's party visits that temple every day. They probably drop by to check their levels. We can do the same thing."

"Indeed," said Kaho. "But is it truly necessary to make offerings every time?"

"I don't know, but I feel like it's a good idea," I said.

"Yeah, I agree completely," said Sae.

I was pretty sure all of us were thinking about the priestess we'd met earlier. She was beautiful, and she seemed like she was probably nice too, but she also had a scary aura that made it seem like it would be wise to do whatever she

said. *Yeah, we should probably donate money if we're going to pray in front of her.* And it wouldn't go to waste if it helped us avoid divine punishment.

"I had no idea that there were levels in this world just like in a game," said Sae.

"Mm. The General Knowledge skill offered no clue, nor do I recall hearing anything from other adventurers," said Kaho.

"Yeah, same. I bet levels only apply to us and our classmates," I said. "We can confirm by asking Haruka-san's party, but for now, let's keep it to ourselves."

"Well said. A slip of the tongue could land us in an unpleasant situation," said Kaho.

"Yeah, we can just treat levels as a point of reference for now," said Sae. "I am kind of curious about whether our levels are high or low, however."

"Hmm. We've slain innumerable orcs, but that in itself may not be enough to accumulate experience points," said Kaho. "There can be no doubt that the evil god had a hand in this system, and that being the case, I wouldn't be surprised in the slightest if there were a trap lying in wait for us."

"I agree that the system probably isn't as simple as 'slay orcs, get points,' but I don't think there's anything malicious behind it either," I said. "The evil god did tell everyone in our class that effort would never betray us, right?"

Over a year had passed since our encounter with that god, so my memories were a bit hazy, but Kaho and Sae both nodded, so apparently I'd remembered right.

"Be that as it may, I'm not certain the word 'effort' applies to anything we've done thus far," said Kaho.

"It's true that we've only been working moderately hard, but I think we should stick to it," said Sae. "It's important to have some breathing room."

"Yeah, definitely," I said.

Stuff like exam preparation would fly by if you just worked hard for a few years, but we had to live the whole rest of our lives in this world, so it was important to work constantly, but also within reasonable limits. That said, it

would be a different story if we could get bonus points for achieving high leaderboard ranks.

“All right. We’ve accomplished our objective for the day,” I said. “What should we do next?”

“Get to work, of course,” said Sae. “I don’t want our current standard of living to go down.”

“Mm. Yesterday was more than sufficient time to recover,” said Kaho. “Our current inn is quite a bargain, but I’d like to avoid whittling down our savings if possible.”

We hadn’t rested for the whole day, but our attempts to gather info and rumors had basically doubled as sightseeing. Plus, our journey from Sarstedt to Laffan had been peaceful, so we weren’t tired at all. I completely agreed with Sae about maintaining our current standard of living, so...

“In that case, let’s head to the Adventurers’ Guild after we finish getting ready!”



At the guild, we got detailed info about where to find orcs. We headed toward the forests northwest of Laffan. Back in Kiura, you could hunt orcs relatively close to the highways, but based on what we’d heard at the guild, orcs in this domain were slain before they could get anywhere near the highways, so we had to venture deep into the woods if we wanted to find any.

Really, keeping the highways safe like that made perfect sense, so it was probably Kiura that was weird. Orcs weren’t a threat to my party, but for most commoners, they were the embodiment of death. If they were prowling the highways, people would stop traveling, which would be fatal to a lot of towns. The lord of Kiura had probably only let the orcs get near the highways because it didn’t really matter if the road between Sarstedt and Kiura was unsafe.

“This forest is rather dense,” said Kaho. “I suppose that’s to be expected, but it’s somewhat of a problem for us—we can’t use a bicycle trailer here.”

“There’s nothing we can do about it,” I said. “We have backpacks, so we should be able to carry at least one orc back with us. That should get us

anywhere from thirty to forty thousand Rea, and that's more than enough for a day's work."

"We could earn double if Kaho would carry one more orc herself," said Sae. "Our lodging is quite cheap, so we'd be able to save up a lot of money bringing in two orcs per day."

Sae's suggestion might have sounded ridiculous, but...

"True, I could do that, but wouldn't such a feat terrify anyone who witnessed it?" Kaho asked. She was legitimately strong enough to pull it off.

"I don't think that would necessarily be a bad thing," I replied. "We'd be able to leave a strong impression on the adventurers in Laffan right out of the gate."

Kaho was the size of a kid, so the sight of her carrying around an orc that weighed a few hundred kilos would be hard for anyone to forget, and there was a good chance it would prevent the worst kinds of adventurers from trying to pick a fight with us.

