



MAMARE TOUNO
ILLUSTRATION BY KAZUHIRO HARA

LOG HORIZON

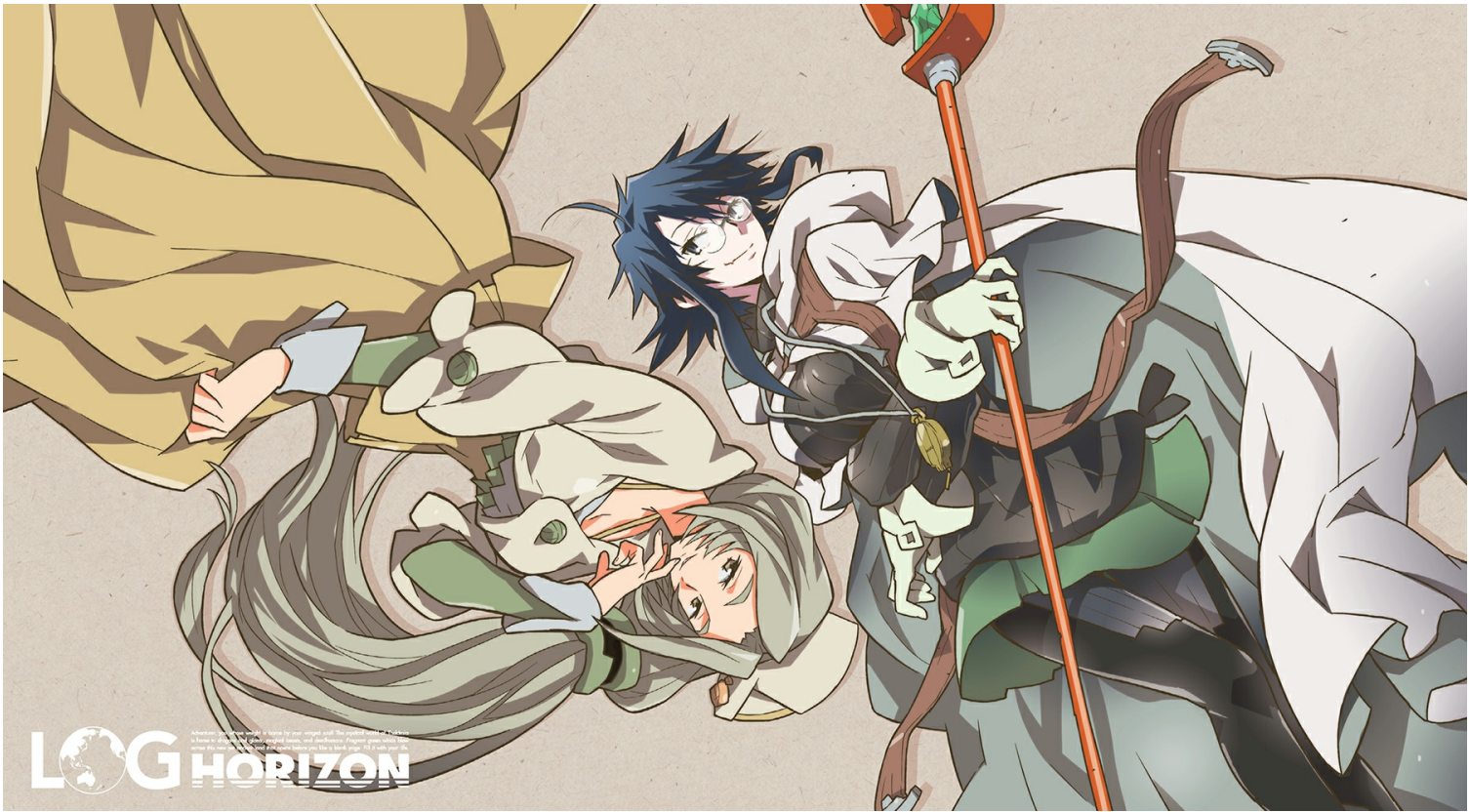
THE LARKS TAKE FLIGHT

In the glare of the Magic Lights, Isuzu became somebody else.

She stopped being the frizzy-haired high school girl with the boring body: just plain thin and short on curves.

She became Isuzu the Bard, who strummed her lute with a self-confident smile.





LOG HORIZON

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8 THE LARKS TAKE FLIGHT

Adventurer, you whose weight is borne by your winged soul! The mystical world of Theldesia is home to dragons and giants, magical beasts, and demihumans. Fragrant green winds blow across this new yet ancient land that opens before you like a blank page. Fill it with your life.

MAMARE TOUNO

ILLUSTRATION BY **KAZUHIRO HARA**

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ON**
NEW YORK

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Log Horizon, Volume 8

Mamare Touno

Illustration by Kazuhiro Hara

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LOG HORIZON, VOLUME 8

The Larks Take Flight

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▼ CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

▶ BOY SAMURAI

TOUYA



MINORI'S YOUNGER TWIN BROTHER. EVEN THOUGH HE GOT CAUGHT UP IN THE CATASTROPHE AND WAS PULLED INTO TROUBLE RIGHT AFTER HE STARTED PLAYING, HE HAS A STRONG, STRAIGHT-FORWARD PERSONALITY, AND HE'S MAKING SOLID PROGRESS IN THIS OTHER WORLD.

▶ MIDDLE SCHOOL MIKO

MINORI



TOUYA'S OLDER TWIN SISTER. SHE'S VERY RESPONSIBLE, AND AS TWINS, SHE AND TOUYA EXECUTE WELL-SYNCHRONIZED COMBINATION PLAYS. SHE'S TRYING TO EMULATE HER TEACHER, SHIROE, AND IS WORKING HARD TO CHOOSE HER OWN PATH.

▶ FRECKLED HIGH SCHOOLER

ISUZU



ALTHOUGH CHEERFUL, TALKATIVE, AND A LITTLE DITZY, SHE'S SENSITIVE TO THE GENERAL MOOD, IN THE WORLD OF ELDER TALES, WHERE EVERYONE IS GORGEOUS. SHE'S PLAIN. HER PARENTS LOVED MUSIC, AND SHE GREW UP SURROUNDED BY IT, SO SHE LOVES IT, TOO.

▶ PUPPY-DOG PRINCE

RUND



HIS "PRINCELY" GOOD LOOKS ARE STRAIGHT OUT OF A CLASSIC GIRLS' MANGA. HE TAKES PRIDE IN HIS SKILL CLASS, SORCERER, AND IN COMBINATION WITH HIS PROUD CHARACTER, IT SOMETIMES MAKES HIM SEEM LIKE A NARCISSIST.

▶ LOVE-STRUCK MARSHALLOW GIRL

SERARA



A MEMBER OF THE CRESCENT MOON LEAGUE, SHE'S GENTLE BUT PROACTIVE WHEN IT COMES TO HER BELOVED NYANTA. WORKING DAY AND NIGHT TO BECOME A GOOD MATCH FOR HIM. SHE'S PLUMP AND A LITTLE SELF-CONSCIOUS ABOUT IT.

▼ PLOT

LEAVING AKATSUKI IN AKIBA, SHIROE, NAOTSUGU, AND LI GAN TRAVELED TO OUU IN THE TOHOKU REGION. THERE, SHIROE ATTEMPTED TO NEGOTIATE FINANCING WITH KINJO—THE YOUNG LEADER OF THE KUNIE CLAN, CONTROLLERS OF THE BANKING SYSTEM—AND FAILED. AT THAT POINT, KINJO ANNOUNCED A RAID. THE DESTINATION: THE DEPTHS OF PALM. SHIROE DECLARED THAT HE WOULD TRAVEL TO THE DEEPEST PART OF THE LABYRINTH, WHICH NO ONE HAD EVER REACHED.

FACED WITH A RAID BATTLE IN WHICH, TO EVADE THE EYES OF MINAMI, HE COULDN'T RELY ON THE ROUND TABLE COUNCIL, SHIROE CALLED ON SILVER SWORD, THE COMBAT GUILD THAT HAD ONCE TURNED THEIR BACKS ON THE COUNCIL. AMONG THEIR MEMBERS, HE DISCOVERED DEMIQUAS, A MAN HE'D FOUGHT IN SUSUKINO.

THEIR MAKESHIFT RAID TEAM WAS DEFEATED BY BOSSES AGAIN AND AGAIN, AND EVEN SHIROE EXPERIENCED DEATH.



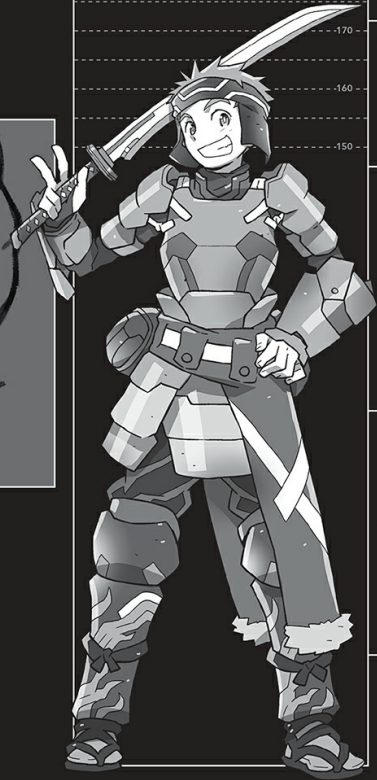
HOWEVER, AS THEY FOUGHT, THE CAMARADERIE AMONG THE TWENTY-FOUR MEMBERS GREW. AT LAST, THE TEAM MANAGED TO SEND SHIROE BELOW, INTO THE DEPTHS OF PALM, A PLACE NO LIVING PERSON HAD EVER SET EYES UPON BEFORE: THE KUNIE CLAN'S ANCIENT STOREHOUSE, CONTAINING AN OVERFLOWING SEA OF GOLD COINS. THERE, SHIROE ACHIEVED HIS GOAL OF PURCHASING ALL THE ZONES IN EASTAL.



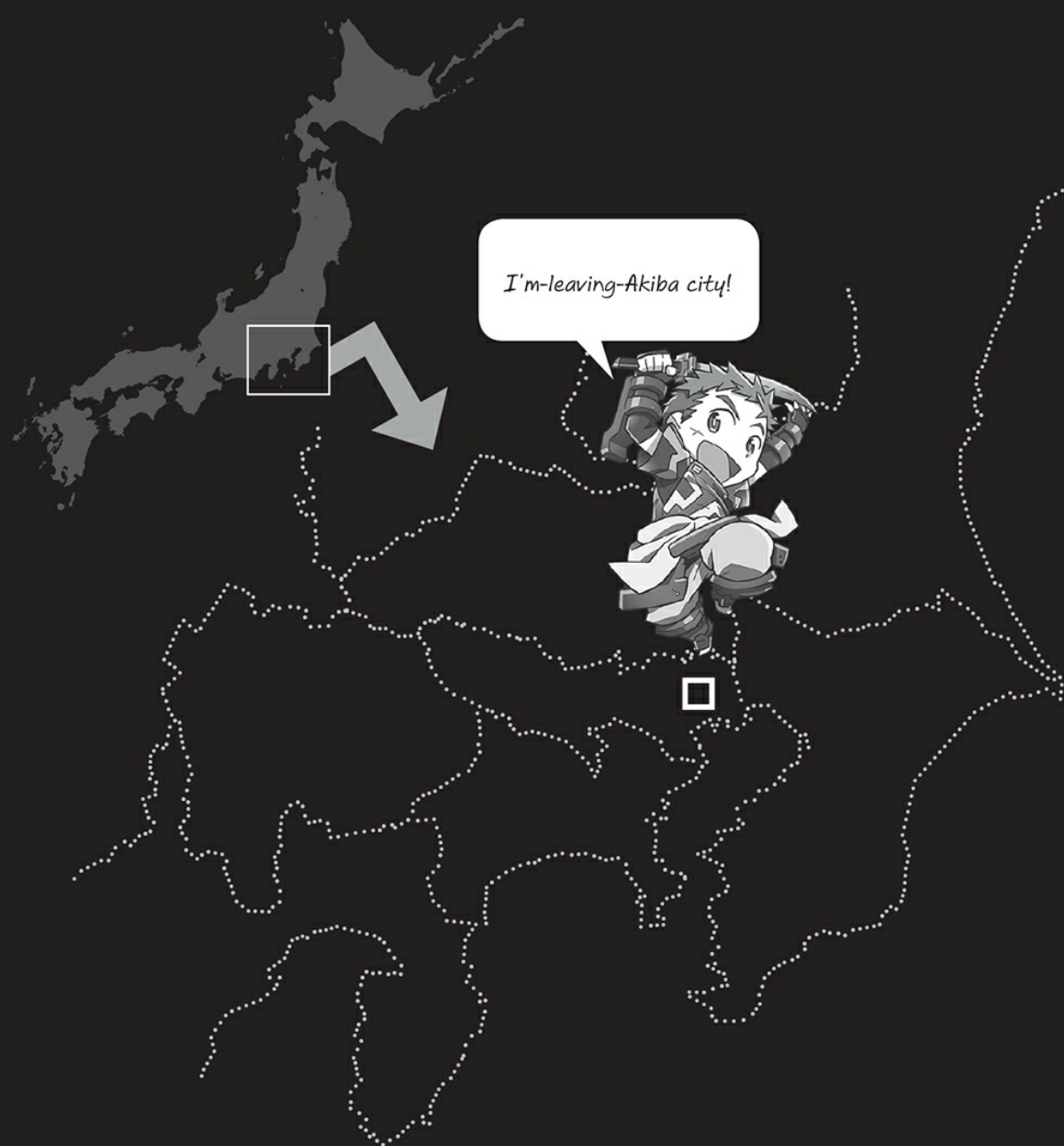
CHAPTER.



LIFE OF A
PERFECTLY AVERAGE
HIGH SCHOOL GIRL



▶ NAME: TOUYA	
▶ LEVEL: 58	
▶ RACE: HUMAN	
▶ CLASS: SAMURAI	
▶ HP: 7548	
▶ MP: 3718	
▶ ITEM 1: [BLUE SWORD—LION'S ROAR] AS A TOKEN OF HIS GRATITUDE, A PEOPLE OF THE EARTH SWORDSMITH FROM CHOUSHI MADE THIS SHORT SWORD WITH BLUE ORNAMENTATION. NAOTSUGU NAMED IT IN HONOR OF TOUYA'S LEONINE COURAGE FROM THAT DAY. IT INCREASES THE FORCE OF HELM SPLITTER AND THE AMOUNT OF GENERATED AGGRO.	
▶ ITEM 2: [SPRING FOAL SHIN GUARDS] SHIN GUARDS EMBROIDERED WITH A RUNNING HORSE, ITS MANE STREAMING BEHIND IT. SINCE THEY ADD A SLIGHT BONUS WHEN MOVING DURING COMBAT, THEY LET THE WEARER GALLOP AROUND THE BATTLEFIELD. SOUJIROU RECOMMENDED THEM, SO TOUYA SPLURGED AND BOUGHT THEM.	
▶ ITEM 3: [PERSIMMON WOOD ABACUS] A TOUGH, STURDY ABACUS MADE FROM HIGH-QUALITY PERSIMMON WOOD. PEOPLE TEND TO THINK, CAN HE ACTUALLY USE AN ABACUS? AND CAN TOUYA HANDLE BEING AN ACCOUNTANT?, BUT, SURPRISINGLY, HE ACTUALLY HAS A FIRST-CLASS ABACUS CALCULATION CERTIFICATION.	



► 1

Isuzu stepped onto a stage that was about twenty centimeters high, holding her lute to her rapidly beating heart. As she advanced with deliberate slowness—torn both by nearly unbearable nerves that threatened to tense her shoulders and butterflies that urged her to run away—she made eye contact with Touya, her partner for the day. He smiled at her brightly, then, as a greeting, lightly kicked the improvised drum set made out of lashed-together cans and boxes.

Isuzu sent him a fearless smile—or at least she thought it was—then raised her lute slightly. It was an An Die Freude, made by Marielle and modified by the Roderick Trading Company.

Standing in the center of the minuscule stage, she looked out across the room. The space was about ten meters square. This was Bloom Hall, one of the many eateries on Akiba's central avenue.

The abandoned buildings in this area had originally been ruins, but the Marine Organization had done experimental remodels on them, and they'd eventually passed into the hands of various Adventurers. This shop had been renovated several times after that, and it currently belonged to the Seventh Marching Band. Yet, that said, most of the staff who actually ran the shop were People of the Earth. The Adventurers were busy; they didn't have time to get involved with shop administration or clerical work. In fact, at present, most of the establishments in the town of Akiba were managed jointly like that—symbiotically.

This shop's interior was rustic, but brightly and lavishly illuminated by Magic Lights. In the midst of those lights, Isuzu bowed her head, and applause welled up loudly.

There were probably around seventy seats, and nearly all of them were filled.

Sturdy sofas upholstered with sailcloth. Toffee-brown tables. Menus posted on the walls. Handwritten event schedules here and there. It was a shop that had been created and tinkered with, through a process of give and take, by the Adventurers and People of the Earth who coexisted in Akiba. There was no generic, bland interior decoration or construction that prioritized efficiency, as there would have been in the old world. Each and every individual guild hall, residence, and shop was handmade.

This shop in particular, with its cluttered atmosphere, had a stage the size of a small balcony, and it was run as a cross between a restaurant, fast-food joint, and music club. In fantasy novel terms, it probably would have been called a tavern, but unlike adventurers in works of that sort, the Adventurers of Akiba didn't drink enough liquor to bathe in. They were eaters more than drinkers. This place reflected that trend, and the atmosphere was lively.

As Isuzu looked out over the shop's interior, trying to ease her tension a little, she found a few familiar faces in the audience and steeled herself.

Being nervous was a good thing. If she learned to enjoy it, she was bound to improve.

Resolutely, Isuzu strummed the first note.

Her scattered thoughts would last only until she began playing. After that, she knew, she'd feel as if she'd been set free.

They'd given her enough time for six songs. Thirty minutes. Long enough that any dream might come true, yet so short that she could blink three times and it would be over.

Isuzu's heart was racing so fast with delight and anticipation that it seemed as if it might jump out of her throat.

Smiling at her pulse, which seemed to be in perfect sync with the rhythm of the drums Touya played, Isuzu scattered eighth notes through the air.

Amber Dragon's Claw, a production-class item Shiroe had given her, slid over the strings. It wasn't how lutes were conventionally played, but it made for a showier performance.

In a corner of her mind, Isuzu thought, *It's like I'm at the beach, swaying in the sound of the surf.*

And indeed, happiness surged over her in waves.

Each time she strummed the perfectly taut strings, the resistance and vibration traveled from her fingertips to her wrist. The sensation was like fizzing soda water, amplified hundreds of times. To Isuzu, this was joy.

Just having an instrument in her hands made her expression soften into a smile. That instrument was responding to her wishes and uttering its first cry—a sharp, clear riff. It was Isuzu's job to help it grow.

Feeling as if she was congratulating it on its birth, Isuzu let the first word leave her lips.

Her voice, which should have been completely ordinary and mediocre, echoed in the room with more clarity than she'd expected. There was no electronic loudspeaker technology in this world, so her voice was unamplified. Yet even so, it was enough to fill a small venue like this one.

This always gave Isuzu a very odd feeling. She was just a country high school girl, the sort you'd find anywhere. Had her voice always been this resonant?

Naturally, Isuzu had begun performing here only a month ago. She could count the number of times she'd been onstage on one hand, and of course she'd had no similar experiences in the suburban town where she'd lived before the Catastrophe. The closest thing she'd known were the freight container-esque karaoke boxes that sat along the highway, surrounded by vacant lots and fields.

As a result, every time, the fact that her own voice was this sweet and carefree startled her.

However, that only lasted for the space of a breath or two.

In the blink of an eye, both thought and hesitation were swallowed up in the flood of sound.

She moved her arms, which were trembling feverishly, in short, sharp motions, summoning the biggest voice she could muster from her tense,

quivering throat.

It was just a rock number, a song that had been very common on Earth.

It was a melody she'd learned from her father's collection, one she'd heard ever since she was little.

Isuzu played and sang the familiar tune with reckless abandon. Touya, who was filling in as the drummer, was enveloped in Isuzu's Bard aura, but there were no other instruments. It was an ad hoc show, put on by a group that common sense in their old world would have considered too small to call a band.

Still, in the face of the joy that welled up like a summer thunderhead, even that feeling of mild shame was meaningless.

Isuzu was singing on a stage of her own.

The experience was far more vivid and moving than she'd imagined it would be.

In the glare of the Magic Lights, Isuzu became somebody else. She stopped being the frizzy-haired high school girl with the boring body: just plain thin and short on curves. She became Isuzu the Bard, who strummed her lute with a self-confident smile.

Explosive delight cleared Isuzu's vision.

All sorts of people were watching her from the packed seats.

They were all smiling.

The venue's dwarf manager, who had become an acquaintance of hers, had set his big mouth in a grumpy line, but even so, he was cheerfully tapping his toes to the rhythm. Feeling as if she was returning his salute, Isuzu leaned forward, thrusting her lute out, and sent an F note arching toward him.

Nyanta and Serara were seated at the counter, twisting back to watch the stage. Serara's cheeks looked flushed, and Nyanta was smiling as if he was watching over her. Serara, whose small, trembling hands were clenched into fists in front of her chest, was really adorable. She was the most feminine girl Isuzu knew. Nyanta, calm and gentlemanly, was wagging his silver whiskers

slowly and seemed to be enjoying the show.

The gentle atmosphere that hung around the pair flowed into Isuzu, lending an extra sparkle to her lute.

The first song ended. Most of the people in the room had been thumping on the tables in time with the drums, and the echoes were strong, almost as if the place was one big percussion instrument. Right now, Isuzu was in the belly of a bass drum. Chasing the tip of her braid, she spun once, jumping and kicking up her feet, and got ready for the second song.

She felt frustration and a keen sadness.

Was her happiness getting through to everyone?

Even in the midst of a fierce giddiness, her lute managed to spin accurate phrases, and she was grateful to it; this lute was her partner.

Isuzu had found the instrument at the Crescent Moon League when she'd been released from Hamelin but hadn't known what to do. Apparently it was an item that the guild master Marielle—who was a Woodworker—had made a long time ago. The lute had been changed and remodeled all over the place, to the point where it didn't resemble its original self at all, but even so, it had soothed the loneliness of being banished to another world.

By now, Isuzu and the lute were a single entity.

This world had no schools or club activities, so her daily life consisted entirely of doing chores at her guild, going hunting with her companions, and playing her lute.

In a world with no TV or Internet, no cable or movies, if she wanted to hear music, she had to play it herself.

At the end of ribbonlike cables that stretched from her trusty partner, tiny spheres pinched between two shells raised their voices. These were man-made spirits that picked up the vibrations from the lute's body and amplified them. They were devices from the Roderick Trading Company: modified Siren's Shells, low-level items that made it possible to summon servants. By nature, the lute had a delicate, graceful sound, but these devices instantly expanded its range of expression, evolving it into a specially made mystery instrument. But that was

exactly what Isuzu loved about it.

She made eye contact with some of the Magic Lights; they blinked and smiled in return.

I'd forgotten. Thank you.

Isuzu nodded, filling the gesture with those feelings.

What number was she on now? She didn't really know. She felt dizzy. She thought she'd played three songs, or maybe four.

Her feverish body seemed about to fly away. She didn't feel the slightest fatigue. It was as if she'd grown wings.

Was this due to the increased strength she got from being an Adventurer?

...That didn't seem quite right.

It felt more as if there were a cord connected to her back, recharging her energy. The sounds that filled the room— feet stamping, the drumbeats marking time—were a joy like a dangerously rampaging avalanche. Isuzu sang a cheerful, silly rock number. It was one of the oldies from her father's collection.

This probably isn't a good performance, she thought.

After all, Isuzu didn't have any musical talent. Her father had told her so dozens of times as she was growing up.

When all was said and done, Isuzu was a country high school girl. She could play instruments well enough to perform a little at school festivals, and her singing was at an "after-school karaoke" level. She hadn't had special training in either, and she couldn't hope to match her musician father.

However, even so, none of that had anything to do with this shining moment.

After all, joy wasn't an emotion.

It was nothing so nebulous. It was real, legitimate energy.

This power—which was colorless and transparent as a rule, neither visible nor palpable—lay dormant in everyone. It was in Isuzu, Touya, Nyanta, and Serara, and in all the people who were gathered here.

It had overflowed and rained down over the stage and connected with Isuzu,

encouraging her to continue playing her lute... And so talent really had nothing to do with it. As proof, it was fun, she was happy, and everyone was enjoying it.

Beside the shop entrance farthest from the stage, Isuzu saw a gleam of gold.

The puppy-dog prince, his cheeks flushed with excitement, was waving both his arms at her.

That sight alone created an even clearer sound from her lute, and it soared past its limits with ease.

Filled with too many feelings to understand, Isuzu gave up on trying to keep herself from smiling, broke into a big grin, and brandished the neck of the lute as if returning his wave. She felt awkward and embarrassed, and there was nothing she could do about it. Notes that had blushed pink seemed liable to overflow.

The next number was bound to put her in a mood good enough to send it all flying, too.

It was a slow ballad, the sort that Isuzu's ally and colleague and personal porter and walking group guard and prince, Rundelhaus Code, loved.

There's really no help for it. I'll give this song to Rudy as a reward, Isuzu thought, drawing a deep breath.

In the midst of the glow from the Magic Lights, which had read the mood and lowered their brightness, Isuzu began to sing the next number.

Even for that day, it was a particularly special performance.

► 2

"The evening appurrs to be a bit warm."

"Yes, Nyanta."

Even so, once they'd left the shop and walked a little ways, Akiba's night showed its true, hushed face.

In this other world, there were no electronic media, no cars or railways, so city noise was completely alien to Akiba. Things were different during events like the Libra Festival, but at this time of year, right at the beginning of February, mornings and evenings were still very cold, so the streets were quiet at night—even on a relatively warm night.

Having left Bloom Hall, Isuzu, Rundelhaus, Touya, Nyanta, and Serara started back toward their guilds, smiling. Firefly Lamps shed milky light here and there on the avenue, but the group traveled with Rundelhaus's Magic Lights ahead of them, too.

Everyone was in high spirits. Rundelhaus, who was walking at the front of the group, talked animatedly with Touya. Meanwhile, Serara and Nyanta seemed to be having fun together. Bringing up the rear, Isuzu followed after them, enveloped in a light, airy happiness.

Touya and Rundelhaus were carrying heavy loads, but all Isuzu held was her lute, hugging it to her chest. Since they were only walking around town, everyone was in ordinary street clothes and lacking any weapons. Isuzu had lived an unsettled life just after the Catastrophe, and when she'd first joined Log Horizon, she hadn't had many clothes or personal belongings. However, since she'd been given a room at the guild house, she had more regular apparel now. Come to think of it, it was just over half a year since the battle for Choushi...

"Mademoiselle Isuzu, are you all right? You're not fatigued?"

"Not a bit. I'm bursting with energy!"

Isuzu was walking slowly, and Rundelhaus, worried, had turned around to speak to her.

Apparently she'd given him the wrong impression.

She'd only wanted to watch everyone while she savored this feeling of satisfaction.

"Let's remewve ourselves to the guild house before we take a chill."

"Our bellies are full, too!"

With that exchange, Nyanta and Touya crossed a small intersection.

As her companions traveled along the dark road, they all seemed to be at peace.

By now, both Rundelhaus and Isuzu felt completely at home in Log Horizon.

Log Horizon was a tranquil, comfortable guild. In particular, Isuzu had also become close friends with Minori, who was currently elsewhere. She felt as if she'd known her brave, earnest younger friend for years. It was the same with Serara, who walked beside Nyanta, wearing a rapturous smile. Isuzu was really fond of that girl.

Isuzu's sworn ally Rundelhaus also seemed to have relaxed the tense expression he'd worn in Forest Ragrand. As the younger boys in their guild, Rundelhaus and Touya had also become friends. When the two of them were together, things got really noisy. Isuzu had realized, once again, that when guys moved in groups, their mental age came down.

Gradually, she'd also grown close to the guild's older members: Shiroe, Nyanta, Naotsugu, and Akatsuki.

Nyanta, the oldest member, was a very easy person to make friends with. He was a calm, fashionable dandy, and the guild's kitchen was his domain. He'd gotten ahold of the younger group's vital point—their stomachs—and they'd gone crazy for him in no time.

Through Touya and Rundelhaus, she'd also come to understand Naotsugu by degrees. Among the older members, he was the life of the party, constantly bantering while they were talking, but Isuzu thought he was an unexpectedly considerate person. If they found any problem with the guild's interior or equipment, he was the one to talk to.

Lately, it seemed as though Naotsugu, Touya, and Rundelhaus (and sometimes Nyanta) had been doing some sort of male bonding. They called it "special training." It sounded somewhat juvenile, but Isuzu and Minori were pretending not to notice it. Rundelhaus and Touya went to all sorts of places, following Naotsugu's orders, and they often came back home grinning and covered in mud. Whenever that happened, Minori and Isuzu smiled wryly and got the bath ready.

Akatsuki was a quiet, acerbic, enigmatic woman. Maybe she was shy: When they tried to talk to her, her replies were often curt. When Isuzu had first joined the guild, she'd sometimes felt a little uncomfortable around her. Still, deep down, she was a kind person with a hidden sense of humor. Not only did she love laundry and house cleaning, she had a habit of doing it stealthily, on a large scale, without help. If they looked away for a moment, and then all the sheets in the guild were abruptly fluttering on the veranda, it was Akatsuki's doing.

After New Year's, a Cleric named Tetora had joined Log Horizon. Tetora seemed to be an outgoing person, and had hugged Isuzu the first time they met. It wasn't just Isuzu. Except for Akatsuki, who'd hastily evaded, everybody got a hug. Before anyone knew what was happening, the cheerful, vivacious Cleric had become the life of the party at their guild.

Meanwhile, the one Isuzu hadn't really understood for a long time was the guild master, Shiroe.

During meals, he tended to space out or hand seasonings or small plates around to everyone, and she couldn't see anything special about him. When he napped on the sofa in the living room, he seemed completely worn out. When they cleaned or went shopping, Naotsugu and Akatsuki tended to be mean to him, telling him, "You'll be useless, go to your room."

When she listened to the rumors in town, she heard that his eyes looked mean, that he was a sinister strategist, a demon who held Akiba's fate in his hands, the mastermind behind the Round Table Council—in other words, nothing good. Isuzu thought he had mean eyes, too, but even she thought a lot of what she heard about him was questionable.

If that had been all, it would have been one thing. However, Isuzu's friend Minori had known Shiroe longer than Isuzu had, and according to her, he was really a nice guy. He was kind, good at looking after others, intelligent, and chivalrous, he could do anything, and she absolutely adored him— She'd really said that.

It was such a confused portrait that it would have been easy to think there were three different Shiroes who appeared in a daily rotation.

Isuzu's internal image of Shiroe was the young man who'd stood at that

crossroads in Choushi, his face stern. The fact that he'd seemed like a judge to her (although she'd never seen a real judge) was a bit of a secret. It was undeniably true that he'd saved Rundelhaus, and she thought he was an amazing person for that.

However, she'd first felt a kind of affection for Shiroe when, one day, Nyanta had told her, "Shiroecchi has 'oldest-son syndrome.'" Shiroe was an unbelievably hard worker to an extreme degree. In addition, she thought that while there were areas in which he displayed great talent, he could be clumsy about other things.

After she'd come to understand Shiroe a little, Isuzu was able to genuinely support Minori.

In this way, Isuzu and Log Horizon had slowly grown closer, and time went on.

Isuzu thought that "every day" was a bit of a tyrant.

Even if they did nothing, human bellies grew empty morning, noon, and night.

When their stomachs were empty, they needed food, and they had to make it. Among its members, Log Horizon had Nyanta, who had a Chef subclass, but that didn't make it all right to force all the meal prep onto him.

In the first place, in this other world, preparing meals was hard work. It wasn't brimming over with convenient cut vegetables and seasonings and instant foodstuffs, the way their old world had been. If they wanted to make something a bit elaborate, the preparations could easily turn into a full day's work. Even when it came to buying the ingredients, it wasn't possible to turn to online supermarket delivery services.

It wouldn't have been fair to leave all that hard work to Nyanta. At Log Horizon, breakfasts were always made in advance so that they wouldn't have to cook every morning, and twice a week, they'd set designated "Captain Nyanta's Rest Days."

The fact that meal prep took work was a problem every guild shared, and the most common shops in Akiba were the type that handled food and drink. There were lots of soup and set meal establishments where people could just drop in, eat, and leave. Maybe it was because this was a town of gamers. Many

restaurants served stick-to-your-ribs dishes with satisfying quality and portion sizes, and there were also candy stores, portable street stalls, and shops that sold take-out snacks. There were only a handful of super-high-class restaurants and the sort of fashionable places that could be used for dates.

There had been a lot of shops that sold side dishes since the early days, but Shopping District 8 had taken the lead and created a street stall bazaar, and now that they'd built a shopping street mall under the elevated tracks in the ruins of Akiba Station, it was possible to relax and buy all sorts of flavors.

On Captain Nyanta's Rest Days, the guild members bought side dishes at shops like these or they ate out.

This custom of eating out had changed, very slightly, starting around Snowfell, the winter festival held to celebrate the New Year.

After Isuzu had given an impromptu performance at Bloom Hall, she'd been scouted, and now, about once a week, she performed small gigs like the one held today.

Bard abilities didn't correct or improve performance and singing. However, limits were placed on the abilities of Adventurers who weren't Bards and didn't have a similar subclass. No matter how skilled they were at performing, there was a possibility that off-key notes would pop out on their own.

If they chose a subclass like Songstress, they could improve their singing by practicing, and the ability limits wouldn't hold them back. Because Bards could lift the restrictions on the people around them as well, when Isuzu took the stage, she often asked Touya, Minori, or Serara to take care of the rhythm or secondary instruments for her. Since the puppy-dog prince unfortunately had no musical aptitude of his own, he mostly handled the cheering.

"It's too bad Minori couldn't come, too."

"Mm, yes, mew said it."

"No help for that. Minori's got a part-time job."

"...At Calasin's place, wasn't it?"

"Mademoiselle Minori is a career woman, then."

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“She’ll be done soon, though, won’t she?”

“I bet she’ll come back with Mr. Shiroe.”

The beat of her heart, which had been turbocharged from soaking in the vortex of sound, was soothed by her talking friends who walked ahead. Yet her heart was slowly returning to normal, accompanied by a lonely feeling, as if a dream were slipping away. Even then, there was not enough happiness to erase that fleeting worry.

I can’t be a professional like my dad, but playing the lute just for fun once in a while is nice.

Standing on a stage had made her acutely aware of one thing.

Apparently, Isuzu liked music far more than she had thought. She stroked the lute she held as if it was precious to her. Its ripe, rounded body was the resonance chamber. Isuzu had played the wood bass, but she thought the lute had a delicacy and an antique atmosphere that the wood bass lacked.

Dweh-heh-heh...

The wood bass she used to use had been mass-produced (but even so, she’d thought it was shockingly expensive as a high schooler), but this lute was Marielle’s creation, one of a kind. There were elegant mother-of-pearl inlays made from the opalescent interiors of shells on either side of the strings. Isuzu had modified it here and there after they’d given it to her, but the pattern looked like a dolphin, and she really liked it.

She firmly believed that any rocker worthy of the name needed a favorite instrument, and this lute, Flying Dolphin, was just that.

“What’s up, Isuzu-sis?”

“Uhn?”

“Mademoiselle Isuzuuu.”

When Isuzu looked up, everyone had gathered around her.

“Huh? What?”

“You were smirking, Isuzu.”

“That’s not true!”

“She was smiling.”

Isuzu put her hands to her cheeks, wondering if she really had been making that sort of face. Her flushed cheeks did seem to be smiling.

“Mademoiselle Isuzu is still excited, you see.”

“Rudy, seriously, that’s not it at all!”

Isuzu raised her voice, leaning in close to him. With a smile that managed to be mildly appalled and yet kindly at the same time, Rundelhaus looked to the people around him for help. At that, Touya responded, “You really were awesome, Isuzu.”

“No, I wasn’t, all right? That wasn’t anything impressive. There were instruments at my house when I was a kid, so I can play a little, that’s all.”

“That isn’t true, mew know. Everyone looked happy.”

Besides Serara, who was smiling and agreeing, even Nyanta complimented Isuzu, and her face went bright red. Then Rundelhaus, who was supposed to be her ally, hit her with an additional blow:

“Mademoiselle Isuzu is an *artiste*, a veritable sylph! Her exquisite melodies are a benediction to this town’s nights. If she’s a foot, even the journey on which we embark next week will be filled with cheer... Hm? What’s the matter, Mademoiselle Isuzu?”

“Rudy. I. *Swear*. You’re such a— How can you say things like that with a straight face?!”

Unable to stand the embarrassment, Isuzu proceeded to chase Rundelhaus around.

She was happy, but she couldn’t look any of them in the face. In the cold night air, the game of chase lasted until they reached the guild house.

In the six months since the Catastrophe, the most-renovated building in Akiba's cluster of ruins was the guild center.

The first floor held the guild reception desk, the bank, and halls. Floors two through six looked like hotel corridors: They were lined with teleportation doors that led to guild halls, which were rented to different outfits. On the fourteenth floor was the Ruquinjé conference hall, which had been used during the establishment of the Round Table Council.

From the seventh floor on up, the building had once been like a rental space with no tenants. In the game of *Elder Tales*, the space had had no purpose, but of course, that was immediately after the Catastrophe. After the Round Table Council had been established, this building had become its headquarters, and the empty space—now valuable—was being repurposed for various things.

During the Libra Festival, the Production Guild Liaison Committee had been created, and many other groups related to the Round Table Council had subsequently set up their offices here. Although the Round Table Council was Akiba's organization of self-governance, even the most diplomatic person couldn't have called its ability to govern "strong." The Council itself held only modest authority, and its capacity for practical business was low as well.

Even so, the Round Table Council was managing to govern Akiba anyway, for a variety of reasons: The members of the major guilds that participated in it made up a large percentage of Akiba's population; the Council had the trust of Akiba's residents; the people who lived in the town were former Net gamers and didn't have high expectations for government institutions; and the town had an energetic volunteer culture made up of altruistic citizens.

In the first place, the town of Akiba was bursting with the spirit of freedom. In this world, as long as all you wanted to do was live, life wasn't that hard in either military or economic terms, and so the residents of Akiba spent their days any way they pleased. Those who wanted to hunt went to the city's outskirts, residents who wanted to manufacture holed up in their studios, and citizens who wanted to conduct sales and interact ran shops.

The general view among the Akiba's residents indicated, as long as the self-governing body didn't interfere with what individuals wanted to do, that was

fine.

Of course, this was how things appeared to the citizens, but in fact, the Round Table Council had more duties than most imagined. The people might have thought that as long as they could do what they wanted, nothing else mattered, but even when it came to things like priority use regarding a ruin that people wanted for shop supplies, it was common for demands from multiple residents to clash.

Processing a vast number of incidents, each of which was trivial in and of itself, was the fate of government organizations, and the RTC was no exception.

“Yo, Machiavelli. I’m done over here.”

“So am I, Isaac.”

The two men, who had installed themselves in a corner of a brightly lit cafeteria in the guild center’s first basement, congratulated each other on their strenuous efforts. They were Shiroe, guild master of Log Horizon, and Isaac, guild master of the Knights of the Black Sword.

They called the place a “basement cafeteria,” but strictly speaking, it was closer to a shared space where people could eat and drink. The light of Firefly Lamps poured down from the high ceiling, and the spick-and-span tables were arranged in a geometric pattern, split into tables for four and tables for two. The space was divided into several areas, and there were individual rooms, including small meeting rooms, farther back.

Four restaurants that shared two kitchens sold their food here. Buyers carried purchased meals to the tables and ate in peace.

Shiroe and Isaac’s group was camped at a secluded table for eight.

Maps, documents, and writing implements were spread over the table, and a variety of tools and measuring instruments spilled out of the bags at their feet. They were clearly monopolizing the table—something that shouldn’t be done at a restaurant—but this wasn’t the first time it had happened, and everyone was used to it.

“What are you saying? I’m the one who organized most of the Black Sword’s materials.”

The young man who spoke to Isaac looked mildly appalled, and his shoulders slumped. It was Isaac's aide, Lezarik. Cracking a macho smile, Isaac dodged the comment, telling him, "Don't bring up fiddly little details like that." As you'd expect, Isaac wasn't wearing his habitual armor today. He was in his Round Table Council uniform, and he'd thrown a gray coat over it like a robe.

Shiroe thought that he seemed to like the Council uniform quite a bit.

For his part, Shiroe was wearing a turtleneck, as usual. When one was carrying around documents or doing clerical work, comfortable clothes were best.

Shiroe had been working with Isaac a lot lately, but Isaac wasn't an office-jockey type. When he was in his office, he always tried to make a break for it, so whenever Shiroe needed to meet him or draft papers with him, they always ended up in a restaurant or a tent somewhere.

Since Akiba's restaurants were trying to do business, camping out in one of them would have prickled their consciences, so in that sense, the shared space in the guild center basement was a boon to Shiroe and the others.

"Not that I really get it, but is this okay?" Isaac asked.

"Yes, that's fine. I'm sorry to ask you to lead like this," Shiroe answered.

"Nah, no prob there, but—"

"Our dear Isaac may not seem like it, but he's looking forward to it," Lezarik interjected.

"Hey, loser. Don't go saying stuff like that. And don't call me 'dear.'"

Chuckling at the pair's squabble, Shiroe sorted the unnecessary documents.

"But, man... To think we'd be drilling knight brigades after the world got like this..."

"The Black Sword is a knight brigade, too, you know."

"Well, yeah, but..." Isaac grumbled, but his face wasn't that gloomy. He was eyeing the document he'd picked up as if it intrigued him. The paper read, **FIRST PEOPLE OF THE EARTH KNIGHTS' DRILL GUIDELINES.**

“As I mentioned during the meeting, it’s also to promote friendly relations,” Shiroe continued.

“Yeah, but we can’t just do it with no goal,” Isaac whined. “They should level up a little.”

“If we can manage to get them two or three levels higher... Well, I suppose we should take it slow,” Shiroe answered without looking up, straightening the documents.

He’d asked the Knights of the Black Sword to run a drill in the City of Maihama. Naturally, the drill was intended for People of the Earth knights. It wasn’t limited to the domain of Maihama; there would be participants from other lords’ brigades as well, so it wasn’t specifically for the Maihama troupe. The official reason was to provide training for all People of the Earth in Eastal, the League of Free Cities.

“For long-term training, those people ain’t asking for much,” Isaac muttered.

“We’re dealing with People of the Earth. We can’t push them too hard.”

“Seriously? Hey.”

When Shiroe responded in the negative, Isaac turned to the aide who stood behind him. “Were you planning on power leveling?” Lezarik asked.

“Power leveling” was a gaming term that meant boosting one’s level very rapidly, half by force. By providing a high-level leader who took players through an unbroken series of battles against monsters with lots of experience points, low-level members of the party—who followed at a safe distance—gained massive amounts of EXP. Since it was a way to level up efficiently in very little time, it was a routine sight in MMO games.

“Power leveling would be a problem. They wouldn’t gain any actual skills that way.”

On the other hand, as Shiroe had pointed out, quite a lot people were opposed to the idea. Power leveling gave you experience points and levels. However, the growth happened fast, and your physical and combat abilities didn’t get intensive training. Even if your attack power, endurance, and other physical abilities increased, you didn’t learn tactics or how to fight, and that was

damaging.

“You’re such a hardhead, Machiavelli,” Isaac said. “We can just alternate power leveling and combat training, y’know. Nah, I’ll make sure there’s more training. They look like they’ll be a pain in the butt anyway.”

As he spoke, Isaac laughed shamelessly.

After hearing all that, even Shiroe thought there was no help for it. In the first place, he wasn’t completely against power leveling itself. Players who already had one high-level character often used growth methods like that when they made second or third characters.

Besides, this time around, Shiroe was staying in Akiba. Even though Maihama was only an hour away by griffin, Isaac would be the one in charge on the scene, and if Shiroe nitpicked his policies, the role-sharing wouldn’t work.

“That part’s meant for the public eye, so don’t go all out, please.”

“Yeah, leave it to me... Still, guard duty, huh?”

Looking as if he was thinking hard, Isaac scratched roughly at his head and fell silent for a while.

It was evening, after dinner.

Since this shared space was a sort of restaurant, business should have been booming right about now, but not even 10 percent of its capacity was in use.

That was only to be expected: This was a sort of staff cafeteria for Adventurers and People of the Earth who worked for the Round Table Council. Adventurers who participated in the Council and had large workloads also needed to manage their own guilds, and as a rule, they worked at their guilds’ headquarters. Shiroe, Michitaka, and Calasin were no exception.

As that was the case, the only people who had lined up documents and were eating here at this hour were those with special circumstances, like Shiroe and Isaac, or oddballs who did so much work that one wondered why they didn’t just move into the guild center. There certainly weren’t many of either type.

“Still no luck getting ahold of that idiot Krusty yet?”

“No. From what I hear, he isn’t responding to his friend list, either.”

“What’s he doing deserting his guild like that? It’s gonna break up on him.”

“It doesn’t look as if things will go that far, but...” Shiroe said.

It had been nearly three months since Krusty’s disappearance in the mountains of Ouu. Isaac had said *break up*—it certainly was enough time for a guild to collapse.

In general, guilds in MMORPGs were terribly fragile.

After all, in the *Elder Tales* game, guilds hadn’t been contractual relationships. They were simply people who “played together.” In a way, relationships with friends in cyberspace—where they weren’t affected by physical restrictions, such as living in the same neighborhood or being classmates at school—were purer than face-to-face friendships, but as a direct consequence, they were also more easily broken.

If a participant thought, *I don’t want to be here anymore*, there was almost no way to keep them there. Guilds such as Hamelin, which had blocked withdrawal procedures, were an exception to the rule.

And in most cases, the center of a guild was its leader.

The leader was the one who determined the guild’s course, and in many cases, they were also the one who set its emotional tone. When there was any sort of internal trouble or quarrel, it was the leader’s job to arbitrate. In order for a guild to carry on as an orchestrated group, “the leader” was a necessary device.

As a matter of fact, immediately following Krusty’s disappearance, D.D.D. had lost some members.

The idea of a leaderless organization had probably made them uneasy. They couldn’t be blamed for that.

However, despite the fact that this world had turned real and therefore guided mutual aid was necessary for survival, the number of members who’d withdrawn from the now-leaderless group hadn’t even reached fifty.

In three months, a guild which had lost its leader had seen only fifty withdrawals. That was already a quiet miracle, all on its own.

Shiroe had received that report from the Sorcerer Riezé. Her expression had been downcast, but when he'd praised her administrative skills, it certainly hadn't been mere lip service intended to keep the Round Table Council running. Shiroe genuinely thought that it was an amazing guild.

"What? You worried, Machiavelli?"

"What about you, Isaac?"

"Like I'd actually worry. The guy's a Berserker. He's probably just messing around somewhere."

"Well."

Shiroe nodded, vaguely.

He wasn't denying what Isaac had said.

Shiroe also thought that Krusty had been sent to another server, or possibly to a zone where telechats were restricted, through some sort of teleportation accident. Similar "events" had existed when *Elder Tales* had been a game. Of course, that was serious in and of itself, and there was a significant possibility that Berserker had gotten pulled into some sort of trouble.

However, as Isaac said, if he'd been asked to choose the one man from the people involved with the Round Table Council who was most likely to make it back alive if he got into unexpected trouble, he would probably have chosen Krusty. There was no sense in worrying about him.

"I bet he just shows up again one of these days," said the guy Shiroe would have chosen as "second most likely."

"It isn't Krusty I'm worried about," Shiroe confessed. "It's D.D.D. and the Round Table Council."

D.D.D. was quite the autonomous guild, and even without Krusty, it seemed to be running just fine. However, whether administrative processing would function smoothly and whether its members could keep themselves calm were entirely different issues. Even if only a few people had withdrawn, their anxiety was clear enough to see. The possibility that D.D.D. might collapse certainly wasn't low enough to ignore.

It was also the biggest combat guild, and the most disciplined organization. For example, if it was a matter of being victorious in raids or combat quests, Akiba had a veritable galaxy of capable guilds. Isaac's Knights of the Black Sword was one, and Soujirou's West Wind Brigade could be relied upon as well.

However, if the scale of the battle grew larger and they found themselves in military action where they were required to make decisions regarding things beyond victory, no guilds could substitute for D.D.D. in terms of command and control experience.

Since that was the case, if that group collapsed or atrophied, neither the Round Table Council nor the town of Akiba would be able to escape the consequences.

Shiroe thought that the Round Table Council was a good organization of self-government, but he didn't think it was perfect. If disharmony reared its head in the council of influential guilds, the system would probably prove to be unexpectedly fragile.

I hope Ains doesn't stop...

Honesty's Fairy Ring exploration was proceeding at a good pace. That said, not many people in Akiba were paying attention to it. This was because of the technological revolution that was unfolding in town. The reforms were slowly breaking down the index of *Elder Tales* levels that had become a part of life in Akiba. The time when having high levels led to wealth was on its way out.

The establishment of the Round Table Council and the ensuing technological revolution were changing the world. It was to the point where, if you had a new idea and the power to carry it out, riches were within your reach.

Even when it came to hunting, many Adventurers were leaving safety margins when they acted. For example, a level-90 Adventurer would go to level-85 hunting grounds. Of course they'd be able to earn money and property that way, but they wouldn't level up. Some combat guilds continued to tackle a string of fierce challenges, but it was safe to say that they were the exception. Not raising their levels meant that they couldn't hope for any great improvement in their combat abilities. In this world, that meant their disparities would be cemented in place.

Quite a few of Akiba's residents were showing signs of irritation at the situation.

As someone who brought people together, Krusty was important, and Shiroe had taken his disappearance seriously.

Just when he'd gotten through the difficulty of financial negotiations with the Kunie clan, he'd found himself with yet another headache. Shiroe felt like crying. The one bright spot was that Roderick, who'd been working in cooperation with Captain Nyanta, had performed a careful investigation regarding highly dangerous flavor text and had issued a statement calling for self-imposed control with certain items.

Even though he'd done this, it wasn't a given that disasters involving cursed items would decrease.

Depending on their flavor text, even items that weren't clearly marked as cursed could provoke tragedies. Since they were checking flavor text via human wave tactics, the list of dangerous items would probably be completed eventually, but there was no guarantee it would put an end to all trouble.

"Shiroe."

"Well, well! Shiroe and Isaac. Are you through with your work? We bought food."

The figures that appeared just then were Calasin and Minori, who was working part-time at the Production Guild Liaison Committee that Calasin ran. Calasin was the same as always, but Minori was in the everyday clothes she wore when she was spending time in town. She was dressed like a student on her way home from private lessons, and she was watching Shiroe as if in a good mood.

"Heya," Isaac said. "You lot, huh? Go on, siddown." He indicated the sofa with his chin. There was force in the gesture, and it could easily have scared people off, but Calasin said, "Sure, thanks," and sat down amiably. While Shiroe was thinking that Calasin's weapon was his friendliness, Minori came up beside him, dexterously tidied away the documents on the table, and set out the sandwiches and drinks they'd purchased.