"I'm willing to do it should you judge it necessary, but I might end up with a strange alias as a result," said Kaho. "Should I disseminate my current alias as a preemptive measure?"

"...If any of the adventurers in Laffan came from Kiura, then I bet everyone would also find out about *my* alias," I said.

"You're doomed whether or not there's anyone like that in Laffan, Yoshino," said Sae. "I feel like your only options are to give up or to try spreading a new alias that you come up with yourself."

"B-Both options sound bad to me..."

"Perhaps you could ask Haruka-san and her friends to spread a more agreeable alias on your behalf?" Kaho asked. "They're warriors of renown in Laffan, so I'm sure they would have no trouble."

I hadn't even wanted an alias in the first place, but it was also true that it could protect me, so...

"Hmm. I guess that's not a bad idea if I really need a new one," I said.

"Let's talk about this some other time," said Sae. "More importantly, Diola-

san asked us to investigate the remains of that orc settlement if possible, but should we actually explore that far?"

When we'd dropped by the guild earlier, Diola-san had handed us a map covered in marks indicating where we might find orcs. One mark was supposedly the location of an orc nest that had already been destroyed, and she'd told us that she would really appreciate it if we could go check it out. It wasn't like she had specifically asked us to do that in exchange for the map, so we *could* ignore her request, but...

"Well, I don't see why not if it's not a hard place to reach," I said.

"I feel compelled to note that there is no reward," said Kaho.

"The reward is earning the guild's trust," I said. "We're newbies in Laffan, after all."

"Mm. It could be really bad for us if the guild got a negative impression of us," said Sae.

We could probably earn trust just by doing normal adventuring work, but it would definitely be worth it if we could earn trust faster by putting forth a little extra effort. If we wanted to continue living as adventurers, then we needed to earn the trust of the guild staff. They would probably still interact with us even if our reputation wasn't the best, but if we built personal relationships with at least a few of them, we would get benefits like advice, quests that paid well, and all other sorts of help that didn't break any rules. It could have a big impact on our lives and our odds of survival, so it wasn't something we could ignore.

"I don't mean to imply that I'm opposed to the idea as such, but bear in mind that our own safety ought to be our highest priority," said Kaho. "We need to be careful when exploring unfamiliar places."

"Of course," I said. "We'll be counting on your sixth sense for monsters."

Kaho gave me a strange look. "I'm not sure the phrase 'sixth sense' is wholly apt... Oh well. Rest assured, you can depend on me."

I tried to stay alert to our surroundings too, but Kaho was the best when it came to detecting monsters and determining how strong they were. Her abilities were really important for our party, especially since orcs weren't the

only monsters we could run into out here. We relied on her as we ventured deeper into the forests. After a while, we got pretty close to the location of the orc nest marked on our map, but...

“This looks completely abandoned,” I said.

“There’s grass everywhere,” said Sae. “I can see some traces of fire, but that’s about it.”

Supposedly there’d been a large orc nest here, but all we saw was a large open area. There were no trees but no orcs either.

“I suppose this ought to quell any concerns that the guild has,” said Kaho.

Based on what Diola-san had told us, the orcs got culled on a regular basis to ensure they wouldn’t get anywhere near the highways. The next cull was supposed to happen soon, but it was hard to tell how many orcs were left due to the fact that Haruka-san’s party slew them periodically, so Diola-san had been worried about the state of the forests.

“Yeah, but it’s not exactly a great outcome for us,” I said. “We could have made so much money if there’d been a bunch of orcs here.”

“Well, this is an open area that should be easy to fight in, so it would be convenient for us if we could *lure* some orcs here,” said Sae.

“An ingenious plan,” said Kaho. “There ought to be some nearby...”

Kaho’s greatsword was huge, and Sae’s magic was super powerful, so dense woods weren’t the best terrain for either one of them in terms of combat. In the past, we’d lured orcs out onto highways before we engaged them, but that had only worked back in Kiura. Here, the distance from the forests to the highway was way too far.

“Yeah, I guess this area would be a perfect place for combat,” I said. “Let’s give it a shot.”

“Okay,” Kaho and Sae replied together.

Later, when we started hunting orcs, we did end up making use of that empty area, but first, we reported back to Diola-san about the remains of the nest. After we’d spent about a week or so adventuring in the vicinity of Laffan,

people got used to seeing our party with Kaho carrying orcs on her shoulders. Our usual haul was two orcs per day, so we had no problem saving up money. Plus, we gained the guild's trust and the reputation for being a hardworking party. That was why Diola-san eventually came to us with a specific quest.



"A gathering quest?" I asked.

"That's right. A certain alchemist requires a party of female adventurers," Diola replied. "I would usually offer this sort of quest to the girls of the Meikyo Shisui party, but they're not in Laffan at present..."

According to Diola-san, the reason that the client only wanted female adventurers was because she was a girl herself and very shy. It was reassuring to know it wasn't a guy asking for an all-girl party. Actually, though, the guild rejected sketchy requests like that out of hand; that was one benefit of having them as intermediaries. They used that as a justification for charging adventurers fees, but for us, that was more than worth it to avoid the risks of accepting a quest directly from a client.

"The reward is respectable, and I'm confident that your party will be able to complete the task," said Diola. "Would you like to accept this quest?"

If you could form positive relationships with guild receptionists, they would generally recommend good quests to you. We accepted the quest and headed to the alchemical shop owned by the client. It was a ways away from the main street, supposedly near the walls—not really a great location for business, but...

"Whoa, this store looks wonderful!" Sae exclaimed.

It didn't look very big from the outside, but it had a cute and fancy exterior, so I got why Sae sounded so excited. Honestly, it reminded me of some of the places you could find in alleys in downtown Tokyo. Most of the buildings we had seen so far in this world were plain and boring, but this store was an exception, and it looked more like a place that sold products specifically for women.

"I assumed an alchemist's shop would look rather gloomy," said Kaho. "This is a pleasant surprise."

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to seeing what's inside," I said. "Come on!"

Kaho was role-playing pretty much all the time now, but deep down, she was still a normal high school girl. Back in Japan, she'd been interested in variety stores that sold cute knickknacks.

All of us were a little excited as we entered the store. The interior had a simple, warm atmosphere. There was also a cute girl with light pink hair and droopy bunny ears who looked like a store clerk. This was our first time seeing a rabbit beastwoman. All of us inadvertently stared at her, and she seemed surprised too; she flinched and looked down at the ground before hesitantly talking to us.

"W-Welcome..."



Her voice was very soft and quiet, but it was also very cute. I really wanted to become friends with this girl, and the other members of my party seemed like they felt the same way, but we were here for a quest. *I hope we can become friends and get to know each other through the quest!* I hid my ulterior motives and tried my best to smile gently as I talked to the girl.

“Um, Diola-san from the Adventurers’ Guild sent us here,” I said. “We’re the Jade Wings party. Would you happen to have some time to talk about the quest that Diola-san mentioned to us?”

When she heard that, the girl relaxed a little and looked up, then breathed a sigh of relief.

“O-Oh, right, the quest! I’m so glad the guild finally found a party. People have been badgering me a lot lately...”

“You are the client who issued the quest, right?” I asked.

The girl forced herself to smile. “Y-Yes, that’s right. My name is Riva. I’m the owner of this store.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Riva-san,” I said. “My name is Yoshino.”

“My name is Sae,” said Sae. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Greetings. My name is Kaho,” said Kaho. “We were forewarned that you were terribly shy, but that doesn’t appear to be an issue.”

Kaho was being pretty blunt, but Riva-san just smiled awkwardly as she looked back at Kaho. “Ha ha, um, well, none of you seem intimidating, so...”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Kaho is tiny,” I said.

I was around 160 centimeters tall, but Kaho was even shorter at around 140 centimeters. I patted her head, which was located at exactly the right height for me, but she wagged her ears to indicate that she wasn’t happy about it.

“Hmph. Height has nothing to do with it, so it’s not just me. But turning to the matter at hand—Riva-san, can you tell us more about your request?”

“Okay. I need your party to gather some herbs called uluosou. I would usually ask some adventurers that I know, but they happen to be busy right now,” said

Riva. “I asked the guild to look for a party full of girls if possible because I’m a bit afraid of strangers. I was getting worried that the guild wouldn’t be able to find anyone.”

Riva-san said the place where the herbs grew was somewhat dangerous. Obviously there weren’t that many parties of adventurers in Laffan who could get the herbs and get back to town safely.

“Mm. Female adventurers are low in numbers, after all,” said Kaho. “By the by, can you tell us what you need these herbs for?”

“Sure. To put it simply, I need the herbs to make a medicine that improves skin texture,” said Riva. “Exposure to strong winds and direct sunlight at this time of the year can damage your hair and skin, and obviously the same applies to adventurers, so— Hmm? Wait...”

Riva-san cocked her head and examined us. The life of a normal adventurer would result in poor skin, but...

“Thanks to Yoshino, skin troubles are a foreign concept to us,” said Kaho.

“Yeah, I can treat most things with healing magic,” I said. “We don’t really need medicine.”

We didn’t need makeup either. I was so glad I’d decided to go with Light Magic. I hadn’t seen any other adventurers who could afford makeup even if they needed it, though.