“Shiroe, here. It’s ginger ale.”

“Thank you, Minori. There weren’t any problems at work?”

Minori shook her head. Calasin watched her with a shamefaced smile.

“Listen, Shiroe. This is pretty awkward, but do you think you could let Shopping District 8 have Minori? She’s got real talent; I’m not kidding.”

Shiroe didn’t know how to respond, but Isaac saved him. Cackling loudly, he thumped the other man hard on the shoulder and said, “Hey, Calasin. Hitting on middle school kids now, huh? What, you’re that starved for girls?”

In a panic, Calasin rushed to find an excuse: “That’s not it, Isaac, seriously. I was talking about work...”

Minori giggled. Apparently Calasin’s banter was routine for her.

Relieved, Shiroe took a swallow of his ginger ale and smiled. Akiba was bursting with beverages, and they were all homemade. The soda was flavored with ginger and honey, and it was very easy to drink.

He had a mountain of things to do, and the way ahead was perilous.

Shiroe’s ears were picking up on lots of unsettling news. The capture of Seventh Fall, where the Goblin King reigned, wasn’t over yet. To that end, the Round Table Council wanted the lower-level demographic that made its home in Akiba to raise its average level to at least 30.

However, Shiroe intended to piggyback another measure on that plan.

In order to make that happen, he needed to lay the groundwork now, and so he spoke to Isaac and Calasin about a further request for the People of the Earth knights’ training.

► 4

Riezé was swamped with work.

It wasn’t that Krusty’s disappearance had increased her regular duties with

the training unit. But as unease had spread through the guild, the number of matters that needed slight adjustments had grown.

Messages were no longer transmitting smoothly, and so every one of them needed confirmation. The time that had to be spent on human relationships—giving advice, listening to worries, consoling others—had increased, too.

What took the greatest toll on her was that she didn't know whether these duties were necessary or not.

Riezé had no idea what kind of work she would have to perform, and how far she would have to complete a task, in order for it to be “enough.” The underlying unease had driven her to an attempt to comprehend and monitor everything about the administration of D.D.D., and the vast amount of information had sent her flying with a single blow.

If she'd been able to give up then, all would have been well, but possibly due to her feelings of impatience, she'd worked herself very nearly to her limits and was causing trouble for the people around her.

She'd lost track of the priority order for things that had to be done, and she didn't even know where she was going. Everything she did or made seemed to be a failure, and day after day, she felt as if she was only getting in the way of the administration.

Her sleep was shallow, and she often bolted upright in bed in the middle of the night.

Her sense of perspective about events had gone off, so even slight trouble seemed to be a huge problem that would impede the guild's future, and she felt so frightened about that future that her teeth chattered.

Conversely, she'd sometimes underestimate matters that needed to be dealt with immediately, and the resulting damage had increased.

Even without the goodwill she felt toward Krusty, Riezé flattered herself that she'd watched him run his guild from as close a vantage point as possible. And it wasn't just her—all the members of Drei Klauen had held posts like that.

However, once Krusty was gone, she was forced to realize that she understood nothing about guild administration or the division of labor, or even

the reporting system.

The guild as a whole had an administration system that operated autonomously for each division, just as Krusty had promoted it, and this system was functioning incredibly well. If it had a flaw, it was that, during the month when Misa Takayama had been unable to act, D.D.D. had disintegrated in midair.

The fact that they'd made it through that shocking month was, without question, thanks to the organizational structure Krusty had created.

However, after the end of Snowfell, an invisible, metallic fatigue had seemed to gradually erode her. Not only that, but she still couldn't see the end of that darkness.

The ones who'd redeemed those days had been Henrietta and the others.

"You're looking pale again."

"...Am I?"

Today, once again, Henrietta had practically kidnapped Riezé and brought her to the Crescent Moon League's guild hall.

Ornamental plants had been placed here and there in the rather spacious dining hall, and the gaps between them were decorated with pictures and odd stuffed animals. It should have looked cluttered, but all the items were filled with the warmth peculiar to handmade things. The table was made from a simple beige wood that harmonized cheerfully with the orange-tinted lights.

It brought Riezé to recognize a homey warmth within the Crescent Moon League's dining hall.

She'd been invited over for a late lunch.

They were eating a cream stew made by a Chef named Girof. Even though the end of February was near, the days were cold, and it was a welcome feast.

They spoke very little; the meal was a quiet one.

Henrietta said the members of the Crescent Moon League had already had their lunch. In any case, nearly half of them had packed box lunches and gone elsewhere.

Tranquil time flowed through the afternoon guild hall. She heard voices in quiet conversation somewhere, and the noises of cleanup work from the kitchen.

They were the sounds of this midsized guild's everyday life, and they brought Riezé a sense of relief.

"Your eyes are looking grim, Riezé. Just like my liege's."

It was Akatsuki, the other guest, who'd spoken to her. The small, black-haired young woman was gazing at Riezé steadily with a slightly troubled expression. Now that she and Akatsuki were friends, Riezé understood this was a sign she wasn't just troubled—she was worried.

"I'm all right. I certainly haven't lost heart yet."

"You mustn't be too stubborn."

Henrietta, her face gentle, admonished Riezé. And yet she still had Akatsuki between her arms: She'd embraced her from behind.

"You're twenty, aren't you, Akatsuki?"

"Mm? Yes."

"And Henrietta, you're twenty-ei—"

"Ahem!"

Her probe was shut down, and Riezé let it drop without protest. The world held many things which shouldn't be pursued too far.

"I am twenty."

"Yes."

Akatsuki looked put out, but Riezé felt as if she'd been rescued by her.

The girl suffered from the disparity between her actual age and her appearance, and she loathed looking young, but if you asked Riezé, it was a characteristic to be envied. After all, it did mean you looked youthful.

However, since Riezé was in high school herself, if she said that, she was likely to cause friction. Even she knew that much.

“You know, it’s curious, isn’t it?”

Having thought that far, Riezé was struck by an abrupt realization that startled her.

Akatsuki was twenty, and a university student. Henrietta said she’d been a career woman employed by a large corporation. Mikakage was studying to become a confectioner at a vocational school for cooks, Minori was in middle school, and Nazuna was a dental assistant.

“My age?” Akatsuki asked.

“No, I just thought, in the old world, I’m sure we’d never have become friends.”

“You could be right.”

Akatsuki responded quietly; she looked bewildered. It was funny to see her friend being fussed over by Henrietta, and for the first time in a very long while, Riezé smiled.

It had been so long since she’d felt her cheeks rise that way that it startled her. Apparently she’d been far tenser than she’d thought.

“No, that isn’t true! They say cute attracts cute, after all. No matter what happened, dear Akatsuki and I would have met!”

“No one needs that declaration.”

“But lately you don’t get mad at me when I pat your head. Oh, I’m so fortunate!”

Henrietta and Akatsuki were messing with each other as usual, right in front of Riezé. From Henrietta’s expression, she might as well have been scattering hearts everywhere, and although Akatsuki looked sullen, she didn’t protest all that much. She probably didn’t like it, but she’d given up resisting. Riezé guessed this was probably because Akatsuki still felt a bit indebted after the previous year’s incident, but she didn’t extend a helping hand.

She thought Akatsuki probably needed the warmth of being held.

In any case, Riezé felt close to these two, and the time she spent with them was peaceful.

Her expression naturally softened into a smile. She even felt as though the heavy accumulation of numbing fatigue that ran from the back of her head to her spine was slowly melting and draining away.

“...Are things rough now that the scary man with glasses is gone?”

“Yes, they are. We’ve realized we were relying on Master Krusty quite a lot.”

Akatsuki, ducking her head like a cat taken against its will and enduring Henrietta’s attacks, quietly spoke to a smiling Riezé. Picking up Krusty’s slack was an issue that Riezé was currently confronting.

“My liege is having trouble, too.”

“Master Shiroe as well...? I suppose he would. When it came to diplomacy, Master Krusty was the face of the Round Table Council. In the time he’s been gone, things have been all right, but considering what’s to come, it’s clear that there will be trouble.”

“I’m very sorry, but we can’t handle the Round Table Council duties.”

True, Krusty’s disappearance was a big problem for the Council as well, but that was clearly something Riezé couldn’t handle. However, it was noteworthy that she’d finally matured enough to be honest about it.

As captain of the training unit, she was able to take command during raids. She could draft management plots, too. However, at the very most, these were game strategies. If it was all right to praise herself just a little bit for something, it would be for her adaption of game strategies for use in guild training in this current, other-world Akiba.

After the Catastrophe, Krusty had told them constantly, “Nothing is different from what it was before. The way we ran the guild then is the way we’ll run it now. Nothing will change. Our lives here will be no different from our lives on the other side.” Most of the guild members seemed to have assumed these were more of the “slippery” lines Krusty was particularly good at, but Riezé knew they had been his true feelings, with no exaggeration.

Not only that, but it was also very likely that he’d meant it when he’d said, “The world after the Catastrophe is just like reality, and it isn’t very exciting.” Just as Krusty had said, his days at D.D.D. had been unchanging and routine.

Shiroe, the young man Akatsuki called *her liege*, was also someone worthy of admiring stares. That young man, Log Horizon's guild master, had diverted capture techniques from the game, just as they were, and had captured *the Catastrophe*.

When his methods and policies were explained, they made sense. MMORPGs were communication games. For that reason, if you genuinely risked your life and used all the words you knew, *it was possible to use capture techniques from the game in real life*. She understood the logic, but she couldn't believe he'd taken it seriously and put it into action.

...Was it really all that strange, though?

Krusty and Shiroe were certainly special, but Michitaka of the Marine Organization, Roderick of the Roderick Trading Company, and Calasin of Shopping District 8, plus Soujiro, Isaac, Ains, Marielle, Henrietta, who was beside her now, Kushiyatama, and crowds of other people...

In a way, wasn't it true that the Catastrophe hadn't changed any of them?

In this world, which had been transformed beyond recognition and was still changing from moment to moment, they kept fighting, using the fact that they were themselves as their greatest weapon.

Krusty and Shiroe had meshed with their circumstances, but in terms of having unwavering selves and using their prior experiences to resolve the situations that confronted them, the others were in no way inferior to those two.

In other words, right now, Riezé was where Akatsuki had been at the end of the previous year.

She was competing in a dimension that was centered on game methods and manuals, asking herself whether this was a right answer or a mistake, and whether or not it was enough. As a result, she couldn't win, and the anxiety made her heart ache every day. She was just like Akatsuki, who'd brooded over her own level and lack of high-class equipment.

Riezé thought that this was the wrong approach. She needed to focus more on her own will and resolutions, on her preparations and how she lived. She

thought that having that center was what made Krusty and people like Michitaka and Isaac strong.

Not that I can gain self-confidence that quickly...

“I’m sure we’re causing you a lot of trouble, and I’m afraid we’ll probably continue to do so.”

“You needn’t worry about that. We know how difficult this is for you. Besides, no doubt Master Shiroe will do something.”

“...My liege doesn’t think of it as ‘trouble.’ Besides, even if you told him not to, he’d try to help you on his own.”

Riezé hadn’t expected them to respond to her statement like that.

Henrietta, her expression prim, assured her that things would be all right, while the petite, lovely girl she was hugging to her chest also blushed and smiled resolutely.

The girl was always expressionless, and when she did smile, it was as if flower petals had begun drifting down.

That fight changed Akatsuki. It must have changed me as well.

She had to take one more step forward. Not from impatience or unease, but because now was the time to deal with the issue she’d been putting off. With only Riezé and Takayama, who blamed herself, they couldn’t hope to improve the situation.

Now that Krusty was gone, D.D.D. needed Drei Klauen, the triumvirate.

► 5

In this world, there was a proliferation of magic items.

The many different types included weapons and armor, equippable items, documents, and even items that were shaped like furniture.

After the Catastrophe, there had been an explosive increase in available

magic items. However, even before that, Adventurers sought after one particular type for its convenience: “the bag.”

In *Elder Tales*, “container” would have been the accurate term for it. It was an item that could hold other items, and it came in a variety of shapes, from handy things like pouches and bags to larger items like crates, safes, and chests of drawers.

You could put all sorts of things inside ordinary container items, provided they had enough capacity. With magic container items, you could put in items regardless of size, decrease the weight of those items, or make a specific item you’d put in go through some sort of transformation. There were so many variations that it was hard to have a solid grasp of all of them.

Dazanek’s Magic Bag was a magic container item that could be equipped starting at level 45. There were magic container items with lower equip levels, but due to their holding capacities and the difficulty of getting them, they weren’t mainstream.

In addition, unless you were stocking and selling items as a production-class player, in ordinary use, the bag had a very decent capacity of two hundred kilograms. On top of that, there were high-level quests that increased the bag’s performance. It was a superb item that became a perennial favorite for many Adventurers.

Nearly all midlevel *Elder Tales* players had Dazanek’s Magic Bags, and the item could have been called the gateway to magic bags in general.

“Are you guys ready to go?”

“All set, Master.”

Naotsugu had poked his head into the living room, and Touya answered him proudly. In this big room, the junior members of the guild—Touya, Minori, Isuzu, and Rundelhaus—were preparing for a journey.

With Magic Bags, it would have been easy to consolidate all their belongings, but unfortunately, the younger group hadn’t gotten theirs yet. As a matter of fact, that was why they were going on a journey. The quest to obtain Dazanek’s Magic Bag—Get a Magic Bag—could be taken at level 45. At this point, there

wasn't much meaning in that restriction, but even after the Catastrophe, the levels at which items could be equipped were still binding.

In order to retrieve the materials to make Magic Bags, Touya and the others were about to leave the Kanto region for the very first time.

"The cart is ready as well, Naotsugu."

Minori, who'd made that additional report, had a notebook in her hand and was absorbed in trip preparations.

They were bound for the Redstone Mountains.

The distance was supposed to be around a hundred and sixty kilometers. Since they were going by horse-drawn cart, the whole trip would probably take about twenty days.

Touya was imagining as-yet-unseen landscapes and mountains, and it made him a little restless. "Well, if it's the Redstone Mountains... That's around Nagano, right? Mountains and rivers and woods! And what's more, villages we've never been to!"

"Hmm. It's been quite some time since I last journeyed. You may leave me, Rundelhaus Code, in charge of the rules."

"Come to think of it, you traveled to get here, right, big bro Rudy?" Touya continued.

"That's right. I traveled with Adventurers part of the way, but from Bogport to Akiba, I was on my own. As a result, I have plenty of experience."

"Yes, that's it. Load the water onto the cart in barrels."

"I know that!"

"Touya, here. Two more pairs of underwear."

"Minori, I told you, I already packed that stuff."

Touya couldn't stop his heart from fizzing with excitement. It had been a very long time since he'd traveled in their old world. Even long day trips had been rare. Besides, this time, it would be just him and his friends from the younger group, and they'd be spending their nights on the road. It sounded a lot more

interesting than a school trip. The idea of leaving in a cart tickled his sense of adventure, too.

Touya and the others had their belongings spread out over the floorboards.

Minori checked over them as they packed away spare clothes, preserved foods, and first aid supplies. That said, Touya didn't think this really needed as much thought as Minori was giving it.



Handmade clothing was one thing, but as long as they had enough durability left, equipment from *Elder Tales* automatically got rid of tears and dirt. That meant that if you spent all your time in armor, even if the only spare clothing you had was underwear, things would work out somehow. And when it came to food in this world, as long as you weren't looking for fun, you could get by on simple stuff.

Still, Touya didn't say anything so tactless. He knew Minori was doing her very best, and that was a good thing. Any older brother worth his salt looked after his little sister (although Minori said that she was his *older* sister).

"Hmm."

Beside him, Rundelhaus, who was down on his knees, began to paw through his luggage.

"What's wrong, big bro Rudy?"

"Hmmmmmm. My brush isn't here. Elegant Adventurers have a duty to keep their appearances neat and tidy."

"Huh?"

Ignoring the sound of Naotsugu's breathing—he seemed to want to jump in with a *Wait, really?*—Rundelhaus went on.

"This isn't good. That's an important item. It cost one hundred gold coins."

"Rudy."

Isuzu had spoken.

Setting down her own bag, which was made with ethnic-looking fabric, she deftly plucked a smoke-blue pouch from the luggage Rundelhaus had scattered around.

"It's in your toiletries set, Rudy. And pick up your things."

"I see, Mademoiselle Isuzu. Thank heavens you found it."

The two of them smiled, and as he watched the pair pick up the gear, Touya felt happy, too.

Rudy and Isuzu were both precious Log Horizon companions, and by now they

almost felt like siblings to him.

When he was little, Touya had played soccer. Looking back, he wasn't sure he'd really liked the sport that much, but he'd been full of energy, and a single ball was the only excuse he'd needed to run around the schoolyard with his friends after class.

Even after he wasn't able to use his legs anymore, Touya had shown up at his friends' gatherings several times.

However, after two months, he'd stopped coming.

It wasn't because he was jealous or resented them. Out of consideration for Touya, his friends had stopped playing soccer in front of him. It made him feel bad, and he couldn't bear to stay.

After that, he'd started to put some distance between himself and his friends. His friends' ability to smile was more important to him.

Even after Touya was forced to depend on a wheelchair, no one in his family had grimaced, not even once. Touya knew he was treasured. Still, logic aside, there were moments when a family member's expression would stiffen, or when they'd bite their lip. Touya was the sort of kid who felt pain if someone was forgoing smiles for his sake.

And so, when he saw Rundelhaus or Isuzu or Minori smile, he felt relieved.

He also respected Shiroe.

It wasn't just Rundelhaus's life that Shiroe had protected back then; he'd kept everyone smiling.

Shiroe had defended their time together, which could be spent doing things like this. That was more amazing than anything Touya had ever imagined.

"Mweh-heh-heh..."

After they'd finally gotten their luggage together and piled it into a small mountain, Isuzu hugged her lute case, petting it as if it was precious. Her eyes were sparkling.

The younger group was going hunting, alone, in order to get the materials necessary to make Magic Bags. It was a quest journey. When they'd come up

with that plan, he'd been the one who'd been happiest about it, but he thought Isuzu had seemed just as glad as he was. His own reasons were one thing, but he wasn't sure about Isuzu's reasons.

"Isuzu-sis, you're happy about the trip, too?" Touya asked. "How come?"

"Sure I'm happy. It'll be fun to go all together. Besides, doesn't it seem a little like a tour?"

A tour?

No one there, Naotsugu included, understood what she meant.

"I mean, you know, in the cart... *Twang-twang-braaaang!* Like that."

Isuzu got up and, still holding her case, gestured as if she were strumming it. Her pigtailed bounced happily as she did so, in time with her giddiness.

"A tour is a journey mewsicians take in order to perform. Famous artists often conduct them on a global scale, and independent artists pay their own way as they travel." Nyanta, who'd appeared from the kitchen with a tea set, explained this as he approached the coffee table near Naotsugu.

"A tour! Luckies! A performance trip across the Milky Way!"

"They're only going a bit past Izu..."

Tetora, who'd appeared next, ran to Naotsugu, who'd spoken after. When Akatsuki and Shiroe came in—as if to further dissuade the Cleric—all the Log Horizon members were in one place.

After hearing it explained like that, even Touya recognized the term. He'd never been to a live music venue or the Budokan stadium, but he'd seen video clips online.

Touya, Minori, Isuzu, and Rundelhaus, plus Serara (who was attending from "the neighbors"—the Crescent Moon League): The five of them would pile into a cart and leave "on tour." He'd never thought of it before, but it struck him as a very exciting idea.

"I see! A tour, huh! Like, *ba-ba-boom.*"

When Touya struck a nearby rucksack with the palms of his hands as though it

were a drum, Isuzu looked a bit startled, but she smiled almost immediately and spun around for him, mimicking instruments with her lips: *eeeowm, eeowm, shreee*.

“A tour, hm...?” Rundelhaus asked. “I’ve never heard the word before, but that’s impressive. Are we going to travel around the villages with the forty-two, then?”

“No, no,” Touya replied helpfully. “We won’t hit *that* many villages this time. Right, Minori?”

“If we’re going all the way to the Redstone Mountains,” Minori began, “then, according to Shiroe’s map, there are only about four or five villages.”

“But hey, why not? Let’s go to ’em,” Touya proposed immediately. “We’ll need to tank up on water either way.”

Climbing mountains and hunting small wyverns would probably be fun all by itself, but Touya figured visiting local villages to perform sounded like just as much fun. If they ran across a village, they’d spend at least one night there anyway. If they could manage to do both, it would be way better.

As everyone voiced their agreement, Isuzu whooped. “Yaaay! It’s a tour! Yeah, a tour!” Her smile was absolutely dazzling.

“Right! Then I’ll be in charge of management and showing the way.”

Rundelhaus stood to make his proclamation, and his face was radiant, too.

Touya didn’t know much about music, but he could let his strength take over and whale away on a drum. Serara could manage a simple keyboard instrument, he remembered, and Isuzu had been teaching Minori to play the lute. They might not be able to measure up to a show by real artists, but just helping Isuzu out sounded like more than enough fun.

“Oh, I’m so happy!” Isuzu shouted, hugging Rundelhaus’s head and pulling him close to her, the way she always did. Rundelhaus was the oldest of Touya’s group, and he was tall, but he didn’t seem to feel up to dealing with Isuzu’s physical affection: He couldn’t resist, and she always did whatever she wanted with him.

Rudyyyyy, you're way uncool. Heh-heh-heh.

Touya came very close to laughing at him, but he swallowed the words back down.

Truth be told, whatever he might say, Touya was in Minori's debt and couldn't defy her, which made him just the same as the other guy. That hit hard, and gave him pause.

On this trip, he and Rundelhaus would have to exhibit masculine dignity. He remembered Naotsugu's expression as he'd outlined his theory, arms folded: *When it comes to the crunch, real men put themselves on the line!*

Of course they were dependable comrades, but three of their companions on this journey were girls.

As a man, he (and his friend Rundelhaus) had no business doing anything but protecting them.

"Minori, Minori! I'm going to buy tons of replacement strings and things!"

"Oh, Isuzu, honestly!"

This was what was going through Touya's mind as he watched the members of his group cheerfully bantering.

► 6

There were several different types of cart in *Elder Tales*, and the technological revolution that had followed the formation of the Round Table Council had surged over even them: Apparently cart springs had always been used in certain high-class carts, but suspension springs, spring models, and lightweight materials were being introduced as well.

The Roderick Trading Company developed items that made liberal use of freakish technology, appalling all of Akiba's residents. They had absolutely no idea what the point was in giving a cart a tail fin out of consideration for aerodynamics. However, tricks like this, which were the product of a few

rampaging individuals, were gradually penetrating the market, beginning with the simple, cheap ones.

After all, all sorts of products were made in Akiba, but for the People of the Earth, carts were the highest in demand.

The People of the Earth had low mana, and it was hard for them to use Akiba-made items that required magic. In addition, most of the items created in the pursuit of the comforts of modern Earth made them wonder why anyone would go overboard like that.

Even if it was the sort of item an Adventurer could buy with pocket money, the same wasn't true for the People of the Earth. Of course, this was fine when it came to the expensive items the lords and aristocrats of Eastal purchased, but that meant the demand for them wouldn't grow.

In that respect, new-model carts were truly ideal products.

While some of them used magic, others did not, and these carts—made more convenient with mechanical devices—could be used by People of the Earth. If their performance was improved too far, the required Driver level went up, which was a shortcoming; but fortunately, Driver and Trader were common classes among People of the Earth. Since there were a lot of them, it wasn't too much of an issue.

Naturally, the prices for such objects were high, but carts weren't consumable items. If a merchant was using one, in terms of business efficiency, it was an amount that could be recouped from profits in a relatively short time, and when farmers bought them, instead of an individual making the purchase, the whole village often put up the money and bought it together. As a result, the high prices were also seldom a problem.

Carts were at the top of the list of articles People of the Earth wanted to purchase from Akiba, right next to chrome-molybdenum steel farming tools.

The cart Isuzu and the others had bought was one such product.

Of course, there were high-end carts meant for Adventurers as well, but ordinary carts were the standard. For instance, flame-resistant, cold-resistant, anti-shock, defense-rank-80 properties were too much for Isuzu's group to

handle.

As long as it was sturdy, easy to maneuver, and could hold lots of cargo and carry five or six people, that was enough. They'd considered wagons and closed carriages as well, but had settled on a covered cart. While they were planning to camp in tents, so they wouldn't *have* to hope for livability from the cart itself during rainy weather, they'd splurged and gone with water-repellent cloth for the covering.

It was a comparatively lightweight cart, too. Nyanta and Roderick had advised them that, since Isuzu's group was still midlevel and the road to their destination would often be rough, it would be best if the cart wasn't all that heavy, and the group had made their decision based on that advice.

Since they'd split the cost equally five ways, this cart really and truly belonged to Isuzu and the others. Serara and Minori had purchased quilted cushions at the market and installed them inside the canopy. The luggage area was waterproofed, and even if it got flooded, anything they put in there would probably be fine. Touya had proposed putting the LOG HORIZON mark on the canopy, and they'd agreed unanimously.

The fact that, afterward, Minori had attempted to draw a picture, and Isuzu had put her in a full nelson to stop her, was something nobody really wanted to remember.

The horses that would draw the cart were dealt with in the style of the Adventurers: by purchasing a summoning pipe.

Summoning pipes were a magic item used to call the animals that Adventurers used. Some high-ranking versions could summon griffins and other flying or fantastic beasts. The item group included a vast number of types, and even if you limited it to the ones that simply summoned horses, there were quite a lot of them. There were all sorts of elements—the type of horse that was summoned and its abilities, the amount of time a horse would help you once it was summoned, the number of times it could be used, the amount of time that had to pass before you could use it again—and naturally, the prices were also all over the map.

In this world, there were “regular horses” that were used mainly by the

People of the Earth. These were animals that spent their lives with you; they wouldn't suddenly appear when you blew a whistle, and they wouldn't run away when the time limit came.

However, these horses had to be fed and cared for, and the Adventurers couldn't use their levels to make them obey, so the summoning pipe was the safest option.

Isuzu's group had bought a Lyman's Twin Horse Whistle.

Considering the size of the cart they'd purchased, they were going to need two horses, and buying one item that could summon two animals had been cheaper than buying two whistles. Still, the truth was that they'd fallen in love with the name and the horses at first sight, and that had been just as important. *Twin Horse Whistle* had made them think of Minori and Touya, and the horses it summoned—which had been billed as cart horses—were tough and powerfully built...and also incredibly cool.

“Wafaaah. Wafaaah!”

Serara was joyfully feeding cabbage to the horses with incomprehensible cries of delight. Since they were summoned horses, there was no need to feed them, but apparently that didn't matter.

With practiced motions, Rundelhaus was using a rag to wipe down one of the horse's necks. From behind him, Isuzu spoke to him in a hushed voice.

“Say, Rudy?”

“What's wrong? Why so timid?”

“Do you think they'll get mad if I touch them?”

“It should be fine. They're docile, and they don't seem that restive at the moment.”

The horse glanced at Isuzu. Then, as if it had lost interest, it concentrated on the cabbage Serara and the others were feeding it. Isuzu thought it might just be greedy, rather than docile, but her curiosity won out.

Swallowing, she touched it gingerly.

She'd borrowed a horse and ridden it to the Choushi summer camp, but when

she touched this one, she felt its muscles under her palm. Apparently, even when there was no particular reason, touching large animals was a profoundly moving experience.

It shifted from one foot to the other, stirring, and even that let her feel the horse's overwhelming muscles at work. This was a force that brooked no arguments, and it reminded Isuzu that the horse really was a living creature.

Not that she was making excuses, but Isuzu hadn't touched the skin of other living things very often. She didn't think it was just her: She doubted ordinary high school girls in general came into contact with large animals on a routine basis. Once you were in high school, you were past the age for cuddling with your parents. She sometimes hugged girls she was friends with when they were joking around, but of course everyone was clothed, and there was never any direct skin contact.

She was nodding to herself as she thought. *Yeah, living creatures really are amazing...*

"Hm? What's the matter, Mademoiselle Isuzu? Are you frightened of the horse?"

Rundelhaus leaned in to look at her. He seemed worried.

"No."

She shook her head emphatically.

"I'm not scared at all. It's cute."

I see. That's all right, then. As Rundelhaus spoke, Isuzu put her hand on his hair and petted it. His mouth bent into a dissatisfied line, and he looked cross, but that just made her feel awkward, for which she ended up ruffling his mop of hair out of spite.

Yes, it's fine. I'm okay with touching dogs.

Isuzu had just confirmed this for herself.

The moment she'd touched the horse, she'd felt startled and incredibly embarrassed somehow, and she'd camouflaged the feeling by touching Rundelhaus. He'd resisted, and she felt a bit bad, but even so, there was no help

for it.

Isuzu was still a little uncomfortable around boys. She thought her former, high school self would probably have been uncomfortable around a horse (an animal!) this big, too. The idea of a creature that wasn't her, was something large, something whose thoughts she couldn't read...really was a little scary.

But she was fine with Rundelhaus.

She would have expected no less from her personal Guard of the Morning Stroll. He was a golden retriever.

"Do you want to feed them some cabbage, too, Isuzu?"

As if to disguise her own thoughts, she latched on to Serara's words.

"Yes, I do, I do. Here, Rudy, you too!" Isuzu all but shouted.

"I'm fine," he replied. "I don't need to."

"You can't be left out, you know. These little guys are part of our tour group, too," Isuzu spoke loudly, in an attempt to blow away the awkwardness.

Snorting and glaring at her, the horse seemed startled by her sudden noise. As she stared at it, eyes round, Rundelhaus scolded her, too: "Horses are skittish, so you mustn't yell around them! Never!"

Are you skittish? she asked it with her eyes. The disgruntled horse twitched its ears, but it didn't look at her.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she apologized.

The mere idea of having this big, lovely companion dislike her was a shock.

"Give it a better apology than that," Rundelhaus said.

That was a tough one. Isuzu didn't have any apologies for horses in her repertoire. In a situation like this, there was nothing for it but to throw herself on the mercies of Rundelhaus's indiscriminating, tranquil, puppy-dog aura.

"I'm sorry. Go on, Rudy, you apologize, too!"

"Wha—?! For the love of... Fine. Forgive us, O horse."

At first, the horse had been out of sorts, but thanks to Isuzu and Rundelhaus's

tribute, it seemed as if it just might open its heart to them. By the time they'd presented it with four carrots and made up, the sun was well on its way down the sky.

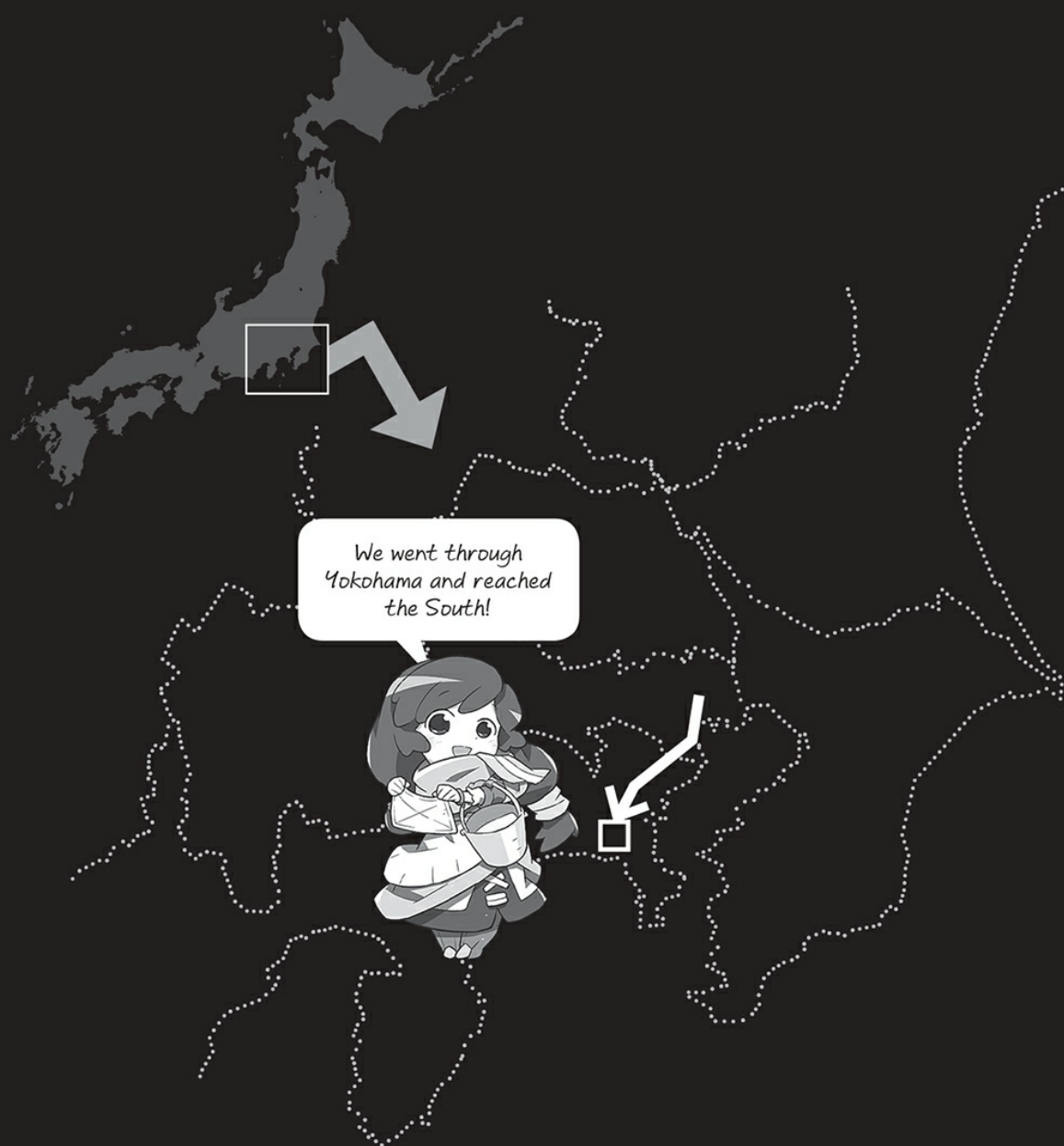
Rundelhaus had seemed reluctant at first, but now his mood had improved, and he looked like he was having fun. He joined Serara, Minori, and the others in taking care of the horses, took them back to the guild house, and even gave them names (sweet, delicious-sounding ones!).

And so, before they knew it, the day of their departure had arrived.

2

DEPARTURE

100



► 1

Unusually for this season, on the morning of their departure, there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Minori and the others had been escorted as far as the Ancient Court of Eternal Ice by the senior members of their guild, but at that point, they piled into the cart and began their journey due west.

With Eight Canals High Coast on their left, Minori's group crossed the river.

The waterway had been called the Tama River in their old world, and even in Theldesia, it was fairly wide. This was a familiar area for Minori and the others. It was about two hours from Akiba on horseback, and there were lots of wild monsters in it, so they'd used it as one of their training grounds.

However, once they'd crossed the river and gone a little farther, they were in completely unknown territory.

At this distance, it was hard to make day trips out from Akiba, and it marked the border of the lands with which their group had no experience. Even so, they felt more excited than nervous.

Before long, the zone name changed to Zooland Meadow.

The terrain in this area was a mixture of wilderness and meadows with grass that grew as high as Minori's waist. The grass streamed in the wind, rippling like waves. Here and there, the ruins of small buildings protruded from the meadow. Most of them were completely uninhabited, providing shelter for vines and animals.

"I see something that looks like cows."

“Huh? Where, where, where? Where are they?”

Isuzu’s and Serara’s voices came from behind the covered rear seat.

Minori, who was sitting in the driver’s seat, checked to make sure that Touya was holding the reins, then turned back. Isuzu was pointing at a herd of large quadrupeds, out on the meadow.

“I think those are Green Elk,” Minori told them.

She’d learned about monster characteristics and distribution from Shiroe, and it was already coming in handy.

“Are they dangerous?”

“It’s fine. They’re far away, and I hear they’re docile.”

In *Elder Tales*, monsters were enemies that needed to be destroyed, but not all types were equally aggressive. If their group approached them, the distance at which they’d show hostility varied. Some monsters would attack Adventurers the moment they saw them, while others would ignore them even if they got close, as long as they didn’t launch an attack. Green Elks were the second type.

Minori’s group’s cart was traveling down a road of red clay. Asphalt showed through from time to time, but as a rule, the cart rolled down the rutted red road at about twice the speed at which the group could have walked.

The wind was still cold, but it wasn’t the biting chill of winter. It was cool, brisk spring air that held a hint of freshness. And although the land was desolate, Minori thought it was beautiful.

The road traced very leisurely curves over the meadow. In general, this road was supposed to run southwest, parallel to the coast, but the ocean was several kilometers away, and she couldn’t see it. The rolling grassland hid it, too.

Minori was remembering Shiroe’s lecture.

On Earth, he’d told her, this road was known as National Route 1, and it had once been called the Tokaido, “the eastern sea road.” Of course Minori had known the term *national route*, but she’d never given much thought as to what it actually meant. She’d thought, vaguely, that it was a road with lots of lanes that got lots of traffic.

According to Shiroe, national routes were arterial roads managed by the nation of Japan. These major roads formed a web across the whole of Japan, and the country took care of them, while the roads that linked them—the ones that were midsized and smaller—were managed by local governments. This efficient division of labor had been devised in the Meiji era and had been in use ever since.

National Route 1, which linked Nihonbashi in Tokyo with Osaka, was the very first road in the national highway project. When she heard this, Minori had sensed something like history about it.

There was a corresponding road in the world of Theldesia, too, although it paled in comparison to the well-maintained, four-lane national highway. This was the red clay road Minori and the others were traveling down.

“Say, Minori. The weather’s great, so can we go a little faster?”

In response to Isuzu’s bright voice, Minori flipped through her notebook.

Think we can do it?

It’ll work, it’ll work!

Let’s do our best!

In the presence of yours truly, the road will manage it!

Awright!

Urged on by her friends’ voices, Minori felt stirred up, too. “Let’s do it!” she said. —And promptly made a mistake.

Late in the afternoon, when they’d hurried farther down the red clay road without stopping at the village of Karube, all of a sudden, the rigging that hitched the horses to the cart came undone.

As Minori and Touya watched, startled, the horses gave a single loud neigh, then took to their heels, disappearing over the horizon.

Minori and the others were left stranded in the cart on the road, looking at one another blankly. After a short while, they burst out laughing.

Lyman’s Twin Horse Whistle had hit its time limit.

No one had noticed that the time restriction—six hours per day—was about to run out. They laughed about that, too, but more than anything, they hadn't expected the horses to make a break for it like that just because the time limit was up.

"Oh, honestly! The silly things ate cabbage from my hand, remember?"

"From mine, too..."

"Geez, they've got no human feeling. Traitors!"

"That's because they're horses."

"Would you call them trait-horses, then?"

"'Horses,' he says. 'Horses.' 'Horses,' agh, I can't take it anymore. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Isuzu and Serara rolled around inside the cart, laughing. Touya and Rundelhaus, and of course Minori, laughed, too. Even though Isuzu and the others were talking like this, the horses had gazed at them with such cute, round eyes that even Minori had given them vegetables. Those twins had definitely swindled them out of snacks.

Between the coaxing and the way they'd taken off without a backward glance once their working hours were over, the horses were just too clever, and they couldn't bring themselves to hate them.

They're much more worldly-wise than my twin and I, Minori chuckled, feeling impressed. A grassland at dusk, and a cart with no horses. They'd made a huge blunder and were firmly stuck, but Minori and the others had laughed so hard that none of them felt very bad.

"No help for that. Here, Minori."

Minori was still giggling. Touya took her hand, and the whole group got out of the cart.

Her feet were unsteady after riding in the cart for so long, but Touya supported her. Minori's little brother was almost too perfect.

On the night when she'd become conscious of her love for Shiroe, while she was writhing in the darkness, Touya had stayed close the entire time. She

wouldn't tell him this, but she was very proud of him.

"The horses ran away, but this is exhilarating in its own way, isn't it!"

With a big stretch, Rundelhaus looked around. "And? Where are we, roughly?" he said.

According to Minori's map, they seemed to be about halfway between the inn at Karube and the Wistria settlement.

However, whichever one they went to, with a horseless cart, they'd be lucky if they got there by the middle of the night. Of course, they'd be able to use Lyman's Twin Horse Whistle again once the recast time was up, but that would take another eighteen hours. It would probably be about ten o'clock the next morning.

The five of them decided that, in that case, they should just steel themselves and camp for the night.

They worked together to move the cart to the side of the road so that their stalled group wouldn't block the way and cause trouble for any merchants or Adventurers.

Then they began to set up camp.

Their camp was a total disaster, and that was putting it mildly.

Because Minori's group had been clumsy, their preparations had taken much longer than they'd expected. Serara had put on New Wife's Apron and enthusiastically made stew, but by the time it was finished, it was already completely dark.

Minori was a modern middle schooler, and to her, four o'clock—the time when the horses had run off—was nothing more than late afternoon. They'd wandered around the area looking for a suitable campsite for a little over an hour after that, and the sun had started to set before they began cooking.

They got the fire ready and pitched the tent, making mistakes as they went, and by the time they'd gotten everything into a semblance of order, it was probably around eight in the evening.

The tent Touya had eagerly set up was off balance and listed to the right, and

when the five of them saw it, they laughed. Everyone's hands were dirty with earth and grass stains, but even that was just another excuse for them to point and laugh at one another.

The stew Serara had made was watery, and even if they were being tactful, no one could have called it good. Rundelhaus fished out a string of carrot slices that were still joined at one side, and Serara was terribly ashamed and apologized over and over, but it wasn't enough to dampen the party's spirits.

When Minori heard the word "nature," at best, she thought of what she'd see in a nature park. The mountain hiking course she'd walked on a school trip to Oze was as far as her imagination went. That was all the experience she had, and so she was surprised to discover that "nature" had far fewer flat areas than she'd expected.

The surface of the grassland where they were sitting was dotted with pieces of shattered concrete, and tree roots twisted under the soil. When Touya carelessly plopped down cross-legged, he sprang up with an "Ow!"

Inside the tent, things were sure to be at an angle, so even when they laid out their beds, they might not be able to sleep soundly.

Even so, the five of them smiled and ate warm stew under the starlight.

Between breaking up and passing around red bean buns from their luggage, remembering the heartless horses, stirring the bonfire so that clouds of sparks went up, and inspecting the axles of the car using Magic Lights, the five of them stayed up quite late under a night sky filled with countless stars.

As far as the beginning of a journey went, it was nothing laudable; it was awkward and clumsy. Still, it was their first long expedition.

The thought that they were the only ones for several kilometers in any direction thrilled even Minori. She felt exhilarated, happy, and anxious all at once, as if she were on the verge of flying off somewhere.

She wanted even just a little more power, so that she could catch up to her beloved Shiroe.

She was happy that she'd been able to leave on her journey to obtain it with friends.

On this spring night, all the trouble they'd encountered that day and all the mistakes they'd made spun together until they almost seemed to be blessing Minori and the others. Now, even things that would have made them hate themselves and want to go home if they'd been alone struck the group as entertaining jokes that added color to the journey.

Saying "I'm practicing!" Isuzu began to play a cute little tune. She repeated it over and over, and Minori and the others hummed along far into the night.

Only when the sky began to lighten did they regret not having gone to bed sooner.

► 2

Three days after their departure, Touya and the others were in the town of Southern.

As they'd planned, they'd arrived in the village just after the sun began its journey down the sky. Waving greetings at the villagers from their cart again and again, Touya's group made for an inn that had a sign with a horse on it.

The local residents called the road Touya's group had followed "the Highway to the West."

To the locals, highways were the main arteries of Yamato, boasting an unprecedented amount of traffic. The villages along these highways were larger than the surrounding fishing and farming villages; they became centers of physical distribution for their areas, and from time to time, they held markets. As a result, traders came and went frequently, and it was ordinary for such towns to have inns.

Touya and the others had heard all this in advance, but after starting their journey, they had learned:

There was a reason for everything.

When they'd looked at the map, they'd thought, *Why would anyone make a road that winds around like this? Wouldn't it be more efficient to just make it go*

to the destination in a straight line? However, once they'd actually traveled on that road, they saw deep forests and depressions or hills that hindered the creation of a straight path. With modern construction machinery, things might have been different, but in this medieval world, it couldn't be done.

There were reasons behind the locations of each village, too. Many elements twined together organically—the location of nearby water sources, its relationship to the highway, whether there was flat land that could be cultivated and the distance to forests and other resource-rich areas—and the villages were built in places that made you think, *Yes, building here was the right choice.*

Villages that were particularly convenient and whose populations had grown were likely to expand until they were proper towns. Southern had developed for all sorts of reasons—resources, geography, importance to trade, and the safety of the vicinity—and for the area, it was a comparatively large People of the Earth stronghold.

The first floor of the inn had been billed as a tavern, but it felt more like an assembly hall than a tavern or restaurant. The hearty, rustic building was enormous, and its first floor was a high-ceilinged space that was bigger than a classroom. Its floor was pieced together from brick-like blocks, and for about half of the hall, floorboards had been laid over the bricks.

The inn's reception desk and cashier were located in one spot, and the place used a unique ordering method in which a seated, cheerful-looking elderly individual shouted out any orders for food or drink. The old man had a huge dog at his feet, and even as he dozed by the stove, he relayed customer requests to his granddaughters, who ran the tavern.

At a big table, People of the Earth with bronzed skin who looked like sailors were enjoying an early round of drinks. The menu consisted mostly of marine products... That and liquor.

Half an hour after entering the inn, Touya's group was performing with the biggest table at their backs.

Apparently, in a People of the Earth village with very little entertainment, the thought of turning them down never occurred to their hosts, especially when

they weren't asking for much by way of compensation.

Serara played a toylike, foot-pumped porta-organ while Touya drummed on the back of a wooden crate. Isuzu and Minori played their lutes in turn alongside impromptu vocal work, sung by whoever happened to be free at the time.

Their show was more like a student exhibition than a gig, but the crowd of villagers who'd gathered in the hall looked like they genuinely enjoyed it.

The innkeeper's granddaughters (and there were a lot of them!) carried liquor as if they'd gone mad, their faces bright red. Apparently, they racked up record sales.

The old man, who had pure white eyebrows like a goat's, told the group, "Just for you kids, room and board are free," and that made them even livelier. Toast after toast was called, and Isuzu in particular was mobbed by People of the Earth and showered with praise.

Touya was having too much fun: The crate had been a clothing case, and he accidentally struck it hard and broke it. Minori got mad at him for that, but even she was happy.

They'd heard that Rundelhaus was a former People of the Earth noble, and true to Touya's mental image of a noble, he was running this banquet as if he was really enjoying it.

After all, Rundelhaus had launched the whole affair by speaking to the innkeeper: "We are a group of traveling Adventurers, and our musician says she would like to stage a single night's performance at this inn. We won't make a nuisance of ourselves. Could you see your way to providing us with a venue?"

After that, he'd gone up on stage first and introduced Isuzu, Touya, and the rest. When the performance began, he retreated to a corner, bright blond hair gleaming, and waved the entire time. From the look in his eyes, you'd have thought he was watching the most entertaining thing in the world.

It brought Touya to think, in the end, that Rundelhaus was a pretty amazing guy.

When Touya had to sit out from his soccer group, he hadn't been able to

cheer them on with a truly happy face like that. This time around, the thought had put a lump in his throat and had made him perform a bit forcefully. Isuzu might not notice such subtleties, but that was all right. It was fine to share this sort of respect exclusively between men.

They stayed up very late that night.

The five of them had sung all the songs they could think of, and they'd given the best performance they could.

Of course they'd squeezed in meals and breaks, but every time they'd rested, a group of People of the Earth that hadn't been in the assembly hall earlier had come in, looking dejected, and asked whether the day's performance had ended, and whether they'd missed it. They'd added one more song for these people, and then another, and every time they did, the show got longer and longer. By the time the old innkeeper stood up and yelled, "That's it for today. Everyone's tired, and there's work to do tomorrow! Go home, g'wan!" it was already five hours past sundown.

"The girls are going to sleep now, you hear?! Rudy, you need to wrap up warm."

"Touya, Rundelhaus, sleep well."

"Good night, Touya and Rundelhaus."

On that note, the three girls, who'd already changed clothes, disappeared into the room they'd been given.

Although there was no bath, the inn employees had kindly heated water for them, and the girls had used it to give themselves sponge baths and wash their hair. Touya and Rudy had just sluiced the dust off, leaving everything else for the next morning.

When they parted ways in the corridor and entered their rooms, the rooms were—as befitted an inn where traders stayed—even more trim and tidy than they'd expected. Thick, quilted coverlets decorated the plank beds, and compared to their rock-littered camps, it was heaven.

"Magic Light."

In the midst of the light Rundelhaus summoned, the two briefly checked their luggage, which they had brought in from the cart, and then took seats on their beds.

Their throats were hoarse, bellies full, and arms leaden. All of it was due to the huge ruckus, but in their inn room, Touya and Rundelhaus savored the echoes of that happiness.

This wasn't like the journey Touya had imagined when he thought about going to hunt Wyverns; he thought it was much better.

When the five of them worked together and journeyed across the wilderness all on their own, it was like an adventure program all by itself, but on the other hand, camping in the wilderness was much harder than he'd thought it would be. Touya didn't want to admit it, but he was a modern kid who was used to city living, not a wild boy.

Besides, the idea of stopping at villages and performing music had been a big hit and a whole lot of fun. It had been like a festival, and being in the brightest spot in the center of it had been a heady experience.

On the bed, he stretched and groaned, but the excitement was still there, like the sound of the surf, and he doubted he'd be able to sleep.

".....Heh-heh."

".....is...right. Uh-huh..... Yes..... Knew it!"

In the quiet room, he could hear fragments of the bright voices next door.

He couldn't tell what they were saying, but from the tone and quality of the voices, he knew they belonged to Serara and Isuzu. Minori also seemed to be part of the conversation. He could hear soft, giggly laughter from all three of them.

"They're quite energetic, aren't they?" Rundelhaus quipped.

"Yeah, way too much energy."

Rundelhaus had sounded as if he were biting back a smile, and Touya sat up, agreeing with him.

"I wonder what they're discussing."

“Curious, Rudy...?”

“Perish the thought. I’m not so vulgar that I would interest myself in ladies’ secrets. I merely wondered at the fact that they hadn’t yet run out of things to talk about.”

“Well, yeah, they’re girls.”

Biting back a grin, Touya responded with an answer that wasn’t an answer at all.

He thought back to when he’d been in school. When girls’ conversation grew enthusiastic, it got out of control. They could stay excited for half a day, or even a whole day, over the pattern on a pair of socks. Touya and the other boys could never understand it.

He thought Minori had a relatively calm personality for a girl, but even then, once she got going, there was nothing anyone could do. He’d once been given a description of the pudding from some shop in front of the station that went on for half a day, and he really didn’t think he could match that level of excitement.

However, from what he’d seen, even Rundelhaus seemed happy. He spoke as if the girls’ chatter puzzled him, but he was polishing his Magician’s Gauntlets with a smile on his face.

“You look pretty cheerful yourself, big bro Rudy.”

“Hm. This is, erm, because one must maintain one’s weapons.”

“Uh-huh. Guess I’ll do that, too, then.”