“I’m a bit envious,” Riva said with a laugh. “However, most people can’t casually use healing magic, so the medicine I make is popular among people who have money to spare on luxuries. The only trouble is that the moment I run out of stock, people begin badgering me to make more.”

Riva-san had a troubled look on her face as she lowered her eyebrows. It seemed like she wasn’t completely happy about her medicine being so popular, but that made sense to me: anyone with money to spend on luxuries probably also had high social standing.

“Why did you run out of stock? Did you sell more than last year or something?” I asked.

"N-No, um, I only started selling the medicine this winter, but it sold faster than I thought it would," Riva replied.

"Oh, it's a new product?" I asked. "I get it. I'm a girl too, so I can understand why it sold out. I'd want to buy some myself if I couldn't use healing magic."

"Well, my medicine isn't nearly as potent as magic," said Riva. "However, because it affects your body from inside, it has a slight antiaging effect, and—"

Hearing some info that interested us, Kaho and I immediately got right up in Riva-san's face. "Tell us more!"

A quiet, girlish scream escaped Riva-san's lips. "Eep!"

But the information she had brought up was of absolute importance to us, so we had no intention of backing down. As an elf, Sae had a long lifespan, but Kaho and I would age normally. I knew nobody could conquer aging, but I still wanted to stay as youthful as I could.

"When you say antiaging, do you mean that it's some secret elixir of youth, Riva-san?" I asked excitedly.

Riva-san just laughed. "No, it's nothing *that* potent. It can slow down aging by a little bit, however."

"A little bit, you say? That sounds better than nothing," said Kaho.

"By the way, how old are you, Riva-san?" I asked.

A simple way to confirm the effects of the medicine was to ask the person right in front of us.

Riva-san blinked and tilted her head in confusion. "Hmm? Me? I'm twenty-three."

"You look so much younger!" we exclaimed in unison.

It was true that Riva-san's appearance made her look a bit young, but she had glowing skin that looked wonderful. Her skin didn't look baby soft, but I'd been confident that she was younger than us. *Hmm. Actually, now that I think about it, she owns and runs a store, so it wouldn't make sense for her to be younger...*

"C-Could you perhaps share the medicine with us?!" Kaho asked excitedly.

“S-Sure,” said Riva. “I can’t give it away for free, but I wouldn’t mind sharing if you could gather a lot of uluosou for me.”

“We’ll do our best to reap everything we find!” said Kaho. “Would you be fine with the idea of rewarding us with your medicine in place of a monetary reward?”

“Yeah, that’s fine with me, but is that okay with your party?” Riva asked. She looked at Sae and me for confirmation.

I immediately nodded. “Of course! That’s exactly what I want too!”

Sae nodded too. “I don’t mind either.”

“Very well. We have a deal, then,” said Riva. “Incidentally, do you know what uluosou looks like?”

“Oh, um, yeah, I have some pharmaceutical knowledge,” I said.

“I see. That’s good to know,” said Riva. “I did prepare a picture just in case, however.”

Riva-san showed us a picture of a plant with drop-shaped fruits attached to a bell-shaped flower. It looked kind of similar to a lily of the valley. We’d need the parts that grew aboveground, including the leaves. I had assumed that there would be some differences due to the fact that Riva-san needed this for alchemy, but it matched the info from my Pharmacy skill.

“The nearest place where you can find them is in the wetlands deep within the forests southeast of Laffan,” said Riva. “It’s a dangerous place, so be careful.”

“Are there powerful monsters on the prowl? If that’s all, have no fear.” Kaho patted her own chest, looking very confident. “Our appearances belie our true strength.”

Riva-san slowly shook her head. “Diola-san sent your party here, so I’m not worried about that,” she said in a serious tone. “But the wetlands are composed of thick layers of grass floating on top of water, and there are gaps and holes scattered all over, so you might fall through.”

Riva-san sounded like she was talking from experience, and we all swallowed

nervously and listened carefully to what she had to tell us.

“It’s an especially dangerous area for adventurers who carry heavy equipment. Your feet can get tangled in the grass, and it’s hard to discard equipment underwater, so you would actually be better off falling into a river or a lake,” said Riva. “If you don’t have any companions who can help you, you might end up stuck inside a gap and be unable to get out of the water.”

“Hmm. Yeah, the wetlands definitely sound like a dangerous place,” said Sae.

Riva-san’s description had convinced us that this wouldn’t be a carefree herb-gathering quest.

“Mm. You can slay monsters, but you can’t slay water. Also, you might catch a cold if you get soaked at this time of the year,” said Riva. “Please be very careful, okay?”

After Riva-san delivered that final warning, we nodded firmly to indicate that we had taken her words to heart.