Touya began inspecting the leather belts of the armor he’d packed.

Right before they’d set out on their journey, the group had had a Hermit artisan look at their gear. There was no way it would have gotten damaged or broken in a few days, so any maintenance was about 20 percent caution and 80 percent for show.

It was already close to the middle of the night, no less. They were physically tired, and it wasn’t as if they had to tend to their armor now, so why were they awake?

The answer was a bit embarrassing: They didn't really want to sleep.

It had been a magical evening.

Touya and Rundelhaus kept talking, unwilling to part with the night, as if it held jewels they hadn't yet discovered.

They spoke about the cart, the horses, their journey. About the food, and the camping, and the battles.

Before stopping at this village, they'd come across a Wild Boar and had managed to vanquish it easily. Minori had been very cautious, but they'd heard that strong monsters didn't appear in the vicinity of the highway anyway, and combat in this zone didn't seem to be a problem.

Then they talked about their companions again.

Rundelhaus, looking dejected, suddenly muttered with a sigh, "Touya, listen. Why is Mademoiselle Isuzu so pure and innocent?"

"...Is she?"

To Touya, Isuzu didn't seem all that innocent or childlike. She wasn't calm or intellectual, but she did act her age. She was a good friend who understood the feelings of the people around her. He could understand why Minori had become close friends with her.

"She hugs me at the drop of a hat, you know, and she tries to comb my hair."

"Oh."

That was true.

But it was something she did to Rundelhaus, never to Touya.

"I feel as if she may be making light of me somehow... Don't laugh, Touya. I'm being serious."

Trying to choke back the laughter that had welled up inside him, Touya fell over onto the bed, holding his stomach and twisting around. Wiping away the tears that had appeared at the corners of his eyes, he searched for a response. It was a tough problem. Any answer he gave would be funny.

"Uh, listen."

“Yes?”

“It means you’re special.”

“Special?”

As Touya spoke, he was fighting back the urge to laugh. An image of Isuzu striking a powerful stance, lips compressed into a dissatisfied line, saying, “Rudy’s my henchman, so he’s special!” popped into his mind, and as a result, his abdominal muscles gave an awful spasm.

“That’s what Isuzu-sis does when she has fun being with somebody and she’s feeling happy about it.”

“Is it?”

“Yuh-huh.”

Rundelhaus folded his arms, muttering to himself. He seemed to be trying to internally come to grips with something.

“Still, I don’t think it means ‘especially pulchritudinous,’ or ‘especially godly,’ or ‘especially magnificent and mighty.’ What does she think of me? The way you Adventurers express your emotions is a bit strange.”

Well, uh, Rudy, your “pulchritudinous” is a bit strange, too.

...But Touya didn’t say it. The bewildered Rundelhaus was Touya’s precious older friend. Right now, he was also a member of his party and a fellow Adventurer.

“You go places with Isuzu quite a lot, too, Rudy.”

“As if I could let a lady walk alone. Mademoiselle Isuzu is a lovely woman. She might get pulled into something untoward.”

Touya’s tightly compressed lips crinkled into a wavy line, but he felt like patting himself on the back for having kept things at that level. He really liked this young blond guy.

The performance they’d just put on rose in his ears again. He felt itchy and impatient, and he wanted to break into a run.

“It doesn’t matter what it is. We’re friends either way.”

“Well, yes, perhaps, but...”

When Touya spoke, he did his best to look serious.

Rundelhaus tilted his head as if he wasn’t really convinced, but he did listen.

Then the conversation turned to their future plans.

They intended to follow the red clay highway to the Deserted Castle of Ariba. Although the Highway to the West didn’t run beside the ocean, it crossed the plains on the Pacific side of Yamato in a general way, linking Akiba with Minami. To get to their destination, the Redstone Mountains, they’d have to leave the highway at the Deserted Castle of Ariba, then take a smaller road, or they might be forced to travel through trackless mountains.

Touya didn’t hate combat.

Of course, it frightened him and grossed him out, and it hurt, but it seemed as though that only made his ties to his companions stronger, and it felt as if he’d accomplished something. Now that they were Adventurers in this other world, monsters were a reality. If they wanted to live here, it was best to have combat abilities.

“Starting tomorrow, we’ll be solidly in the Sakawa region, then.”

“Yeah. Can’t wait!”

“We should sleep soon. While traveling, Touya, one should avoid fatigue like the plague.”

The two of them lay down on their own beds.

Then they fell asleep, wholly satisfied.

► 3

On Earth, the Sakawa region was the plain that included Odawara.

Until now, Minori hadn’t been particularly good at geography, but in this world, she understood it with an ease that mystified her. When she thought,

This is where we're going to go, she grew interested, and things stayed in her mind.

According to Shiroe's knowledge and the information she'd looked up in Akiba beforehand, this area was water-rich and focused on agriculture. It was dotted with small People of the Earth settlements, and the main crops were rice and wheat.

The enemies were mainly nature-types, and there were lots of Wild Dogs, Wild Boars, and plant monsters. However, even these lived in the forests and mountainous areas. The plains and farming villages weren't absolutely safe, but the levels of the monsters they were relatively likely to run into were low, and so was the encounter rate.

Still, when they entered the Sakawa region, Minori's group felt a faint tension, and they grew warier.

It was a slight difference—the scent of the wind, the rustle of the treetops—but it definitely reached them, telling them that something was off. In fact, in the half day since their departure, they'd seen monsters running away in the distance twice, and although they'd only been skirmishes, they had fought battles.

They hadn't taken damage, of course, but it was a warning that something was different.

"I mean, there was a Dire Rat."

"Yeah, that startled me..."

Even as they talked, the cart gradually made its way up an increasingly steep road to higher ground.

When, climbing slowly, they reached the top of the gentle slope, Minori's group saw a pure white landscape. In that first moment, it looked like snow, but the faintly sweet fragrance that reached their noses told them it was flowers.

"Cherry trees?! Are those cherry trees?"

"No, Isuzu. Those are plums."

Isuzu had leaned out, and Serara, who was supporting her, told her what they

really were.

It appeared a region of plum trees was rising out of the chilly, early spring landscape.

“They smell so good!”

The scent of the blossoms was weak, but out in the fields, it had a definite presence.

On the hill’s descending slope, they saw that stone walls had been used to build terraces, showing that human hands had been at work here. The plum trees were planted here and there in the terraced fields. Possibly because someone had taken the amount of sunlight into consideration, this side of the hill was a forest of plum trees.

Minori and the others followed the road as it wound around the hill, heading west. It took them away from the direction they wanted to go, but there was a wide river ahead of them, and they’d have to choose a place to ford it.

The sea of white plum blossoms went on and on. Isuzu and Rudy were thoroughly impressed, and Serara provided commentary for the two of them and Touya. Apparently, just after the establishment of the Round Table Council last year, she and Nyanta had bought plums, pickled some of them, and made jam from the rest.

It was a bucolic sight.

The wind was still cold, but the light was bright and clear; the cart traveled in a warm pool of sun. As they approached the big river, the wind began to feel moist and the temperature fell, and even when they entered the shadows of the forest, the peaceful atmosphere was unbroken.

From deep in the woods, they heard People of the Earth shouting in unison, like teamsters.

They might have been doing farmwork. The five Adventurers listened to the voices, smiling a little.

It was when they were detouring through the woods along the river, looking for a place to cross, that the air changed. The dense growth shut out the light,

and from inside it, they heard sharp screams and violent sounds. Instantly reclaiming the tension she'd felt since that morning, Minori picked up her nearby staff and held it at the ready in front of her chest.

"Minori, I'm going on ahead! Something's there!"

"Touya! Oh, honestly!"

"What? What is it?!"

With a cry that was more like an oxygen-starved gasp than a scream, a sturdy man in brown and gray cold-weather clothes came tumbling out of the woods. He was a Person of the Earth. While they were looking at the man, people who were probably his companions came running out of the darkness behind him.

Touya leapt down from the driver's seat, racing forward at several times the speed with which the other group was approaching them.

"Enemy attack! Get ready!" Minori shouted, then swung her staff and cast Purification Barrier on her little brother. The bestial breathing that was closing in on them from the forest belonged to an ogre.

Ogres were classified as evil demihumans.

They were considered to be similar to the goblins Minori and the others had fought in the village of Choushi.

Ogres were taller than goblins, and their builds were comparatively powerful. They were stoop-shouldered, but if they stood up straight, they were about as tall as Touya, and they were stronger than goblins as well. However, they were bad at working together and acting in groups, and they weren't particularly good at using weapons.

High-level goblins had full sets of weapons and gear, tamed Dire Wolves and other animals, and were very occasionally able to use magic.

Even at high levels, ogres wore almost no armor. They got bigger and bigger, and their strength and endurance rose. They used a strange kind of magic known as "black magic." Ogres that had been given names, like Ooe, appeared in quests, so named ones could be said to be one of the famous types.

Both ogres and goblins were seen across a wide range of levels, from low-to

midlevel. It was said that when *Elder Tales* had been a game, they had been distributed across regions in order to bring out each area's distinctive characteristics.

There were many goblins in the field zones of eastern Japan, from Kanto to Tohoku. Ogres were also found west of the Chubu region. Parenthetically, Shikoku was home to lizardmen, while orcs lived in Kyushu. Each area had had its own forces and distinctive quests.

These were all things Shiroe had taught her.

According to what Shiroe had said, the levels of most of the monsters along the highway were low. Of course, he'd told her that the world's transformation had probably affected things and that they should be careful, but even so, something about this felt wrong.

They'd encountered a level-21 ogre in broad daylight. True, at this point, it wasn't a tough enemy for their group, but wasn't it the sort of monster they should have met in the woods or mountains, far from the road?

"Wolfie!"

Beside Minori, who was growing warier due to the feeling that something wasn't right, Serara had gotten down from the cart and was summoning her servant. The Gray Wolf that appeared was cute and still roly-poly, not yet full-grown. Cloaked in shining magic, he circled around to the front of the group of People of the Earth. He'd gone to guard them.

"It's a start, at least," Serara said, eyes focused and intent.

She'd sensed the same wrongness, and instead of vainly trying to follow Touya, she'd made a general-purpose move. This made it possible for her to go forward.

"What's the situation, Mademoiselle Minori?"

"Ogres came out of the forest. They're chasing People of the Earth. Rescue and protect them!"

As Minori shouted and broke into a run, she passed the leading Person of the Earth, who stumbled from fatigue and fell. Touya had already gone farther

ahead and was locked in combat with the ogres. There were three enemies, levels 22, 22, and 21.

Strangely enough, their levels were nearly the same as those of the skeletons they'd fought in Forest Ragranda. However, in the six months since that summer training camp, Minori and the others had grown much stronger. Putting her level 54 magic behind it, she cast Mirror's Mystic Spell. A magic mirror appeared in front of her, and the projectiles of light it unleashed pierced the monsters, which had bright red skin and vicious faces. At the same time, they healed Touya's scratches and scrapes.

After the missiles had run the ogres through, Touya landed an additional attack with Izuna Cutter. Using the momentum, he spun halfway around, shifting directly into Floating Boat Crossing, then into Fire-Wheel Sword. Samurai's accuracy and damage were lower than those of an Attack class, but this trick compensated for it. Even as he scattered his attacks, he cut the monsters' lines of sight, continuing to take positions that protected Minori, his guard.

"Minori, the woodcutters are all right!" From behind them, Serara shouted a report.

At the same time, Frost Spear drew a clean trajectory and blew off one of the ogres' arms.

If this was how things were, they'd be okay. They were overpowering three monsters with only half of their party's firepower.

They'd all grown enough, both in terms of levels and fighting style. More than enough.

"Don't get careless! Fifteen more!"

A clear, carrying voice they didn't recognize rang out from the forest, and then the trees ejected a clump of monsters. They were unfamiliar ones, shaped like black mist.

Due to the strict training she'd received from Shiroe and Naotsugu, Minori responded by drawing one leg back, taking an alert stance, and then checking their statuses.

Nightshade Servants. Level 40.

These were much tougher enemies than the ogres, and there were fifteen of them. Quickly, Minori ran some calculations. If she recalled correctly, Nightshades were spirit monsters. Spirit monsters' lineage gave them high endurance regarding attribute damage. Dark spirits had the ability to withstand toxins and mental attacks, and they were also highly resistant to instant death.

Servant indicated the role and rank of a monster in the same category. It was a sign that, among Nightshades, these monsters had relatively low combat power. Even so, level 40 was just ten levels below Minori's group, and in this post-Catastrophe world, that meant these weren't opponents they could afford to be reckless with.

They could probably win. However, the People of the Earth might take damage. There were too many of them to protect properly. That was what they were up against.

Without hesitating, Touya roared out Samurai's Challenge.

He was letting Minori take command:

"Rundelhaus, concentrate your firepower and finish off the ogres! Isuzu, focus on defense!"

"Leave it to me! Orb of Lava!"

"Sturdy Pastoral!"

They'd probably been on standby. Rundelhaus's fireball flew in immediately, punching through two of the ogres and finishing them off. Timing his move to that, Touya retreated a distance of about ten paces in one jump. Their ranks had extended too far. He'd retreated in order to condense them, and he'd made the right decision.

On the other hand, Touya and Minori were on the front line, and the People of the Earth group was still behind them. Serara and Isuzu were guarding them directly, so they didn't think anything too bad would happen, but there were limits on how far they could retreat.

Even as they did this, the Nightshade Servants moved their mist-shrouded

forms to attack Touya. But he'd refined his swordsmanship; while they weren't the sort of moves he would have used in kendo, he'd learned from Akatsuki and Soujirou, as well as Naotsugu, and he was learning the key points of diverting enemy attacks.

Minori shot glances in all four directions. The woman who'd warned them was probably in the woods. Depending on the situation, they'd have to save her, too.

However, as if ignoring Minori's wary thoughts, a bespectacled woman emerged from the forest at a run, crashing through the undergrowth, her pure white coat flaring behind her. She sent a soundless torrent of energy from the tip of her staff, turning two of the Nightshade Servants iridescent. Then she raised her staff again.

"Servant Summoning: Princess Lace!"

Servant Summonings were a basic Summoner attack method: Monsters called "servants" were called in and put to work. Since there were no time limits, a Summoner's fighting power was a combination of the Summoner's own power and that of their servants, equal to the other eleven classes at the same level. On its own, Servant Summoning wasn't a very powerful spell.

However, that was if they were on the same level.

Cloaked in shining level-90 magic, the woman and her servant ran across the battlefield, routing the enemy.

Summoners' spells could never be called first-class, but the female Adventurer played her cards magnificently, using her servant, Princess Lace, to blast death-dealing energy waves, destroying the Nightshade Servants in rapid succession.

Facing Minori's group and the stunned People of the Earth, she adjusted her glasses with a humorous gesture and raised her voice.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Roe2, a Summoner. I'm on my way to Minami, and...I suppose you'd call me a traveling Vampanella."

Standing before Minori and the others was a Summoner in a pure white coat and round glasses.

The People of the Earth who'd fled from the forest were woodcutters, and they explained that the ogres had attacked them while they were working. Minori's group split up to retrieve their tools: the axes and racks slung on their backs they had flung away in their escape.

The People of the Earth could have gone to pick them up, of course, but it was possible that there were still hostile beings in the woods.

Minori and the others weren't obligated to help them. Even though no one had actually suggested it, they naturally accepted the job of guarding the People of the Earth. Minori decided it was too late for them to back out now, since, if people they'd saved once ended up being attacked in the woods a second time, it would leave a bad taste in their mouths.

While they were doing this, even though she'd made such a flashy entrance, the woman who'd called herself Roe² sat slumped in the back of the Adventurers' covered cart.

She was a high-level Summoner, but according to her, she "wasn't good with sunlight." As a result, she said, she'd been traveling through forests or mountains all this time.

When they'd collected the tools and were ready to set off again, a staggering fact came to light. Thanks to Minori's Damage Interception spell, the red beams of light the Nightshade Servants had fired had veered away from Touya, but the stray shots had struck the group's horses. The twin animals had been badly injured, but even so, they'd taken off running and disappeared beyond the horizon. Even their item, Lyman's Twin Horse Whistle, was cracked. Because of the recast time, they weren't able to check right away, but even if that hadn't been the case, the damage was bad enough that they were hesitant to use it again before getting it repaired.

As a result, Touya and Isuzu ended up taking the cart to the local village.

Even if their levels were still in the fifties, they had Adventurer strength. As long as speed wasn't an issue, walking while pulling the cart was easy.

The People of the Earth—the woodcutters and their boss, Haze—were walking in any case. Since they were traveling together, this was actually more convenient.

Serara and her servant wolf led the way. The wolf pup, a ball of light gray, was a bundle of curiosity; it kept busily shoving its snout into the bushes on either side, sniffing the scents, then returning to Serara and yapping in a cute little voice as if to report its findings.

Touya was pulling the cart. Haze and three of his assistants walked warily beside the boy.

Isuzu was the one in charge of pushing the cart from behind. Technically, Rundelhaus was next to her, doing the same thing—“It would be unseemly to force all the manual labor onto a lady,” he’d said—but class differences were cruel, and even when they were the same level, Bards (a Weapon Attack class) were stronger than Sorcerers (a Magic Attack class.)

“Don’t worry about it. You can just ride in the cart.”

“No, I cannot.”

“Then I guess we’ll go for a walk together.”

“Why are you in such high spirits, Mademoiselle Isuzu?”

“Because it’s a walk?”

Minori, who was listening to the exchange taking place behind the cart, was riding inside.

Since Roe2 was exhausted, she’d decided that she needed to treat her.

“No, don’t trouble yourself. I’m not good with recovery spells.”

“Not...good with them?”

“Because I’m a Vampanella, you see.”

Roe2, who was wearing an extremely lethargic expression, poked her index fingers into the corners of her mouth and pulled outward, showing her teeth. Sharp canines peeked out.

On seeing this, Minori remembered the Vampanella subclass.

It was something she'd heard about from Shiroe while he was making small talk. It was one of a vast number of subclasses that had been added during a previous fair of some sort, and apparently it had been a rather badly balanced one. Its performance wasn't at all suited to party play: In exchange for heightened abilities at night and the ability to absorb HP during close combat, abilities were greatly reduced during the day, and recovery spells not only failed to recover HP; they actually did additional damage.

Yet Roe2 had said she was a Summoner. She was about as tall as Minori, but she had a womanly figure, and her chest, which was encased in a thin knitted garment, was rather prominent. She was also quite beautiful.

In this other world, everyone was beautiful or cute. This was a relic from *Elder Tales'* game days, and while Adventurers kept the appearances they'd had on Earth, they'd been made more attractive.

However, strangely, even now that things were like this, there were clear "beauties" and "lovely girls." It was simply the power to attract people, something like an aura, and it came through in gestures and atmosphere.

Her guildmate Akatsuki had that quality, for example. She radiated a delicate charm that went beyond her fair appearance. In terms of Minori's acquaintances, others included Henrietta and Marielle, Misa Takayama, and Nazuna of the West Wind Brigade, who'd recently begun to teach Minori.

To elaborate even further, Princess Raynesia was far and away the best of them. Even though Minori had only exchanged greetings with her a few times, she thought she'd never known anyone who was so memorable.

These beauties (or lovely girls) had a definite presence, and even if all they did was smile, even though Minori was a girl as well, it was enough to set her heart beating faster.

Roe2 seemed to be that sort of person, too.

Her disheveled, casual hair didn't look as if she really took care of it, but it was glossy and somehow stylish. Even though she wasn't doing anything in particular, the lazy-looking expression behind her glasses had a pensive charm to it.

Her white coat and angular bag were the rough Adventurer sort, and in combination with the rather masculine way she spoke, they gave her a boyish air. However, even then, it was likely that no one could have mistaken Roe2 for a man. She looked like a charming woman through and through.

It gave Minori a rather sizable inferiority complex.

After all, awakening to love had made her more melancholy overall.

Because it had made her realize that she was ordinary.

Of course she was trying as hard as she could, and she wanted to wear cute clothes as much as possible... Particularly when she went anywhere with Shiroe. She was talking it over with Isuzu and trying to choose clothes that were subtly mature: not childish, but nothing that would fail her by making her seem as if she was trying too hard.

(According to Isuzu, this was “Minori’s Trim, Upper-Class Young Lady Strategy.”)

Even so, when she walked beside Shiroe, she sometimes felt ashamed and ridiculous. It was as if she was an embarrassing little kid who knew nothing, someone who wasn’t suitable for him.

When that happened, she lost sight of the words she’d been about to say, and even just walking with him made her feel bad. Apparently she was more of a coward than she’d thought. The moment Shiroe turned around and waited for her to catch up, the feeling—which resembled dejection—was blown clean away, and she felt as if she’d burst with happiness.

Minori had been startled to discover herself to be so calculating.

Yet she had been the one to tell Touya, “I haven’t done a thing.” That was the night she’d resolved to do everything she could to be allowed to stay with Shiroe.

However, the fact that there was so little she could do confounded her. Shiroe was an adult, but even in this world, where school didn’t exist, Minori was still only a middle schooler.

She felt she was a wretched, puny, insignificant human being, and it made her

chest ache.

Even so, although the pain hurt, she didn't want to let it go.

"You seem pretty down."

Roe2 spoke, and Minori responded: "Yes... Wait. Is that the Sacred Robe of the Stars?"

"Hm? Oh. That's right. I'm impressed you knew."

"Yes. My, umm... My teacher, Shiroe, he wears one."

"Huh? Ah, I see. Is he a Magic class, too, then?"

"Yes. He's an Enchanter."

"Well, this robe is pretty high-performance. It's resistant to wear and tear, too, which makes it handy for everyday use. Besides, it's comfortable. Even after a long journey, it's still nice and clean, no?"

She was right. The robe didn't seem to have any tears or dirt on it.

She'd been traveling over mountains and fields, but she was a level-90 Adventurer. Even moving alone, if she chose her route well, it would probably be possible to travel without causing too much wear. That said, being a Vampanella really did sound inconvenient. Having your movements restricted during the day was a pretty big handicap.

"Where did you come from? Where are you going?"

"'Whence do we come, and where do we go?' That's a very philosophical question."

"No, um, that isn't what I..."

Roe2 grinned, as if to say, *I know that*. She'd been teasing. Minori had been about to protest, but that expression killed her momentum.

Apparently this woman had a much better sense of humor than her appearance suggested.



“I started my journey in Ouu. I think it’s been about three months now. It’s brutal. Even I didn’t think it would be this rough.”

“From...Ouu?”

Minori searched her memories. If she remembered right, that was in what would have been Japan’s Tohoku region. Shiroe had gone to that area near the end of last year. A raid quest called the Coronation of the Goblin King was still underway there, and an emergency in Ouu had been the indirect cause of the desperate struggle that Minori and the others had encountered in Choushi. When she thought of it that way, it felt like a familiar area.

“Before that, I was somewhere farther away, though. I jumped there by Castling.”

“Oh. Yes, you are a Summoner, aren’t you. That’s a special spell that lets you switch places with a servant, isn’t it?”

Castling was a spell unique to Summoners that let them trade places with a creature they’d summoned or a being with which they’d made a contract. Apparently Roe2 had switched places with a servant in Ouu.

In *Elder Tales*, summoned servants hadn’t been able to go very far from their magicians. However, in this other world, they’d discovered that, depending on the method, they could go quite far, even to other servers. This knowledge was so common that Honesty, one of the guilds on the Round Table Council, was using it to investigate the Fairy Rings.

“Yes, my servant, or my older brother... Yes, my brother. Let’s call him that. I switched places with my brother.”

Roe2 blushed, speaking as if trying to cover up the fact that she was a bit uncomfortable, then went on rapidly.

“Since then, I’ve spent my days walking through the mountains to avoid sunlight. For now, I’m headed to Ikoma. If I go there, I can quit being a Vampanella.”

“So it’s a departure quest, then?”

When she heard that, everything made sense to Minori.

Ordinarily, it was possible to overwrite your subclass by acquiring another subclass. When you did, you lost the subclass you'd used up until that point. Minori herself had changed to Apprentice by overwriting Tailor.

However, there were some subclasses that couldn't be overwritten. It was a feature seen in subclasses acquired on highly difficult quests and at limited-time-only events. If you wanted to change those subclasses, you had to complete a "departure quest" and reset your subclass entirely.

Vampanella was a subclass with a lot of disadvantages. Furthermore, Shiroe had told her it was a rather embarrassing subclass and that, at this point, it was rare to find someone who had it.

The fact that Roe2 was having such a hard time on her journey was probably due in large part to the effects of being a Vampanella. If it was possible to leave the subclass, she'd certainly want to. Apparently that departure quest was in Ikoma.

"Excellent guess. I'd love to ask the responsible party why I even have this subclass. My older brother-type... Maybe? Well, anyway, the person in charge. I mean, really, this is just for show. True, it was handy on the moon, but I wish he'd given a little thought to what would happen after I came down to Earth."

Something about Roe2's musings raised a question for Minori, and she was about to ask about it.

However, just then, they felt a bouncing sort of vibration, the cart stopped, and their conversation broke off.

"Heeeey, Adventurer in there, and our little Adventurer benefactors. This is the edge of our town, Koyurugi. We do have an inn, so please relax and take it easy. We'll come by to thank you properly in a bit!"

When Minori poked her head out from under the canopy, she saw that the river had forked, forming a delta. On the delta, which was created by the protection of the currents and fertile soil brought in by the river, there was a town surrounded by a patchwork of beautiful fields.

In the light of the slowly sinking sun, with smoke rising from its cook fires, the town seemed to be welcoming them.

It was easy for them to get a room.

February was still early for trading. Traders who'd been affected by the feverish atmosphere in Akiba were the exception, and they often worked hard at their jobs even in winter, but the trade in farm produce wouldn't really begin until spring.

Isuzu and the others left their belongings in their inn room, which stood independently, like a cottage. Then, taking only their valuables and equipment, they returned to the dining hall. The room was intended for traders, and while it was a separate room, with the five of them in there, there wouldn't be much space for anything except beds. That wouldn't be a problem when they slept, but the sun wasn't completely down yet.

The woodcutters had said they'd be paying them a visit, and there was dinner to think about, too.

That being the case, the five of them went back to the dining hall, where the innkeeper waited.

The hall was made of wood and had a low ceiling.

The framework seemed to have been made with pillars and beams that used fallen trees and other natural materials in their original state, and the whitewashed walls were striking. Instead of oil, the lamps used Light-Storing Stones. These were magic items created in Akiba; they sat in the sunlight all day, then released that light slowly over four or five hours, and they were much cheaper than Firefly Lamps, which used mana to shine.

In the dining hall, there were several low sofas tinted green with plant dyes, set around equally low tables. Ornamental plants decorated the areas around pillars, and the hall seemed more like a living room than a dining area.

Roe2, who'd traveled to the village with them, sat on one of those sofas with her legs stretched out casually in front of her.

They didn't know any of the other guests, and it would have been awkward to

go to a different table, so Isuzu's group approached the woman's sofa. Roe2 smiled faintly, beckoning to them, and Touya relaxed on a seat across from her with no hesitation. Isuzu and Rundelhaus sat at the edges of the table, and Minori and Serara ended up next to the woman.

She was drinking a reddish-purple juice. When Serara asked, she told them, "I hear it's plum juice."

"Did you take lodgings here, too, Roe2?"

"Yes. I wanted a bath; it's been a long time. From what they tell me, this inn has one."

"We heard!"

Isuzu's voice was so cheerful that even she noticed it.

A good percentage of Adventurer equipment repaired and cleaned itself. The function automatically got rid of mud stains and dust from grass and trees, until the items looked brand-new. Even if they got sweaty, with their current bodies, the sweat dried before they knew it, and in that sense, as long as Adventurers paid attention to damage, baths weren't as necessary for them as they had been in the old world.

However, mentally, things were different: Even if they weren't sticky, they felt like they were, and they wanted to bathe. As a teenage girl in high school, Isuzu felt this twice as strongly as the average person. She thought Serara and Minori probably felt the same way.

Food they hadn't ordered was carried over to their table.

According to the man who served it to them, they were being treated by the woodcutters they'd rescued. Apparently the town mayor had sent a message of thanks as well. For some reason, the menu consisted of deluxe rice bowls with fried egg, with sausages and tomatoes poking out over the rim of the bowls. There was white rice at the very bottom, and two fried eggs on the very top.

Maybe it was the inn's specialty: The same thing was being served at every table.

With a big smile on his face, Rundelhaus began looking around the table

restlessly. Taking the initiative, Serara took several seasonings from the pouch at her waist and set them on the tabletop.

“Soy sauce for me!”

“Oh, Touya, honestly.”

—The twins apparently belonged to the soy sauce camp.

Without saying a word, Isuzu handed the similar bottle that sat next to it to Rundelhaus.

“My thanks, Mademoiselle Isuzu.”

“Once you’re done, pass it back.”

Isuzu and Rundelhaus were members of the Worcestershire sauce camp. At Isuzu’s house, her mother used soy sauce, while her father and Isuzu preferred regular sauce. If she’d been in Akiba, and if it had been just her and Rundelhaus, she could have splurged and used teriyaki sauce, but she wouldn’t ask for such a luxury now. On the contrary, lately, everything she ate tasted so good that it was almost a problem. Compared to her days in Hamelin just after the Catastrophe, the things she ate now were heavenly.

The dish currently sitting in front of her was a (rather eccentric) rice bowl with fried egg, but this wasn’t bad news. Isuzu thought that the most delicious things in this world were B-grade gourmet items. This was because they were guaranteed to belong to the food culture that the Adventurers had brought in.

An Adventurer somewhere had probably dreamed up this fried-egg rice bowl, too. When sumptuous-looking full course meals were brought out, if they were incredibly lucky, there was a possibility that they might be good, but if not, such food was generally tasteless.

Compared to menu-created items that were all show, handmade cooking that couldn’t be made at the touch of a button tended not to look very fancy. In other words, if the food that was brought out looked like B-grade gourmet fare, it was almost certain to have flavor, and to have originated with the Adventurers.

In that sense, while it didn’t quite measure up to a teriyaki Crescent Burger,

this fried-egg rice bowl looked promising.

Rundelhaus was almost certainly thinking the same thing. He'd closed his eyes and was waiting for the formal "Thanks for the food" to be said, but she felt as if she could see a transparent tail wagging from side to side, sweeping the floor.

"Yes, yes, there we go."

Serara was using a spoon to take mayonnaise out of a lidded bottle, and there was a languid smile on her face. As an ordinary high school girl, the feeling of looking forward to meals while on a long journey was something Isuzu could highly relate to.

Yet Roe2 seemed puzzled, so Minori offered:

"This is soy sauce, and this is salt. This is semisweet Worcestershire sauce, and the red one is ketchup. Which would you like, Roe2?"

"Hm. Hmmm..."

Looking mystified, Roe2 picked them up, then put them all on, in order.

Personally, Isuzu thought that using both soy sauce and Worcestershire sauce was an awful idea, but to each her own. Humans were liable to start wars when delicate subjects were brought up, and fried eggs were high on that list. It was the same way at Isuzu's house. Isuzu wanted to tell her father that ponzu sauce was simply not okay.

"Thanks for the food!"

And so the group ate dinner. Spoons had been provided, but both Isuzu and Rundelhaus had brought their own chopsticks. Rundelhaus had gotten quite skilled with his.

About half the seats in the dining hall were filled.

Most of the people around them were artisans and merchants, and they seemed to be exchanging information about the area. Isuzu had learned this only after beginning this journey, but in towns and villages that were on the small side, inns and taverns were more than just commercial buildings. They were a sort of public facility. Naturally, it was possible to eat and drink there, but apparently people also visited them to collect information on the town, to

talk to other people, and sometimes to create rules.

In this dining hall at dusk, Isuzu and the others had a pleasant meal.

Meals eaten while camping had a charm all their own, and (provided Serara didn't mess up) they were delicious, but it was nice to be able to settle down and look at each other while they ate.

Isuzu tweaked a grain of rice off Rundelhaus's cheek, then poured chilled tea into everyone's cups from a pitcher.

"All right, I've got it now! This gloppy black stuff is Worcestershire sauce, and the runny black stuff is soy sauce, yes?"

Murmuring that to herself, Roe2 added more of both.

Isuzu and Minori exchanged looks. They were both thinking the same thing. Both sauce camps were still in competition with each other.

"Well, well. It's perfectly clear to me now. Learning should always be thus."

"Mayonnaise is yummy, too."

Serara was looking to recruit allies, and possibly because she'd pressed her, Roe2 gingerly added mayonnaise on top of everything else. Isuzu grew worried, but still she said nothing. The politics surrounding fried eggs were complicated and rigid. Simply expressing her opinion might be taken as interference in domestic affairs.

"...I hear they turned back partway there."

"A caravan would have difficulty, then?"

"Even so, individual merchants might be able to manage..."

Travelers were in close conversation with influential villagers and artisans, their foreheads practically touching. This probably wasn't just idle gossip; it might be an important exchange of information that would determine future policy for the town.

Hearing the sigh-filled conversation, Isuzu looked up. Now that she was paying attention, the merchants' faces seemed gloomy.

"Do you think something happened?"

At Isuzu's puzzled question, her friends all looked around the dining hall.

The comfortable hall held merchants who seemed to have been staying there for quite some time, and there were a lot of artisans with grim expressions.

"If you head west from here, there's a mountainous area known as Boxroot. It has a pretty lake, and it's governed by an aristocrat who grew prosperous on tariffs, but they say monster activity in the Boxroot Mountains has increased."

"Is that right..."

After eating a mouthful of rice mixed with egg yolk from her spoon, Roe2 interpreted the conversations in the dining hall for them. She said she'd heard about the situation while Isuzu and the others were in their room.

"In general, the monsters' levels range from twenty to thirty. That's similar to the ones we fought this afternoon. I expect there was some sort of power struggle in the mountains. High-elevation monsters that are mildly strong are coming down into the foothills. Their activity ranges are probably shifting in a chain reaction."

"Did you see it, Roe2?"

"Yes. After all, I've been traveling in the shadows of the forest the whole time."

After answering Minori's question as if it was nothing important, Roe2 set down her bowl, saying, "Thank you for the meal." She'd been casual about it, but she'd been the first of the group to finish. Privately, Isuzu updated her opinion of the woman: *For somebody gorgeous, she eats fast*. It made her feel friendlier toward her.

"We'll be fine, but it must be very hard on the merchants."

At Minori's words, Isuzu thought for a little while. "Provided we're merely traveling along ordinary highways, the monster levels are all about ten. Most of the terrain is like that. I hear the red clay highway in particular has an ancient-tech spell meant to ward off wild beasts."

Rundelhaus, meanwhile, spoke as if he was organizing a fresh idea that had just occurred to him: "If merchants are trading based on that assumption, of

course things would get ugly if level-twenty monsters started appearing on the highway.”

The merchants who were staying in the dining hall long-term had probably had trouble crossing the mountain pass and were stranded.

“We’re in trouble, too, you know. Our horses are injured.” Serara’s interjection brought the reality home to Isuzu as well.

It was true: That was a big problem. She really doubted that a People of the Earth town like this one would have a shop that sold Adventurer equipment. The possibility of finding an Adventurer item artisan here was very nearly zero.

“Horses, hm? Oh, yes, they did run off, didn’t they? You could just summon horses, couldn’t you?” Maybe because her belly was full, Roe2 seemed to be in a good mood.

It certainly would have been possible for a Summoner, but not for Isuzu and the others.

“Can you do that sort of thing, big sister Roe2?”

Touya was probably thinking the same thing. He had asked the question in his usual, cheerful voice. However, the response wasn’t what Isuzu had expected.

“Big—b-big sis?! Boy... Would you call *me* ‘big sister’?”

Isuzu had a vague premonition that the atmosphere was about to head south in a big way, but before she could stop them, her friends had answered: “Big sister?” “You mean ‘big sister Roe’?” “Would ‘Lady’ be more suitable than ‘Mademoiselle’? No, that’s not right, is it. Sister Roe2.”

The bespectacled woman clenched her fists, basking in the lingering echoes of emotion. She nodded wordlessly, breathing deeply over and over, as if savoring the feeling.

“Big sister. That’s nice. Big sister... When I hear that phrase, it makes me feel as if someone’s counting on me.”

No, we aren’t, Isuzu almost said.

Her friend Minori had even struck a pose, the palm of her hand held out to interrupt Roe2, as if the Kannagi meant to say something.

However, with Roe2 the way she was now, neither of them could cut in. Her expression was proud, radiant, and filled with goodwill.

“Being counted on is rather exhilarating. Big sisters are good things, aren’t they? I’d like to be treated as a big sister—I’d like to be admired as a big sister! All right, I’ll accompany you on your journey. You may depend on me in battle. I’ll provide horses as well, of course. I’ll summon the most splendid horses the world has ever seen, so many that you could stack them! As my reward, you will let me act as your big sister. Will that do?!”

Roe2, with her dashing expression and figure, had made a declaration that seemed pretty uncool to Isuzu. She’d asserted herself all in a rush, and Isuzu’s group found themselves steamrolled.

► 6

“Ooh, look how *big* it is.”

“Wow. That’s amazing.”

In the night’s darkness, the Bug Lights that had popped into existence with charming little sounds illuminated dense clouds of steam and a bath surrounded by rocks. They’d been told there was a bath, but that it wasn’t attached to the rooms at the inn. Instead, it was in a depression a few minutes’ walk down the gravel path around back... And so they’d gone to see.

The surrounding trees provided a perfect screen, while hot springwater and cold river water cascaded into the rock bath like waterfalls. It was closer to a true hot spring than a bath, and it was apparently made from a mixture of hot water drawn from the earth and cold water from the Ricouart River.

The structure that looked like a shed was probably the changing room. After marveling at the rock bath for a little while, Serara went into the small building with Minori and Isuzu.

Like the rock bath, the changing room was deserted.

Ordinary People of the Earth went to bed early. Felinoids had good night

vision, and it was possible to use Light-Storing Stones like the ones in the inn dining hall. Even regular households probably had lanterns, at least. However, it took fuel and preparation to use them, and it wasn't easy to light up a large space. Taking one along to the bath would have been a pain.

According to the universal way of life among the People of the Earth, if the alternative was to go to the trouble of getting a light ready and work at night, then it was better to finish what they needed to do while the sun was up and turn in early.

When Serara and the other two had headed for the bath, the innkeeper had told them, "It'll be so empty you'll think you reserved it." This was only natural for him to say, but it had also been true.

Serara knew she was timid enough to feel unnerved by the bath being described as "reserved," but since Adventurers had Magic Lights, they could enjoy the rock bath to their hearts' content without any problems, even at this hour.

Isuzu, who'd stripped energetically and tied her hair back, wrapped herself in a towel. At the changing room exit, she turned to look back.

Serara was flustered, but no matter what she did, she ended up moving slowly.

It depressed her, but even if the only people around were friends of the same gender, it took courage for plump girls to undress.

Since it wasn't as if anyone was paying attention to her, this was sheer, embarrassing self-consciousness.

Hurrying as fast as she could, Serara pulled her hair together at the back of her head with her bath clip, then timidly made for the rock bath, holding her bath towel so that it hid her front. This was another world, after all, and defense was important.

Minori was waiting for her there.

"It isn't all that hot. There are stone flags over there. Would you like to rinse off?" Her younger friend gave her an untroubled smile, and Serara relaxed just a little.

Smiling and nodding, she headed over that way.

Compared to their old world counterparts, the “natural, additive-free shampoo and conditioner” and “experimental creamy soap” that they’d brought from Akiba weren’t very high-class articles, and their performance was sure to be bad as well. Still, the People of the Earth treated them as ultraluxury items, and they were good enough for practical purposes. The three of them used the products with loofahs and towels, and they washed their hair as well.

After the Catastrophe, it was times like these that made Serara think, *I’ve changed, too*.

Before, Serara thought, she’d been awkward, slow, and clumsy enough that even she could tell. Even she’d thought, *It’s only a bath*, but on school trips, she’d been the only one on her team to stay in for a long time and cause trouble for the other team members.

She didn’t know whether she’d changed because she was a Housekeeper, or whether it was living in this world that had done it.

In the old world, she hadn’t hated doing thorough tasks like cleaning and laundry, and she’d often volunteered for them. However, her skill with them certainly hadn’t been better than average.

In this world, since she’d become a Housekeeper and had done chores the entire time, she seemed to have grown more dexterous at a variety of things.

Serara thought it would be nice if it was because she’d mastered things, and not just some sort of game-related subclass bonus.

She still wasn’t all that skilled, but even so, she was much better than before. She thought that being attentive and efficient at housework was a wonderful thing, and that it made one seem a bit like a young wife.

She and Minori washed each other’s backs, then rinsed their hair at the same pace.

“I’m finished, Serara.”

“I’m done, too, Minori!”

Their eyes met, and the two of them snickered. Then they jumped Isuzu, who

was looking dazed, and began washing her hair.

Unbound, Isuzu's hair was wavy, and it fell all the way to her waist.

Isuzu said she wasn't anything like a girl, and that she was skinny as a rail, and freckled, and just your average high school kid, but Serara had noticed that she took very good care of her long hair. This was patently obvious from the way she washed it slowly and carefully every time she took a bath, even though she badmouthed it as she worked. Serara and Minori had been waiting for the opportunity to touch their friend's hair.

"We'll make your hair soft and fluffy, Isuzu."

"I brought two different types of comb."

"Don't bother; it's a pain. I can do it myself."

"No, no, this is a Housekeeper's job, too."

"Apprentices don't run from any task."

"Does it itch anywhere?"

"Geez, Serara..."

"If you talk, you'll get soap in your mouth, Isuzu."

"Minori, you, too? Argh."

"Serara's practicing for the future."

"Huh?"

"It's practice for being a newlywed."

"Whaaat?!"

At Minori's overly solemn tones, the three of them laughed as if they couldn't hold it back—*Is that true? Really? Why?!*—and their voices echoed in the rock bath. Even so, Serara's hands didn't pause. She knew that washing long hair really was a lot of work, and besides, washing Isuzu's hair was a special event that she and Minori had discussed beforehand.

It was wonderful that they'd gotten their chance now, on the road.

In the glow of the Magic Lights, which were spinning cheerfully in midair,

Serara relaxed in the big rock bath, sinking up to her shoulders. The heat of the hot spring slowly soaked into her body, and it felt heavenly. The two beside her were also smiling and sighing.

The bath was big, about five meters square. This was spacious compared to the lion-footed bathtubs found in high-class People of the Earth inns, and it was deep enough that, if they stretched their legs out in the water, the tips of their chins touched its surface. In a few places, it was even deeper.

Two streams of water flowed into the rock bath, one hot and one cold. Searching for the perfect temperature, Serara and the others sat down companionably.

“Mmmm, what a great bath!”

Isuzu smiled as she spoke.

Minori was smiling, too, and Serara was happy.

The sky held the Magic Lights and a moon that was about half full. The three of them looked up, then giggled for no reason.

Adventurer bodies were astonishing things: Even though they’d been traveling and had spent some of the time camping, they didn’t get muscle aches, and they weren’t particularly fatigued. Even so, they’d been tense and on edge, and they were glad to have found an inn where the three of them could soak in a hot spring like this.

As a matter of fact, when she’d heard they’d be doing a lot of camping on the journey, she’d been a little frightened.

Minori had said that in the old world, this region was a big tourist area. She’d heard that the fish were delicious, and the dried seafood was famous.

Serara thought, absently, that she’d love to come here with Nyanta someday.

“It’s warm, isn’t it?”

“Yep. Nice and warm.”

“Mm-hm.”

The three of them relaxed limply, talking about that sort of thing.

Even Isuzu, who was always full of energy, was smiling like a cat during its afternoon nap. When she saw this, Serara felt entertained. To hide her smile, she ducked until her mouth was underwater and blew bubbles, and even that was exhilarating.

In baths this comfortable, maybe all humans turned into felines. Serara felt like taking a nap; she thought she might even have been developing cat ears.

If she did grow cat ears and whiskers, she'd be a felinoid, a kitty cat. Or, no, felinoids were *all* cat, so maybe she'd call herself a mew-mew. That would put her one step closer to her ambition. She wriggled her toes in the warm water. Pleasant fantasies were always a little ticklish.

"You look a bit dreamy, Serara."

"That's because I'm a kitty cat."

She was warm all the way to the center of her brain, so she couldn't think anything very complicated. If she sounded silly, there was no help for it... Or that was the excuse Serara made to herself as she responded, anyway.

"And? Do you want to bathe with Nyanta, Serara?"

Isuzu shattered her drowsy mood with one shot.

It might have been payback for earlier. She pressed Serara, wearing a bright smile with a trace of spite mixed into it.

"No, it isn't like that."

"But Nyanta is handsome, right?"

"Nyanta is dandy, and dashing, and stylish."

Serara had given the very best retort she could muster, but Isuzu hugged Minori's shoulders to her, beaming. Minori was looking from Isuzu to Serara in bewilderment, but Isuzu kept loudly broadcasting the attitude that Minori was on *her* team.

"If that's what we're talking about, then what about you and Rundelhaus, Isuzu?"

"Huh? Rudy's just a walking buddy."

To Minori's response, Isuzu looked blank, while Serara was exasperated.

Considered normally, Isuzu and Rundelhaus had to look much more like a couple than Serara and Nyanta did, but for some reason, Isuzu didn't seem to have noticed it.

Even though they look so good together...

She'd thought they were going on early-morning dates. She hadn't been able to think otherwise. For Serara, who went on kitchen dates (or wanted to think she did), Isuzu's denseness was a complete mystery. However, she thought this might be because she herself yearned too much for Nyanta. Even as the thought crossed her mind, she asked herself whether "yearning *too much*" might not be a questionable expression for a maidenly young woman to use, and she was steamed by a heat that had nothing to do with the bath.

In order to hide this, the only thing she could do was stick the lower half of her face underwater and blow bubbles.

"Serara will make a good wife."

...Especially once Minori launched an additional attack in a cheerful voice.

"And what about you, Minori? Will you be Shiroe's secretary?"

"Ah... That isn't what I meant."

"But you're crazy about him, aren't you? I'm cheering for you, you know."

The brunt of the attack had shifted away from her, and Serara felt relieved.

Isuzu was happily messing with Minori, but Minori seemed like an amazing girl to Serara, too. She'd changed her subclass to Apprentice, and now, on the days when she didn't go out hunting, she was working part-time at Shopping District 8.

She was a super middle schooler.

While she spent time with her as a friend, she'd noticed lots of cute things about her, and lots of klutzy things as well. However, she wanted to learn from her firm sense of responsibility and her cleverness, and particularly from the speed with which she worked. She thought so every time they cleaned up or pitched camp, but Minori always finished her work first. It wasn't that each

individual move she made was fast. She was quick at linking one job to another, and at preparing for tasks. To Serara, it seemed like a natural, mental difference, a difference in intelligence. In short, Minori was impressive.

She was a little bit younger, but in this other world where there was no school, it didn't seem to matter much. To Serara, Minori felt like a friend her own age.

"If he has you as his secretary, Minori, absolutely everything will go well."

"That isn't it. I just want to be a little bit useful, that's all."

"Suuure you do."

"Suuure you do."

"Isuzu, Minori's saying something."

"Serara, Minori's pretty cute, isn't she?"

She blindly followed Isuzu, and the two of them jostled Minori between them.

She giggled. She was in an odd mood. When she was in Susukino, she'd never even imagined being able to laugh like this. It felt as if it had been years since then.

This time, as Serara clung to Minori, feeling giddy, she sent a leading question to Isuzu:

"Well, what are you going to be, Isuzu?"

"Huh?"

Isuzu had been teasing both of them, and the question seemed to have startled her. However, that expression only lasted a moment, and when she spoke again, she looked solemn.

"I'm ordinary. If we get back to the old world, I'll be an office worker or something. If we stay like this, I'll hunt and go on quests and run errands for the Round Table Council, and every week, I'll sing at Bloom Hall."

"Are you going to be a singer, Isuzu?"

"Huh?! No, no."

Half laughing, Isuzu waved her hands in denial, making light splashing noises.

“No, no way. A singer? Nothing like that. That’s for girls who stand out more. I’m just normal. Strumming away at a restaurant once in a while suits me best. I provide background music for the times when everyone’s having fun. Me and Rudy.”

Her expression was nonchalant, and there was no darkness or excessive humility in it, so Serara thought that really was what she felt. Come to think of it, that was only natural: Not everyone aspired to be a musician. Isuzu loved music, but she probably wasn’t interested in that sort of thing.

“The future, hm?”

The voice was quite close, and it startled them enough to make them jump.

They hadn’t expected there to be any other bathers.

Roe2 nodded generously to the flustered group. Her steam-fogged glasses glittered.

“You’re young, aren’t you?”

Her voice was gentle, and for some reason, Serara nodded meekly. Roe2 was a mysterious woman: Some of her reactions were childlike, but from time to time, she showed the easy kindness of someone much older, someone who knew absolutely everything.

“Roe2, you’re—”

“Naturally, as your big sister, I’m older than you, so I have a physical advantage.”

Roe2’s statement startled Serara.

Isuzu wasn’t just startled. Her mouth was hanging open.

The fact that they’d thought of her as a dependable older sister up until this very moment was blown clean out of their minds.

“Uh, ah, um...”

“My chest is big, too.”

Isuzu was tense and flustered, Minori seemed terribly depressed for some

reason, and Serara tried desperately to encourage them. Naturally, she couldn't put it into words well, so she did it all inside her head, but as far as Serara was concerned, she was one big cheer squad. Isuzu was slim with a nice figure, and she thought Minori looked right for her age.

"My chest is big, too."

Regardless, Roe2 said it twice, so comforting them was a job and a half.

The two of them protested, and were appeased in turn. Then for some reason the conversation turned to love, and then to Earth and the towns where they'd lived.

"Where did you live, Roe2?"

"I suppose you could call it an underpopulated city. It was an empty place."

"Did you live alone? Lucky..."

"I am an adult, so yes. Besides, with transmissions as developed as they are, physical distances don't matter much."

I see, Serara thought. That's true.

There had been an online game, and it had turned into another world, and Serara had met Nyanta.

Maybe distances didn't matter where meetings were concerned.

Time simply flew by, but they didn't run out of things to talk about.

Serara realized that she'd never once gotten bored when she was with Minori or Isuzu, and Roe2 had jumped right into their circle.

They had just as much fun as when Pippi visited the Settergren siblings. Of course, pleasant times always come at a price, and the four of them got very overheated.

CHAPTER.