Having been warned about the wetlands, we gathered some more info ahead of time before we headed to the forests. Luckily for us, there were plenty of reference materials at the guild, which told us that brancheater spiders and slash owls were the only monsters we’d run into in the southeast forests apart from goblins. Apparently those monsters were dangerous to rookies, and we were a little bit wary of them given that we’d never fought any, but...

“They’re not as dangerous as I thought they would be,” I said.

“Indeed,” said Kaho. “As long as one remains alert to the possibility of ambush, they’re nothing but small fry.”

I used my mace to smack away a slash owl that was flying toward me, and Kaho used her greatsword to slash through a bunch of nearby branches together with the brancheater spiders that had been hiding in them.

“To be honest, Kaho, I think your attacks are way too powerful,” said Sae.

Each of Kaho’s attacks had done a ton of damage to the trees around us. It was kind of inevitable—none of us had a good way of attacking enemies on top

of branches—but every time she killed a brancheater spider, she also destroyed a branch as big as her own body. The trees here were a source of wood for Laffan, and we'd been asked not to damage them if we could avoid it. I had a feeling that Kaho's attacks were close to crossing that line.

"I understand, but it's not easy for me to smoothly defeat monsters with my weapon," said Kaho. "Would you prefer to use your magic instead, Sae?"

"I think it would be best to avoid forest fires," said Sae.

"Yeah, if Sae goes all out, the branches won't be the only collateral damage," I said.

Sae might be able to avoid burning the trees, but if anything caught on fire, it would be too late. None of us could use Water Magic.

But Kaho smiled playfully and pointed at the object Sae had in her hands. "Don't you have that staff in your hands as well? Is that supposed to be an ornament that you can't use?"

"Yeah, it's an ornament," Sae replied immediately.

Kaho seemed a bit disappointed after she heard Sae's words. "Y-You didn't hesitate at all, huh? So be it. But I still think it would be wise for you to become somewhat more proficient in combat, Sae."

She obviously meant physical combat. Sae could blast away monsters like orcs no problem using magic, and she was probably strong enough physically to beat up the average thug, but she was still weak for an adventurer. It wasn't a problem we could fix easily, though.

Sae had a troubled look on her face. She poked the ground with her staff. "I know, but that won't be easy. I don't know anyone who can teach me how to fight with a staff."

"Do you want to give my weapon a try, Sae?" I asked. "You basically hit monsters the way you'd hit balls in a batting cage. It's actually kind of fun."

All I had was the Club Fighting skill, so I couldn't teach Sae how to use a staff, and Sae was also only using a staff because that was what people expected of mages. Actually, though, mages in this world could use pretty much any

weapons they wanted, so there was no need to get stubborn about a weapon you couldn't use, and anyway, Sae lacked muscular strength as an elf, but her physical abilities weren't bad by any means. She had gotten really fit over a year of adventures.

Sae sounded kind of confused by my analogy. "A batting cage? I've never been to one myself." She still took my mace when I handed it over to her, though. "Will I really be able to do this? Oh, I see a monster. Here goes!"

I usually wielded my mace one-handed, but Sae gripped it with both hands and swung it like a baseball bat. There was a whooshing sound followed by a dull thump when the slash owl's body made contact with the mace. Sae had kept her eyes on her enemy the entire time, so she had a good understanding of the basics, and she landed a clean hit that turned the slash owl into crushed meat.

"Whoa..."

Objectively, it was pretty gross, but it was tame compared to a lot of the stuff we'd seen in this world, so Kaho and I had no qualms about praising Sae.

"I did it," said Sae. "This is a bit different from what I had in mind, though."

"Yeah. You definitely smacked it like a baseball," I said.

It was different from how I used the mace with my Club Fighting skill. It looked like a form of sports.

"Still, it could be a good learning experience for you, so do you want to keep at it for a while?" I asked.

"Really? Sure, I guess," Sae replied. "I'll see what happens."

As we made our way through the woods, Sae claimed a few more victims in the form of slash owls, but apparently you couldn't learn Club Fighting that easily. After a while, Sae still hadn't learned a new skill, but a grassy plain opened up in front of us.

"This is our destination, right?" I asked. "I see nothing but grass, but this should be the wetlands."

"Indeed. Henceforth, we must tread carefully." Kaho almost took a step

forward, but she stopped halfway and turned to look at Sae. “Can you go take the fore?”

Kaho almost took a step forward, but she stopped herself midway through and turned around to look at Sae.

“Me?”

“Mm. You’re the lightest member of our party. The area we’re standing on is already somewhat unstable, so...”

Height was a significant factor, so Kaho was the lightest of us, but her greatsword was really heavy. Sae, however, was just holding a cheap piece of wood that had been carved into a staff, so it was obvious who was lighter overall.