AFTER THE GIG

▶ NAME: MINORI

▶ LEVEL 57

▶ RACE: HUMAN

▶ CLASS: KANNAGI

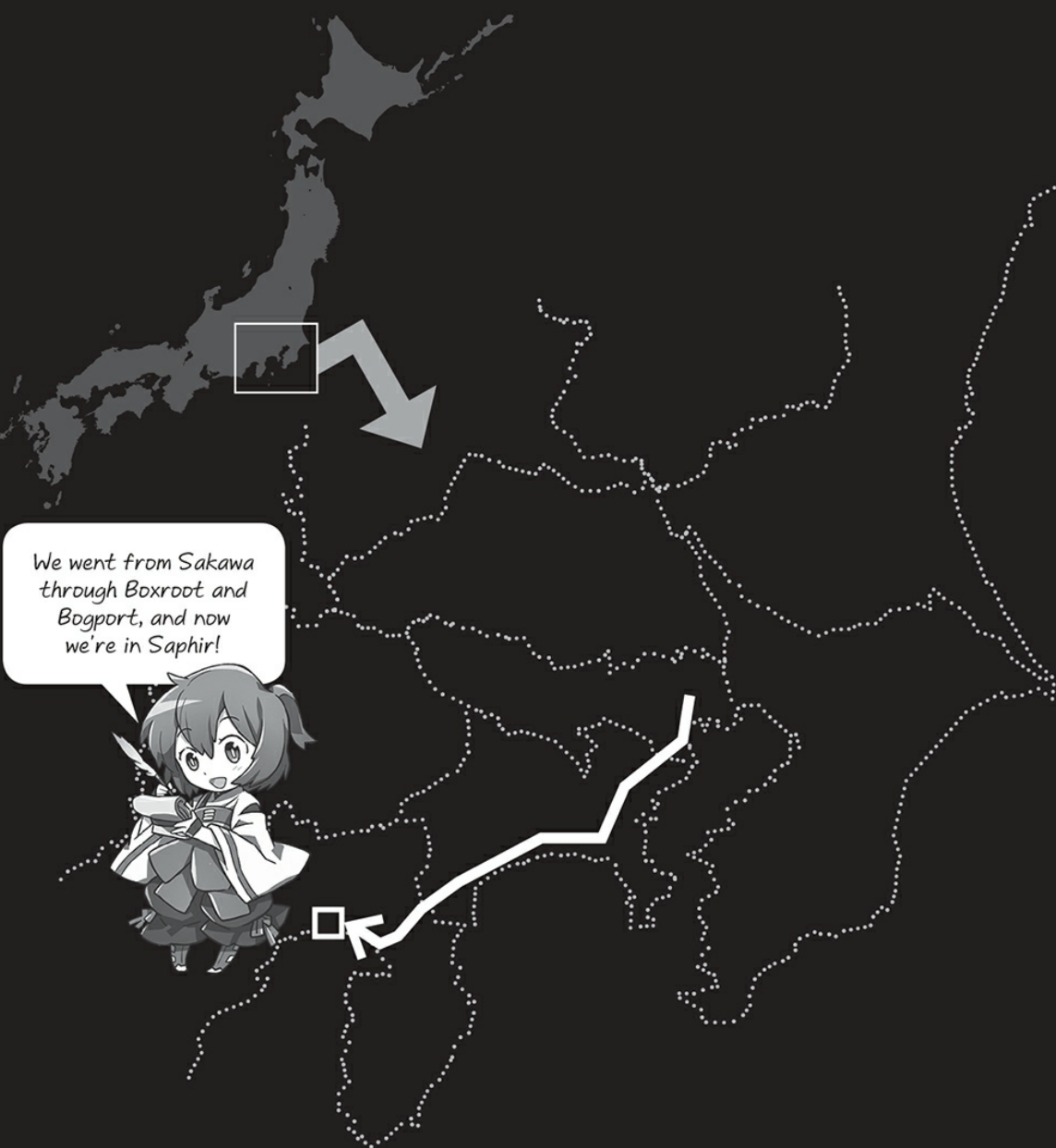
▶ HP: 5468

▶ MP: 5318

▶ ITEM 1:
[PRAYER STAFF WITH KAGURA BELLS]
A STAFF THAT GREATLY IMPROVES THE PERFORMANCE OF RINGING BARRIER. SINCE FIRING DISTANCE LENGTHENS AND RECAST TIME SHRINKS, YOU CAN USE IT SEVERAL TIMES IN A ROW. BECAUSE ITS PERFORMANCE AS A WEAPON FALLS DRASTICALLY, ITS PRIMARY USE IS DAMAGE INTERCEPTION.

▶ ITEM 2:
[BASKET WEAVE CHIHAYA]
KANNAGI-EXCLUSIVE ITEM WITH BASKET WEAVE PATTERNS. IT HAS THE PROTECTION OF THE WATER GOD, AND IT GREATLY INCREASES RESISTANCE TO COLD. IT ALSO MAKES DAMAGE INTERCEPTION SPELLS MORE EFFECTIVE AND INCREASES THE AMOUNT OF DAMAGE NEGATED. IT'S POPULAR FOR BOTH ITS PERFORMANCE AND ITS LOOKS.

▶ ITEM 3:
[FRAGMENT OF PURPLE CLOUD]
A CONSUMABLE ITEM. A PURPLE CLOUD INSIDE A SMALL BOTTLE. IT'S A POWERFUL SECRET MEDICINE THAT INCREASES THE FIRING RANGE OF RESURRECTION SPELLS AND CUTS HALF OF THE RECAST TIME. IT'S ALSO EXPENSIVE, BUT AFTER THAT BITTER EXPERIENCE IN CHOUHI, SHE SPENT THE MONEY ON ONE.



► 1

Boxroot.

Even in Arc-Shaped Archipelago Yamato, that name was well-known.

The name had originally belonged to the mountains, but it had become the region's name, the name of the mountain pass, and the name of the fortress as well.

There were several highways that ran from eastern Yamato to western Yamato, but all the highways on the Pacific side had to pass through the fortress of Boxroot. With the exception of marine transportation, it was practically the only trade route, and it was a strategic strong point as well.

On Earth, the place was called "Hakone," and of course Touya knew that. They'd covered it in his social studies class, and he'd had friends who'd gone there with their families on vacation.

What had left the biggest impression on him was a WebTV travel program.

At Touya's house, they'd often had that program on during dinner. His mother liked traveling, and now that Touya's legs didn't work right, the only trips they could really take him on were to hot springs resorts, so they watched this sort of program a lot. When he'd seen Hakone through the monitor, his only impression of it had been its lake and hot spring, but...

Right now, Touya's group was making its way up a Boxroot mountain road.

It had been nearly half a day since they'd started up the trail, but Touya and the others had been startled. It was serious enough that one could have said they were flabbergasted. After all, it was a bona fide mountain trek.

People might say, *What are you talking about? You're so dumb*, but those were Touya's real feelings. The road was only about three meters across, just barely wide enough to let the cart pass. From time to time, there were areas that had been reinforced with curbstones or stakes, but most of it was red clay, and it looked as if it would get very muddy if it rained.

That unstable road twisted and curved, hugging the hillside. On the right was an ascending slope that ran up to the mountain peaks and was covered thickly with trees that looked like Japanese cedars. On the left, another slope ran down into the valley, and the landscapes featured dizzying drops.

The scenery alone would have been one thing, but since the highway stuck close to the rock face, the whims of the terrain made them climb slightly, then descend a little, wind from side to side, and sometimes switch back so far it felt as if they'd reversed direction. In March, the mountain was still wintry and desolate, but nature was hardy, and the air was filled with the scent and rustle of deep green.

In other words, even though they'd grown used to post-Catastrophe Theldesia, Touya, Minori, and Serara were city kids at heart, and the sight was enough to shock them.

Isuzu was better acquainted with "nature" than the other three, but her familiarity with it went only as far as the fact that the back of the landowner's mountain rose on the other side of the fields, or that the weeds that grew thickly on the freakishly wide, dry riverbed were as tall as she was, or that it was possible to harvest mystery watermelons from the untended vegetable garden behind the school. This humorless, genuine mountain road left her dumbfounded.

In the first place, this world was supposed to be bursting at the seams with ruins from the Age of Myth.

They felt like complaining that this other world had a Tokyo Expressway, even if it was crumbling in quite a few places, so why did the Hakone Pass have to be an unpaved mountain trail?

It wasn't even a woodland lane, soft with leaf mold. Enormous wet black rocks twice as tall as Touya jutted out of it abruptly, and the road had to detour

to avoid them.

Rundelhaus, the only one with experience, nodded knowingly. “This is why, when we departed this morning, I said we would have to work very hard today,” he told them, sounding mildly rankled.

When he heard that, even Touya had to fire himself up.

The one bright spot was Roe2, who had said she would accompany them, and the Pale Horse she’d summoned. The ashen horse looked bloodless, but it was strong. Roe2 had called it after she’d used the Coach System to lower her level, and even then, it pulled them forward all by itself with power that was even greater than what they’d had with two horses.

The mountain road undulated, up and down, over and over. Even riding in the cart was painful, and they couldn’t go fast, so Rundelhaus and Touya had gotten down and were walking ahead of it.

The girls slumped in the covered cart, or sometimes walked behind it.

A round, whitish wolf pup ran up to Touya’s feet, then twined around them, looking gallant and proud of itself. It was a dead ringer for a white Shiba Inu, as far as Touya was concerned, but according to Serara, it was “Wolfie.” It had been summoned using a special technique in the servant summoning magic system, and unless Serara ordered it to do so, it wouldn’t vanish. Since that was the case, during their journey, except when they slept at inns, it often guarded the area for them like this.

“I can summon guard spirits, too, you know.”

“My thanks, but no, sister Roe2.”

Roe2 spoke lazily from the driver’s seat, and Rundelhaus looked back, answering firmly.

That morning, just to see, they’d had Roe2 show them her Zombie Bats, and they’d looked very grotesque. It had been so bad that Serara had crouched down, her eyes tearing up. In addition, they didn’t need to be guarded that heavily, so they’d vetoed the idea of patrolling with Roe2’s Zombie Bats. Besides, since she’d already summoned the Pale Horse, it would have taken too much mana to maintain them.

“They’re cute in their own way, once you get used to them...”

Roe2’s class was Summoner, which made summoning her specialty. Summoners were a type of magician that could call forth a variety of summoned creatures and make them act in the magician’s stead. Since they had a group of special skills that could be applied across an extremely wide range, they were considered the class whose activity had increased the most in the post-Catastrophe world. Typical examples included Undines, which could create water and control cold air, and Salamanders, which generated flames and manipulated heat.

The single term “Summoner” covered several orientations, which could be roughly divided into four categories: Elementalists, who controlled spirits like Undines and Salamanders; Beast Tamers, who controlled unicorns and Carbuncles; Alchemics, who summoned eccentric, artificial creatures such as slimes and golems; and Necromancers, who used skeletons and phantoms.

The relationships between these orientations weren’t exclusive. Ordinary Summoners created their own styles: About 70 percent had contracts with nature spirits, but also made occasional contracts with mystical beasts. Minori had read a memo that said that the best parts, and the places where the Summoners showed their skill, were in the combinations and balance. She’d probably heard that from Shiroe.

However, Roe2 said she was a Necromancer to the core. All the servants and summoned creatures she’d contracted with were Phantom monsters, and she had no other types whatsoever. Since she was a “pure build,” her abilities weren’t very adaptable. Naotsugu had told Touya that the popularity of Necromancers had fallen after the Catastrophe. Apparently this was because the monsters looked scary and grotesque, and it was hard to communicate with them.

Looking at the wolf Serara had summoned, he thought, *I guess there’s no help for that.*

This white puppy-type monster was brave in a fight, of course, but it was also brimming with curiosity and a little bit spoiled, and it looked almost like a pet. Even Touya could tell that if you were going to be traveling around with

something on a regular basis, fluffy guys like this would probably be more popular.

“Touya.”

“I see it, Rudy.”

Visibility wasn't good on the mountain road; there were almost no places where it was possible to get a clear view straight ahead for any significant distance.

Instead, when they rounded projections in the rock face, areas that were three or four bends ahead would abruptly appear.

On the road about fifteen minutes ahead of the group's location, they'd seen two stopped carts. They didn't seem to be under attack from monsters, so they'd probably run into some sort of trouble. *What do we do?* Touya pondered.

From what he'd seen, the carts appeared to be heading west, the same direction they were going. Under ordinary circumstances, that wouldn't be a problem: They could just follow the carts that were traveling in front of them. However, if those carts were stopped, it was another story. The road around here wasn't wide enough for them to pass, so they couldn't overtake them. With their Adventurer strength, he had a feeling that they could probably force a resolution somehow, but he still didn't really have a handle on the situation.

“They seem to be stalled.”

“Yeah.”

“What is it? Is something up?”

They heard Roe2's voice from the driver's seat. She'd been sitting slumped down, saying she was bad with sunlight, and unlike Touya and Rundelhaus, she probably hadn't seen that particular sight.

“There are carts stopped on the road, three or four bends farther on. They seem to have had some sort of trouble. There are two of them.”

“We might not be able to get past 'em, big sis Roe2.”

“Hm. I see. Well, I am the big sister here, so...” Roe2 puffed out her chest, but

she didn't seem to have any particularly good ideas. "In any case, let's get over there first."

"Yes, let's."

Minori agreed as well, and after heading farther down the road, the group encountered a caravan that was—as predicted—stuck.

"Say, would you like to buy a sword? It's a real gem, Akiba-made. Equip levels ten to twenty."

Those were the first words they heard from the caravan.

The merchant looked haggard, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He'd spoken to Touya, who was walking at the front of the group.

Touya was startled, but he promptly shook his head.

"Our levels are higher than that. We don't use those swords. What's the matter, Mr. Merchant?"

The merchant shook his head dully. He seemed to be the leader of the caravan, and when they looked, they saw three guards seated on wooden crates that had been set down on the road, slumped with exhaustion. Nearly all of the cargo had been unloaded. One of the two carts seemed to have a broken axle.

The cart Minori and the others were riding in stopped about twenty meters away. Turning back or changing direction would be easier if they weren't too close. This part of the narrow mountain road was particularly constricted; there wasn't room enough to pass, and if they took a wrong step, they'd go tumbling down a steep slope overgrown with slender trees.

"This is quite a sticky situation, isn't it, Touya?"

"Yeah."

This was only a guess, but if all that cargo was iron swords, the cart had been overloaded in the first place. There was a simple way to resolve the situation: Shove the broken cart down into the valley, load as much of the cargo as possible onto the other cart, dump the remaining cargo here, then move on. However, naturally, the merchant had bought all that cargo, and they guessed

he probably hadn't been able to bite the bullet and do it.

"We've already passed a day and a night here since the axle broke. If you find the merchant ill-mannered, please do forgive him."

A woman with gentle features stepped down from the innermost cart.

Her hair was the pale brown of maiden grass plumes with sunlight shining through them, and she wore a bolero, a long skirt, and a large hat, all coordinated in pastel yellows, ranging from daisy to dandelion. She was lovely, with a tender gaze and softly curving eyebrows.

The air held the faint scent of hepatica flowers, and as he gazed at the beauty, Touya felt troubled and rather gloomy. His hunches tended to be right. This woman, who seemed to be pure kindness, would make him feel something very painful. He had no grounds for thinking this, but he knew.

"I am Dariella, a travel writer."

The woman greeted them, delicately pinching up her skirt in a sweet gesture.

"You're young, but you're Adventurers, aren't you? I'm afraid that spending yet another night here will be very hard on the merchants. Could you possibly carry a few crates for us, just to the fort of Boxroot? With your assistance, Adventurers, I believe you'll be able to overtake us at the pass, a little farther down the road, and the merchants will be able to extricate themselves from this predicament."

Dariella's entreaty was exquisitely mild and graceful.

Although gentle, her words were persuasive, to the point where both Touya and Rundelhaus nodded involuntarily.

Under the circumstances, there really were no other options.

The two of them turned and headed back up the mountain road to discuss the matter with Minori and the others.

Apparently, the caravan cart's axle had been broken by an abrupt dip in the road. There had been a protruding rock, thinly coated with dirt and hard to spot; the wheel had run up onto that rock, then immediately fallen down the drop and landed on another square stone. It had only been a fall of ten centimeters or so, and ordinarily, it wouldn't have caused this sort of accident. However, the merchant had been greedy, and he'd loaded twenty-four crates of steel swords onto the cart. The jolt had been a violent one, and the wheel had broken.

The crates were heavy enough that it would have been hard for a Person of the Earth to lift even one of them, but Minori and the others were able to lift two or three at a time without trouble. When, carrying the crates, they'd made their way down the mountain track for about twenty minutes, they reached an area where the road widened, jutting out like an observation platform.

The carts would be able to take a break or pass each other here, and for now, it would probably be a good place to stack the crates.

Serara stayed there to prepare lunch, and about two hours later, Minori and the others finished carrying the crates. Although it was a pity, they'd pushed the cart with the broken axle down into the valley, and the merchant was on his way here with the undamaged cart. Apparently, he'd joined forces with the guards and used up all his energy and willpower, and was now taking a nap.

"He spent the entire night protecting his cargo on a mountain road where monsters might appear. It's no wonder he's exhausted," the writer Dariella said, smiling softly at Minori.

She was a Person of the Earth, and it was difficult to tell her age. She was probably older than Minori, but it was impossible to imagine how much older. If they estimated slightly higher than her appearance suggested, she was probably about the same age as Marielle, but when she spoke, quite unexpectedly, she sometimes gave a sweet smile that made her seem to be Minori's age after all.

"Are you the merchant's wife, Miss Dariella?"

Dariella looked startled, then burst out laughing, her eyes half-closed in amusement.

“No, I’m not. I was on my way back home, and I simply had the merchant give me a ride.”

“I see. Minami, was it? That’s in the same direction as Ikoma.”

“Yes, it’s quite close. My house is in the mountains of Ikoma.”

“Oh-ho.”

Roe2 had approached and spoken to her, and Dariella, naturally, responded.

The merchant’s undamaged cart, the pile of crates, and the cart that belonged to Minori’s group were all lined up in an area that seemed to be a sort of lookout spot for the pass. It was surrounded by a wooden fence that didn’t seem very sturdy, and the open area itself seemed to jut out into empty space. But beyond it lay a breathtaking, panoramic view of the valley.

The merchant’s group really did seem to be exhausted. One of the guards was managing to sit up, leaning against the cargo, but the other members had climbed into the cart as if taking refuge and had fallen asleep. Serara tried to serve them soup, but they showed no sign of waking.

Minori’s group, meanwhile, had decided to take a late lunch here. The wind was still cold, but it was refreshing; it blew across the mountains, carrying a distinctive scent of greenery that it didn’t have in Akiba.

“What kind of soup is this?”

“It’s miso soup with potatoes and carrots.”

“And these long things are...?”

“They’re leeks.”

A short distance away, Minori was listening to Roe2 and Serara’s conversation and biting back a laugh.

The meal they ate at the lookout was reminiscent of box lunches, and it was fun. Isuzu perched on a fallen log, swinging her legs, while Rundelhaus sat next to her, stuffing his face with *onigiri*. Both looked cheerful and animated. Dariella, who’d joined Serara and Roe2 and was offering them pickles, also seemed to be in a mild mood.

“Touya, does your stomach hurt?”

“No, it’s fine.”

Touya was off by himself, and his mind seemed elsewhere. Worried, Minori had spoken to him, but her practical little brother had only answered her with a grin:

“What about you, Minori? You okay? You’re not missing Shiroe, are you?”

“Oh, honestly! I am not.”

“Well, that’s fine, then. Once we’re over the pass, we’ll be real close to our destination.”

“Yes, and besides, they’re wyverns, aren’t they? Shiroe said that they might appear in the mountains around here, too. The activity ranges for flying monsters have expanded quite a lot...”

“Yeah? I guess we’d better be careful, then.”

Abruptly, Touya glanced up, as if at the sky. Following his gaze, Minori saw *it*, too:

A group was approaching them.

And at the head of that group was a heavily equipped knight in full body armor.

There were about ten Adventurers in all, and there was something dismal about them. They were climbing up the road, and Minori’s group focused on them immediately. They’d come from the direction Minori and the others were going, the route that led down into the foothills.

Quickly, Minori checked their statuses.

A Samurai named Ishiijirou was in the lead. He was level 90 and was affiliated with the guild Plant Hwyaden. The fourteen members who followed him belonged to the same guild and were at roughly the same level.

At this point, there weren’t many player killers on the Yamato Server. At the very least, the act was all but unheard of in the vicinity of Akiba by now. However, on meeting a group this deep in the mountains, Minori and the others

couldn't hide their tension.

Casually, Rundelhaus went over to stand by Touya.

As he swept his mantle back, standing in a pose that made him look like a model, he was the very image of a young nobleman, but Minori knew he'd taken up that position so that he could shield Isuzu and Serara behind him.

The group walked at a steady pace, without hurrying.

If they were high-level, they must have had highly capable mounts, but not a single Adventurer was riding. The fourteen of them formed two rough lines, drawing nearer on the mountain track.

Since the road had opened up here, they wouldn't be passing each other at a narrow place. All they had to do was watch them go. Although Minori thought it might be cowardly of her, the fact relieved her.

Yet, the four individuals in the center of the group were supporting an enormous object.

It looked like a portable Shinto shrine. The decorations on it seemed very European, but it was surrounded by a crosshatch framework of thick poles, and the four people to the front, back, and both sides were using those poles to carry it.

"That's Boreas' Moving Temple," Dariella murmured softly.

"What's that?" Roe2, the only member of the group who didn't seem tense, asked indifferently.

"I haven't seen it very often myself. It's something the Odysseia Knights carry with them from place to place. I heard it's a sacred item used by the Adventurers."

"Hm."

On hearing that, Isuzu and Serara looked dubious.

Minori hadn't heard anything of the sort, either.

The same was true of the name "Odysseia Knights." The mere sound of it provoked echoes of unease, as though a cold wind were blowing through. In

any case, when she'd checked just now, the group had been Adventurers affiliated with Plant Hwyaden.

That meant the *Odysseia* Knights probably weren't a guild.

In which case, what exactly were they? Minori didn't know.

What she had heard before was the word *Odysseia*, "those who long for home."

It was a group whose ultimate goal was returning to the old world. If that had been all, she could have sympathized; in a way, the group would have been expressing the feelings of all Adventurers. However, all the rumors she'd heard as she'd helped Shopping District 8 in Akiba's guild center had seemed tinged with gloom.

The group came closer, until they were able to make out equipment and the features on individual faces. All the members' equipment was clean and neat. They actually seemed a little *too* disciplined to Minori. None of them made small talk with each other, and they walked at a fixed pace. They were a group of Adventurers with unlimited physical strength, level 90 at that, but they seemed like a band of exhausted wraiths—even though there was nothing in their gestures to suggest it.

"They say Boreas' Moving Temple resurrects all Adventurers."

As a Person of the Earth, Dariella probably didn't know.

Her words sounded somehow distant, as if she were speaking about someone else.

"Also, I couldn't say whether it's a side effect, but it's said to disturb the voice of your heart. It must be quite important to the Adventurers."

Minori and Serara exchanged glances.

No matter what she said, they'd never heard of the item before. They weren't sure how to react. They didn't really understand the meaning of what Dariella was saying, either. Minori felt as if something inside her was refusing to understand.

If they took her words at face value, that "moving temple" seemed to be

something that acted like a temple and resurrected Adventurers who'd lost their lives near it: a substitute for a resurrection point, or rather, a movable resurrection point.

It did sound like a blessing that heightened Adventurer immortality, but on the other hand, it seemed terribly ominous.

Feeling uneasy, Minori whispered her little brother's name into his back.

For the past few minutes, Touya had been standing at the very front of their group, drawing himself up to his full height and fixing steady eyes on the Odysseia Knights. As a result, his back was all Minori could see.

Touya didn't respond.

However, as his twin, Minori could see tension in his back that was as great as when he was fighting.

When the procession reached the side of the open area, they advanced at an unchanged pace—as if searching for something, as if led by something—without paying any special attention to Minori and the others.

It felt as if a very long time had passed, but considered objectively, it had probably only been about ten minutes.

They caused no trouble. They simply passed by.

Even so, Minori was unable to quiet the whisper that spread through her heart.

► 3

A magic circle was cast about thirty meters ahead, laying track and warping nature in accordance with its established effect. It interfered with Dryads and Treants, creating a tunnel-shaped space through the dense forest. The surrounding trees twisted out of its way.

The magic array continued to generate the same gleam, advancing ever onward. This particular magic circle did more than simply interfere with the

surrounding natural environment; it also acted as magical rails that generated a floating force field and aided movement.

With the help of levitating power, steel carriages advanced over the magical array. They were huge, box-shaped vehicles about eight meters long. The carriages were clad in rough armor, and even though they had windows in them, the glass was tinted dark, and it wasn't possible to see inside.

The fourth car from the front was a two-story command post vehicle with a roof that could be opened, and in it, there was a woman.

Her voluptuous body, which had a carnivorous air about it, was encased in a military uniform, and her name was Mizufa Trude.

She was a high-ranking officer who served the Holy Empire of Westlande.

The lady general was watching the outside world through shielded glass. Her smile was sardonic, a mixture of obstinacy and thoughtlessness. Her beautiful legs, which she'd crossed at the thigh, showed that she was relaxed, and the fingertips of her right hand toyed with the hilt of her sword, caressing it.

Mizufa was satisfied with the moving train's performance.

Without the chained rails, the train would have been too heavy to move at all, but with the help of the magic circle, it was able to advance over even this mountainous, uneven ground. Considered in combination with its defensive capabilities, even its unwieldy mass wasn't a flaw.

The Adventurers wanted machines that could fly through the sky. They'd discarded this train as a useless toy, an attempt that had failed during development. However, for Mizufa and the other People of the Earth, even this discarded toy was a treasure more precious than gold. The overwhelming difference in technological power made Mizufa smile.

It wasn't just technology. Magic, strength, inventiveness: The Adventurers had several times more of all these things than the People of the Earth did.

It was as if someone had decided that they were the protagonists of this world.

...And Mizufa and the others were supporting players.

She chuckled deep in her throat at the dark humor in it. She had no idea who'd done it, but they'd created quite a cruel farce.

"Progressing smoothly, ma'am."

"What's our location?"

"The same as before: the eastern Deep, Dark Woods."

The steel carriages composed the heart of the army corps under Mizufa's control, and they were currently carrying out a top secret mission: Operation Crimson Night. There weren't many personnel involved in the maneuver. However, it was an important mission, and cutting-edge technology such as the train, Servant Summoning Gems and EXP Pots had been committed to it.