“There are no trees to block our line of sight here, so we needn’t worry about monsters catching us by surprise even with Sae in the front,” Kaho pointed out.

“I see. I suppose my ornament will actually become useful for us now.” Sae handed the mace back to me and stuck her staff into the ground as she walked forward.

Kaho and I followed Sae, and I immediately understood what Kaho had meant. “Yeah, the ‘ground’ definitely doesn’t feel stable here.”

“Mm. I’m heavier than you, Yoshino, and my feet are small, so the weight per unit area might be double in my case,” said Kaho.

I looked at Kaho’s feet. Sure enough, they had sunk deeper than mine into the turf—deep enough that water was seeping out.

Sae, though, was walking steadily with no issue. “We definitely have to be careful here. There are holes here and there that are hard to notice.”

Periodically, Sae’s staff sank into the ground. She used that to help us avoid the holes, but they were very well hidden. You wouldn’t even notice them unless you really kept an eye on your surroundings.

“Hmm. If we ever return to this place, perhaps each of us should carry a staff,” said Kaho.

“I don’t think this place will be hard to navigate once we get used to it, but

carrying a staff would definitely be safer if we have to walk around looking for herbs,” I said. “Like, the herbs might distract us.”

“Yeah, I agree,” said Sae. “Oh, Yoshino, isn’t that the uluosou?” She pointed with her staff.

“Let me take a look,” I said. “Yeah, you’re right, it is.”

There was only one uluosou with the distinctive drop-shaped fruit; the rest only had leaves. Still, I’d been able to recognize them right away, probably thanks to my Pharmacy skill. I hadn’t thought about this before, but the Pharmacy skill seemed useful for herb-gathering quests. We walked carefully and quickly picked the uluosou that Sae had noticed. When I looked around, I saw a lot more uluosou. *I guess we’ll be able to gather more than enough for our own share of Riva-san’s medicine, huh? Yay!*

“Let’s split up and gather all the uluosou here,” I said. “Keep one on you for reference.”

Kaho and Sae could easily find uluosou if they had some in their hands to compare to. I handed one plant each to each of them, and we made sure to stay close to each other as we gathered more uluosou.

“Is it okay for us to pluck a lot, Yoshino?” Sae asked.

“Well, they’ll apparently grow back if we leave the bulbs alone,” I replied. “They’ll die if we don’t give them any chance to regrow, though.”

Uluosou wouldn’t die as long as they could keep photosynthesizing and store nutrients and their bulbs. They were sensitive to environmental changes, but they were apparently hardy enough as long as the environment was perfect for them.

“They seem to be far from uncommon,” said Kaho. “I suppose we’ll be able to complete this quest without too much trouble.”

It was very easy to gather uluosou, and the monsters we had encountered on our way here had been easy to handle too. We’d been careful walking through the wetlands and paid attention to any potential holes or gaps, so Kaho was probably right that nothing bad would happen, but...

"You know, if you're going to let your guard down like that, then I feel like you're setting yourself up for a surprise, Kaho," I said.

"Really? There are no monsters within sight, and Sae can discover the dangerous spots for us," said Kaho. "The ground is very stable as well, so..."

As she was talking to me, Kaho jumped up and down, and the ground shook a bit as a result, but nothing else happened. The grass must have been a lot more buoyant than I had assumed; apparently you couldn't sink into the water here.

"As you can see, this area is perfectly safe as long as one knows where to stand."

Kaho sounded very confident, and she wasn't exactly wrong, but...

"The fact that you're the one saying this makes me uneasy, Kaho," said Sae.

"Hmph. Your imaginary fear will not result in anything, Yoshino!" Kaho seemed unhappy that Sae had agreed with me. She stomped her feet hard. "You see? Even this doesn't do anything, so—"

A giant shadow leaped out of a hole in the grass and splashed water all over place, then spun in the air and dived underwater again. Kaho was completely drenched.

"Told you so," I said.

"Mm, I figured something like this would happen," said Sae.

Sae and I were safe because we'd been standing a ways away from Kaho.

Kaho shook the water off of her ears and tail, then stomped her feet again. "Ridiculous! Why would something suddenly happen at a specific moment?! Or perhaps I ought to ask, what was that just now?!"

She seemed clueless about the thing that had just leaped into the air—she had been too close to it—but Sae and I had had a clear view.

"It was just a silhouette, but it resembled something I've seen before," said Sae. "Was I just imagining things?"

"No, you probably have the right idea," I said. "It looked really big, though."

A while back, we'd gotten pretty popular thanks to a fish called the emperor

salmon. The thing that had just leaped out of the water looked pretty similar, but it had been about twice the size of the one we'd caught in Sarstedt.

"Don't fish basically hibernate when it's cold?" I asked. "It's winter right now, so..."

"Kaho might have woken one up stomping around," Sae replied. "You can't hear sounds aboveground very well while you're underwater, but apparently that doesn't apply to vibrations."

*Hmm. Yeah, I guess that would explain why the fish leaped into the air near Kaho at the perfect time.*

"That has nothing to do with the fact that it was absolutely gigantic!" Kaho exclaimed. "The emperor salmon that we saw before was only three meters long!"

"There might be some rivers connected to the wetlands," I said. "The biggest emperor salmon might have swum here."

Kaho ground her teeth in frustration, then hoisted her greatsword in the air and prepared to do battle. "Hmph. I'll make the fish regret challenging a civilized and intelligent being like myself! Survival of the fittest among fish is nothing but mere child's play between inferior creatures!"

"Do you need help, Kaho?" Sae asked. "I can roast it if you want me to..."

"I can handle this by myself! And, um, I am fairly confident that it won't happen, but please save me if I happen to fall into the water."

"Sure," said Sae. "I'm glad to know that you haven't completely lost your cool."

A fish that had just been hibernating probably wouldn't be able to move that fast, and the current temperature was definitely unfavorable for the fish too, so Sae and I just watched. We were confident that Kaho could handle an emperor salmon by herself. If Sae had no plans of using magic, it would definitely be safer to let Kaho face it alone.

"Come at me if you dare, fish!"

Kaho started stomping around again, and pretty soon, a black silhouette

leaped out of the water.

“A fish out of water is nothing but food!”

Kaho swung her greatsword and landed a hit right on the emperor salmon’s tail fin. The fish collapsed onto the grass nearby. It looked like it was over five meters long, but before I could really assess it, Kaho swung her greatsword again.

“I’ll turn you into a miso butter salmon!”

A dull sound echoed through the air as Kaho’s greatsword smashed into the emperor salmon’s head. At the end of her battle, we got some fresh winter food.



We’d gotten into another incident involving emperor salmon on this quest, but we still managed to pull it off without any big problems. When we delivered all the uluosou, Riva-san was really happy. She even gave us some of her “youth” medicine as a reward! Plus, we’d earned some trust from the guild in the process.

As for the emperor salmon, it was too big for my party to eat all by ourselves, so we shared some of it with Riva-san, Diola-san, the innkeeper, and some of the other acquaintances we ended up making in Laffan. That way, we improved our relationships with the people of Laffan. We enjoyed our lives here as we waited for the return of the Meikyo Shisui party.

# Afterword

Five years have passed since the Dragon Novels label was founded, which also means it's the fifth anniversary of the publication of *To Another World... with Land Mines!* It's thanks to all your support that this series has managed to reach volume 10! Double digits! Yay! If I include my other series, then I've been able to put out an average of three light novels per year. I'm pretty sure that I can call myself a professional author by now, right?! I don't really have anyone to talk to about this, however. I guess I could bring it up with the taxman, but I'm not completely sure.

In any case, the main theme of this volume's cover is fake marriage. I'm sure the people who have finished this volume all know what I mean by fake, right? The cover might have made you think that the series was going to end with Nao and Haruka getting married, but that doesn't happen in this volume. Ten would be a nice number to end on, but this series isn't over yet. In fact, it'll probably continue as long as people continue to purchase volumes!

Once again, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of my loyal readers as well as Nekobyou Neko-san and all other involved parties. I'm truly grateful for your support. I was told that I don't have to write too much for the afterword this time, so I'll end it here. I hope that we'll all be able to meet again in the next volume.

Itsuki Mizuho



## A teacher around the same age?!

“In a situation like this,  
the greeting one ought to  
reply with is—”

Metea

Mary

Illias

The class had turned out a bit different from what we had expected. Illias-sama had guided us to a room where a slightly plump woman was waiting for us. We assumed that the woman would be our instructor, but instead, Illias-sama herself stood at the front of the room.

I had been a bit worried about whether the sisters would be able to keep up. Mary seemed like she was struggling, but Metea had no trouble absorbing the information and even asked questions from time to time.

“...By the way, what made you want to give me a massage all of a sudden?”

“We’re partners, right?  
I figured it wouldn’t hurt to act like actual partners.”

All of a sudden,  
Haruka’s hands stopped moving  
and her face was right next to mine.  
Man, she looks beautiful even up close.  
As her face got closer and closer,  
I extended my hands, she let her  
eyes drift shut, and—

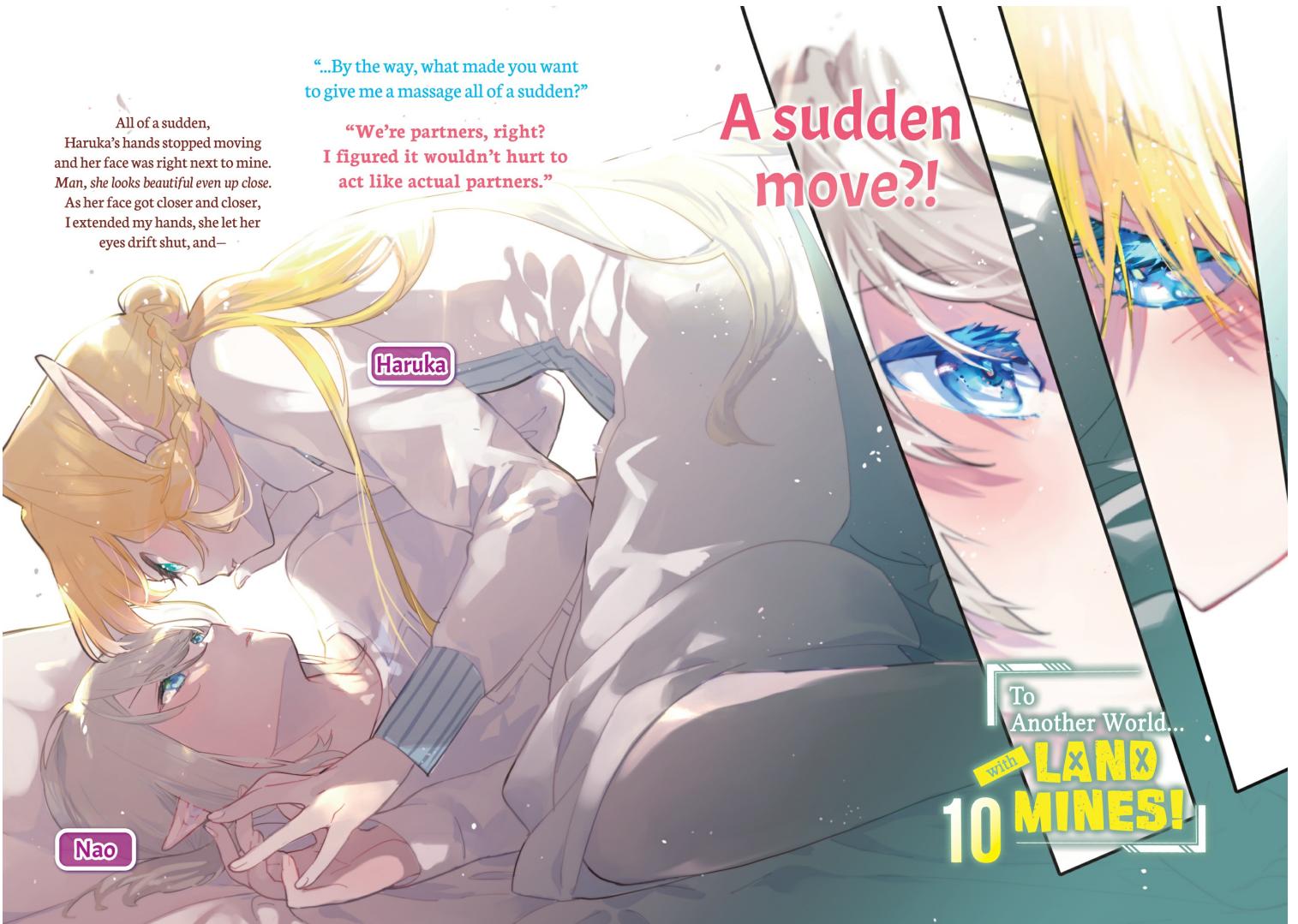
# A sudden move?!

Nao

Haruka

To  
Another World...

with LAND  
10 MINES!





Sae glared at Kaho and shouted,  
“Gosh, why didn’t you tell me ahead  
of time what would happen  
when I prayed?!”

Kaho just tilted her head and shrugged.

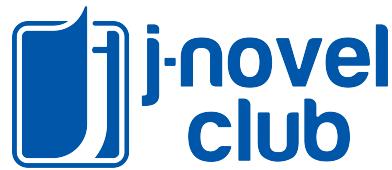
Sae

Yoshino

“I enjoyed the surprise  
and wished for you to have  
the same experience. To spoil a game  
is an unforgivable sin.”

Kaho

Side Story  
Jade Wings: Episode 5



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To Another World... with Land Mines! Volume 10

by Itsuki Mizuho

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