Its importance had doubtless been confirmed by the Ten-Seat Council as well, but Mizufa thought that was nowhere near enough. The Adventurers didn't understand the meaning behind this operation in the slightest.

Nureha, the council's capricious leader, had accompanied them on the maneuver in order to slip out of the castle, and it had encouraged the troops. This was something Mizufa herself had planned, and its effect had been enormous: Now, her soldiers were willing to fight under her orders to the point of giving up their lives and souls. In the Holy Empire of Westlande, Nureha was a princess who was the object of blind belief and fanaticism. Her charisma was beyond description.

Of course... No doubt that's Lady Nureha's whim.

Still, no matter how much belief was invested in her, Nureha was an Adventurer as well.

Maybe she'd tired of the march through the Deep, Dark Woods. She'd unexpectedly vanished from the train. Her ladies-in-waiting and menservants were frantic, but Nureha disappearing wasn't all that unusual. Mizufa was calm.

In the first place, she'd wanted Nureha to encourage the troops and review the unit, things she'd already done; after that, she had no need for her. On the contrary: It would have been more of a nuisance if she'd stayed nearby, meddling in this and that. Letting Nureha disappear and allowing the situation to stand would probably have been a problem in and of itself, but one of the

Ten-Seat Council members, “Imperial Guard” Loreil Dawn, was following her. It had been five days since they’d vanished; they’d probably met up again by now. To Mizufa, these were welcome circumstances.

The single remaining thorn was another Ten-Seat, Kazuhiko, who was riding in one of the rear cars.

This insolent stick-in-the-mud led his own private army, the Miburo, and poked his nose into every problem in Minami. Mizufa considered him an eyesore. He’d even used the name of the Ten-Seat Council to interfere with her military authority and had used his organization as a military police force. As its leader, Kazuhiko had insisted on confirming the safety of the Servant Summoning Gems and had planted himself in a rearward car.

Still, even that had already been factored in.

That was how much value there was in Crimson Night. Or rather, this entire sequence of unit reinforcement was a process that was absolutely vital if Mizufa was to achieve her ambition.

The lady laughed deeply.

The train wasn’t going all that fast. Even if they’d been traveling on an ordinary highway, their top speed was only about a third of what the latest four-horse cart could manage. However, on the other hand, that speed didn’t decrease even on unimproved ground. It would follow the undulations of the forest even into a ravine, but it was still faster than moving an army on foot.

This certainly fell short of the miraculous, sorcerous machine the Adventurers had wanted—one that could travel from Minami to Ezzo in ten hours—but it was extremely useful for all that. Compared to traveling through the sky, where it wasn’t possible to avoid being seen, in terms of secrecy, it could even be considered superior. At any rate, even the Adventurers hadn’t completed a flying machine yet. To her, this treasure of a train alone was enough.

The Mana Breeder Zeldus was said to have developed Jared Gan’s Mana Furnace, which had made the train practical on an industrial scale. The ancient technology of the Kunie, handed down through the House of Saimiya...the magic technology that had been born from this knowledge was, naturally, the core of Adventurer fortunes, but the People of the Earth had received a tiny

share as well. This train was one example.

That the locomotive “advances over uneven ground” was easy to say, but it wasn’t limited to wilderness. In order to secure its course, the Circled Rails had the power to warp the surrounding forest. In other words, while it was slow, it made it possible to covertly transport troops across Yamato, which was thick with mountains and forests.

At present, Mizufa had ten armored cars under her command. Of these, four were particularly large. The fact that there weren’t many of them was worrisome, and she preferred her equipment more standardized, but there was really no help for that.

Adventurers were fickle, and they loved novelty. They weren’t interested in mass-producing things that were already technologically complete. They were constantly attempting to create new, different, powerful, superior items. Of course, this was doubtless a good attitude to take in terms of technological development, but for soldiers like Mizufa, it was irritating. In the field, it was better for both repairs and operation if equipment was standardized.

That said, since Mizufa had taken an invention that wasn’t wanted, she wasn’t about to be picky. She had enough authority to request minimal maintenance, and in a pinch, she knew she could make a variety of bribes work for her.

Adventurers were children, and when it came to their desires, they were weak.

“Report on the status of the Nightshade Servants.”

“Company One has returned. Companies Two and Three are being deployed to Redstone from Boxroot. Company Four is backup. Company Five is currently on duty patrolling the area. Companies Six and Seven are resting.”

“Ah-ha, that’s great. Advance, and stay on guard.”

Mizufa issued orders to the two Arcanemancers who were seated in the engineers’ seats two steps below.

“The Nightshade Servants sent ahead as scouts have been brought to a standstill by a moving body of water we believe to be the upper reaches of the Favorwell River.”

“Hm.” Mizufa glanced at a military map that was posted on the wall.

The car, which was rocking only slightly, held a variety of maps, documents, and files. Mizufa liked taking command in the field and letting her saber drink blood, but she was well aware that, now that she was a high-ranking general, these were her weapons as well.

“The Favorwell River, hm? This area is—”

She licked her shapely lips, narrowing her eyes as she skimmed the detailed notes that had been written in. The black triple claw marked wyvern habitats.

Their levels were ideal, and in addition, they were a perfect check on the neighboring residential areas.

A kaleidoscope of strategies ran through Mizufa’s mind. Each one was a blood-scented dream, as red as a spider lily.

The Adventurers might be good people, but Mizufa was under no obligation to imitate them. Either way, Yamato was headed for troubled times. The Holy Empire of Westlande was the only governing organization to have retained the bloodline of the Ancient Dynasty of Westlande into the present day.

Which made Eastal, the League of Free Cities, an enemy of the emperor.

Of course, Mizufa didn’t believe any of this. She just needed the pretext. It meant that this was now a world where a soldier like Mizufa could rise to the top through military exploits. As a rule, soldiers ranked low among the nobility of Westlande, which tended to favor terms like “elegance” and “singing and dancing.” She had to grab the few chances she could get.

In addition, Mizufa knew that her own merit bloomed on top of blood.

Or rather, she’d gotten drunk on blood. Even she no longer knew whether she wanted military achievements or the simple scent of blood.

“Wyverns, hm... The load’s too heavy for just the Servants, but... I see. Keh-heh-heh. The Odysseia Knights were around here, weren’t they?”

Silence filled the car.

“Issue subjugation orders to the Nightshade Servants. Notify the sergeants as well.”

The message was immediately relayed to the rearward armored carriages via the Directives Crystal.

On receiving the order, in the rear cars, more than a hundred People of the Earth donned black masks and fell into a false sleep in cramped beds that looked like lidless coffins. The Servant Summoning Gems that were linked to sockets on each bed glowed eerily.

These jewels summoned Nightshade Servants, which were projections of the casters' minds.

In a way, this was the equivalent of giving People of the Earth additional bodies. As they lay here, in beds on the train, they acquired monster bodies that could move freely. Nightshade Servants manifested with levels that were equal to the levels of the caster who'd summoned them, but it wasn't possible to break past the upper limit of 45.

To the Adventurers, the magic items were probably trivial, with laughable military potential. In fact, the Adventurers who'd provided them had given them up so easily they might as well have been joke items.

However, if you asked Mizufa, they were nothing of the sort. These items granted People of the Earth temporary immortality.

Even if the Nightshade Servants were defeated, the People of the Earth were lying in bed and took no damage. Not only that, but any experience points earned in battle went to the casters; in other words, to the People of the Earth.

You really couldn't help but laugh. It really was ridiculous; an earth-shattering magic item.

"In ten minutes, start administering the EXP Potions."

These potions doubled the efficiency with which experience points were acquired. Taken orally, they were inefficient. Injecting them directly probably made the burden greater, but it visibly increased their effect.

"Lord Kazuhiko is requesting that we stop all inhumane devices."

"Nobody cares. That hypocrite... He's an Adventurer; we're People of the Earth. What does a man who can't die know about war? Now is the time for us

to sacrifice our lives. Isn't that right?"

Mizufa smiled. It was a dark smile.

The lives that would be sacrificed didn't belong to her. They were weapons that were needed in order to harvest more flowers.

"The advance unit has made contact with the enemy," a tense operator communicated to them in a low voice.

Mizufa kept her cool, waiting for further reports. Then news of a wyvern sighting came in.

Tensing her lips, which had curved up involuntarily, Mizufa softly stroked the pommel of her sword.

"Advance unit, charge! Drive the wyverns out of the mountains! Tell them to get some distance, then focus on magic attacks. Chase them into the town. Then the Odysseia death-wish crowd will help with the hunt! Tell them it's our time to really rake it in."

They'd found an ideal hunting ground. In Adventurer terms, would this be called "power leveling"? Mizufa would have called it a military drill. In order to temper steel weapons, one had to sharpen the red-hot blades with blood.

"Send in the troops. Put Companies Six and Seven into the war zone, as well as Company Five on direct guard duty!"

"What should we do about guarding the train, ma'am?"

"Have Rondarg watch the area. Or, well, no, ask him to."

"Contacting Lord Rondarg. —Speaking tube!"

The order was relayed to an Adventurer who was riding nearby, not in a cart, but on a Phantom Steed.

"...Even Rondarg gets called 'Lord' if he's an Adventurer, hm?"

As Mizufa murmured, one of the communications officers turned to look up at her.

The lady general's lips twisted. "No need to relay that. I'm just talking to myself." She took a swallow of wine. The man was a failure who'd wandered

down to them from Susukino, but it made him suitable for the dirty, low-ranking jobs. She almost felt like thanking him for it.

Rats have their own nesting places. She thought that was an apt phrase.

As Mizufa laughed, in high spirits, the secret units of the Holy Empire of Westlande were rapidly deployed to central Yamato under her command.

By curious coincidence, the territory of Mizufa's longed-for Crimson Night included the town of Saphir, where Minori's group was heading. However, at this point, not even Mizufa knew what that meant.

► 4

At the merchants' request, Serara and the others had carried some of the cargo to the mountain fortress of Boxroot, then relinquished their loads and gone on ahead. Dariella, the Person of the Earth, rode in their cart with them.

Having lost one of their carts, the merchants no longer had the leeway to take her along, and while the highway was comparatively safe, this was true only for seasoned travelers and Adventurers, not People of the Earth women who were traveling alone.

It had been decided that they'd give her a ride to Saphir, their current destination.

Saphir was one of the places where Serara and the others had always meant to stop. It was a relatively prosperous city on the highway that ran west from Akiba, and they'd been planning to soothe the fatigue of their journey there since before their departure.

The cart traveled over stone-flagged ways covered with damp moss, slippery red clay tracks, and chilly ridge-top roads covered by arches of deep green. They went slowly. On mountain roads like this, the Pale Horse's strength wasn't much help. If they drove as fast as they could, they could easily end up with an accident on their hands.

Serara and the group advanced over the winding mountain road, traveling no

faster than a person could walk.

Somewhere, she could hear a bird twittering. It sounded a little like a pipe, and as she walked, she strained her ears to listen. When she glanced at Minori, who was walking beside her, she seemed to be looking for the bird, too. She looked around and saw her wolf watching a bird that was about the size of a hot dog bun and had yellow lines on its blue wings. The bird called one more time.

Glad that she'd managed to find it, she tugged at Minori's sleeve to tell her, but apparently the other girl had seen it as well. The pair looked at each other and smiled.

Thanks to that, Serara visibly relaxed.

The Odysseia Knights had been at the mountain fortress the group had passed, too.

From what Dariella said, they weren't that unusual in this area of Yamato. They fought to protect People of the Earth villages and towns, risking their lives, and they were highly respected. The knights were a stern, vaguely dreary group, but they were courteous and high-minded, and their equipment was excellent. When she heard this, Serara thought it was probably true.

Still, the Odysseia Knights seemed to have made Minori, Touya, and the rest a little uncomfortable as well.

She knew this because ever since they'd crossed paths in the mountain pass, the atmosphere had been tense and prickly. Still, several hours had passed, and the mood had finally managed to relax. *I'll have to thank that blue bird*, Serara thought.

Technically, according to their itinerary, they'd meant to spend a night at the mountain fortress, since the fort had lodging facilities for travelers.

However, the group had spent the night in that open area in the mountains, and they'd passed the fortress before noon, so they'd missed their chance.

"Minori," Serara asked, "we're camping again tonight, aren't we?"

"I think so. There aren't any good towns to stop at in this area."

“What about tomorrow?”

“We should reach Fuji fairly early. When we do, let’s stay the night there.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Serara beamed as she agreed.

She’d confirmed that their itinerary was what she’d expected it to be, and she was happy that, as usual, Minori had given careful thought to that side of things as well.

At last the mountain road ended, and the way gradually grew wider. It still sloped, but gently, and the dense woods progressively became a mixed forest. The view from the road opened up, and they could see Mount Fuji clearly. Serara didn’t know what its name was in this other world, but it was Japan’s most famous mountain, snowcapped and very familiar.

“It’s Mount Fuji.”

“Ah, indeed it is. That’s Sacred Mount Fuji.”

Touya and Rundelhaus were talking loudly, as if in high spirits.

Serara was feeling vaguely excited, too. If you lived in Japan, you saw Mount Fuji at least once a month on the WebTV weather forecast, and as a matter of fact, when the weather was good, the mountain in the distance was visible from Serara’s city. It wasn’t unusual enough to make a fuss over, and come to think of it, this was another world, so it wasn’t the real Mount Fuji anyway.

Even so, it felt like a special mountain. Was it because they were Japanese? Serara didn’t really know, but when Isuzu said, “Now it feels like we’re traveling!” she had to agree. It really did feel like that.

In the early afternoon, they began to hear a low sound, as if the wind were blowing past them, and before long, they came out on the coast. It wasn’t a white, sandy beach. It was covered with pebbles about the size of the tip of Serara’s little finger, but even so, the blue-gray sea was there.

The coast sketched an extremely gentle curve that stretched in the direction their group was traveling.

The highway ran parallel to the coast, and there was no clear border between

the road and the gravelly beach here. The only markers were the pine groves that dotted the area, providing erosion control.

The ocean was calm, and they saw several boats floating on it. They might have been People of the Earth fishermen.

“It looks like Choushi.”

“The coast seems rougher here, though.”

Serara and Minori compared impressions, then hastily glanced around for any sign of sahuagins.

Of course, fortunately, there were no such monsters here, and the two of them were left to smile at each other.

“Now that we’ve come this far, it’s only a little farther to Saphir,” Minori said. “Have you spent the night there before, Miss Dariella?”

“Yes, a few times. It is on my way home.”

“We’ll be there tomorrow, won’t we?” Minori continued. “If we hurry, I suppose we could reach it late tonight, but...”

At Minori’s words, Serara and the others all shook their heads in unison: No recklessness. That was another lesson their travels had taught them.

However, that did mean they’d need to camp today. Serara glanced at the sky, trying to gauge its mood. In its upper reaches, the wind looked strong, but the air was clear, and the weather didn’t seem likely to deteriorate. That meant camping wouldn’t be very difficult. Naturally, staying on the coast would be too scary; it would be better to go a bit farther inland, find a grove of trees, and stay there. From what she’d seen, there seemed to be lots of mixed groves that could serve as windbreaks.

That said, since the road they were traveling on was by the coast, it was flat and easy to walk on, and there were all sorts of likely-looking campsites. This made things tricky, and while they hesitated, evening might creep up on them.

“If that happens, I won’t be able to make dinner...”

Serara was thinking in circles.

She'd volunteered for dinner duty, but no matter what they did, cooking on the road was hard.

Before they'd left, Serara had stuck close to Nyanta and learned all sorts of things from him, but when it came time to put them into practice, she couldn't manage half her ideal menu.

Outdoors, where she didn't even have a flat cutting board, things never went as well for her as they did in a kitchen.

All the food she managed to make was dismal, and it made her feel bad.

As a matter of fact, her worry was fairly off base. Among People of the Earth, "travel rations" meant leaden, hard-baked bread, plus diluted wine or mead.

The soup or *okonomiyaki* Serara and the others made each time they camped belonged entirely to Adventurer culture, and they weren't the norm in this world. In particular, the group had lived close to Captain Nyanta—a Chef who could make a success even of cooking outdoors—ever since the Catastrophe, and it had skewed their idea of what was normal. That was all there was to it.

"Pasta soup, maybe?"

Turning red, Serara murmured it quietly.

If she used vegetables, dried meat and the bottled soup base she'd purchased in Eat-Till-You-Drop Alley to make soup, then added some leaf-shaped pasta, the result would probably be filling. Then, she thought, if she attempted an apple and mayonnaise salad, although it would be a little sour, she might manage to make it presentable.

Still, she sighed. "I wonder if making just one dish looks lazy..."

"No, not at all. Hot soup is delicious."

Beside her, Minori tried to encourage her.

Serara smiled, feeling a little wretched. Her desire to work as hard as Nyanta was so great that it would have taken several baseball stadiums to measure it; however, since their group didn't have Magic Bags, they could only carry around limited amounts of ingredients and seasonings, and when cooking outside, it often took a lot of work to maintain the prep site and the heat

source.

When she tried to do anything mildly complicated, Serara easily fell apart and failed. Since she had New Wife's Apron with Nyanta Appliqué equipped, she couldn't even excuse herself by saying that her subclass was Housekeeper.

"All of you get along so well."

As Minori tried to cheer up the distressed Serara, Dariella spoke to them with a gentle expression.

"We're friends, you see."

"Yep, it's 'cos we're friends!"

In response to Minori's prompt answer, Isuzu, who'd been walking up ahead, turned around and shouted back in agreement.

"Are you from the same guild?" Dariella asked.

"No. Mine is different," Serara answered.

We are friends, though. The feeling made her puff out her chest with pride.

"Serara's a member of the Crescent Moon League," Minori offered. "We belong to a guild called Log Horizon."

"Um. I'm not with a guild. I'm a traveling Vampanella." From the driver's seat, Roe2 put her two cents in as well.

"If you don't mind, may I ask...? Why are you going to Minami?"

"We aren't going there. We're going partway, so we can hunt wyverns in the Redstone Mountains." Touya was the one who answered Dariella's question this time.

"My! Wyverns? Those are monsters that occasionally come down into the villages."

"Are they, Minori?" Touya asked.

"Shiroe said that that sort of thing did happen sometimes."

Serara tilted her head, thinking.

According to Minori's drawing, wyverns seemed to be shaped like paper

airplanes that had sprouted arms and legs. If they could fly, they certainly might come down to settled areas.

“We’re also on tour, I guess.”

It was Isuzu who’d spoken; at some point, she’d dropped back from the front of the group.

“On...tour?” Dariella asked.

“What’s that?” Roe2 added.

“Come to think of it, you haven’t seen us, either, have you, Roe2?” Fretting over how to explain it, Serara looked at Isuzu, asking for help.

Isuzu lifted the spear she was using as a walking stick, cradling it to her chest, then mimed strumming it the way she’d strum a lute and winked. “We’re going around performing.”

“Isuzu is a Bard, you know,” Serara said.

“Eh-heh-heh-heh. Mostly I’m just an amateur.”

“My, my. You play music?”

Dariella’s impressed cry seemed to have put Isuzu in a good mood; she took a few light, dancing steps and twirled.

“I may not look like it, but at Bloom Hall in Akiba, they call me a rock ‘n’ roller.”

“A rock ‘n’ roller?”

“Um, erm... In other words...”

“In other words?”

Roe2 sounded perplexed. “It means she’s cool, kind of,” Serara told her.

Minori had been biting back giggles for a little while, and at that, she burst out laughing. Serara protested desperately. Even she’d thought her explanation might have been a bit odd, so she couldn’t stop her cheeks from turning red.

Almost nobody said *rock ‘n’ roller* anymore; it was Isuzu’s fault for using a word that was hard to explain. Puffing her cheeks out crossly, Serara stared at

Isuzu, loading her look with certainty. However, it didn't seem to get through to the other girl: She rolled her shoulders, strummed downward, and struck a pose with a "Rock 'n' roll. ♪"

The only one to sympathize with Serara was Wolfie, who gamboled around her ankles.

"Musical activities, hm? Intriguing."

"Yes, it sounds rather wonderful."

Hearing Roe2's and Dariella's opinions seemed to please Isuzu.

"Okay, then, how about this? We'll be playing in Saphir tomorrow night, so come and watch."

"Playing?"

"Right, Minori? That's okay, isn't it?" Isuzu asked energetically.

They'd always planned to spend two nights in Saphir. This was because after they'd built up their energy in the town, they would finally head into the Redstone Mountains. When they'd crossed the Boxroot Pass, the terrain had been mountainous, but they'd still been able to get through on a highway meant for commercial traffic. In the Redstone Mountains, since they'd have to hunt, in the worst case, they'd have to trek through trackless wilderness.

"I, um, I sing with Isuzu, too."

When Serara added that comment, Minori nodded, as if telling her not to worry:

"Yes, it's fine. Let's relax a little and take it easy in Saphir."

As if those words had spurred them on, during the short interval before sunset, Serara and the others traveled just a little farther.

► 5

On the predicted night, the gig was fantastic.

Everything seemed to shine somehow. It was hot, and her heart beat fast, and it all seemed much too precious—even the stains on the wall and the homely innkeeper.

Isuzu's voice was far more relaxed than usual, and An Die Freude was loyal to her.

Eighth notes paraded across a musical staff as uniformly as if they were wearing matching hats, joining the rhythm Touya drummed. Serara's foot-pedaled porta-organ provided an astonishingly expansive accompaniment. This might have been because the white wolf cub was pushing on the pump as if its life depended on it. Even the number where she let Minori handle the lute was fun.

They made mistakes, but all of the errors melted away into a joy that was like a fizzing, carbonated sea. It was simply wonderful.

Roe2's eyes were round, and she applauded until her hands ached. Dariella complimented them, looking thoughtful. Most of all, the People of the Earth who'd gathered at the inn applauded and cheered. As a Bard, she felt almost unbearably lucky.

Sighing with delight for the umpteenth time, Isuzu basked in a happiness so intense she thought she might burst and vanish.

"Oh, geez. Oh, geez!"

"Mademoiselle Isuzu, don't struggle."

"I'm not struggling."

"Yes, yes, all right. I know."

Rundelhaus had lent her his shoulder and helped her to the café terrace behind the inn. He sounded mildly exasperated, but even as he spoke, he lowered Isuzu's skinny body into an oversized chair. For some reason, he looked even more effervescent than usual, but that was undoubtedly because that night's gig had been incredible, and certainly not because she'd accidentally drunk something alcoholic.

It was already near midnight.

The moon had climbed high into the sky, and a cool wind was blowing.

This place—the Noble Mountain Snowdrop—was a big tavern, even for Saphir. Its facilities were complete, and it had a big terrace facing the road out front as well. Today’s show had been such a huge success that all the shutters had been thrown open, and crowds of guests had looked into the tavern from outside. That feverish atmosphere and commotion still lingered in the tavern like a glowing ember, and it reached Isuzu’s ears faintly.

That said, at this hour, the enthusiasm was ebbing. The sun had set more than five hours before, and Minori and Serara had run up white flags long ago and retired to their borrowed rooms.

Isuzu, reluctant to let it end, had plucked at her lute even after returning to the audience seating area, had drunk liquor the townsfolk had pressed on her, telling her it was their treat, and had been escorted out into the cool back garden.

“Here, Mademoiselle Isuzu.”

“Uh-huh.”

Isuzu, who was feeling a little repentant, took a swallow of the water Rundelhaus had drawn from the well. This village was located to the south of Sacred Mount Fuji, and at night in early March, its well water was so incredibly cold that it made her temples ache.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh. Heh-heh-heh-heh-heeeh.”

Feeling entertained, Isuzu slumped over onto the wooden table that had been set on the terrace. Her cheek was pressed against the wood, and it was chilly, but her body was flushed, and it felt nice. Rundelhaus had pulled over another chair and sat down, and having him nearby felt good, too.

Still sprawled over the table, she looked at the back garden.

Even if this was a town, unlike in Akiba, the houses weren’t crowded close together. Some structures made use of ruined buildings, but there weren’t many of them in Saphir; the Noble Mountain Snowdrop was about the only one.

Nearly all of the rest were wooden, single-story buildings, and ample space

had been left between the houses. They had things that corresponded to yards and hedges, but in terms of scale, it seemed better to call most of them vegetable gardens and stands of mixed trees.

This back garden, no exception to the rule, held a kitchen garden and an untended space where wildflowers bloomed, a large well, a shed for livestock, and a grove of trees. The orange light that bled from the tavern's open back door and the moonlight that streamed down from above gently illuminated the nocturnal landscape, which would otherwise have been pitch-black.

She wasn't sleepy, but when she closed her eyes—just for a moment—the world seemed to spin, and she felt exhilarated. She didn't feel the cold as much as she'd expected; wondering if it was because the wind wasn't very strong, she opened her eyes a crack and saw Rundelhaus, raking his bangs up with his fingers as if they were a nuisance. He'd wrapped himself in his mantle, and he was sitting upwind from Isuzu.

Their eyes met, and Isuzu suddenly felt embarrassed.

Ordinarily, it was nothing at all, but every now and then, she'd start to feel this way. Still, it was probably just his puppy-dog magic. Pretending not to notice it, she lightly kicked Rundelhaus's chair with her toes.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"Really?"

"Yep, mm-hm."

"That was a good show today."

After the gig—

An outdated phrase rose to her lips.

The party was over, it was after the gig, and all the heat that had been packed into Isuzu's body was unraveling into the night. It was a melancholy, lonely feeling, but it wasn't unpleasant. She'd been in high spirits for today's show, but it had ended. All gigs ended. That was certainly sad, but this interval existed so that they could begin the next one.

She could hear the sound of Rundelhaus's gentle breathing.

Isuzu's belly was full. Both her stomach and her heart were full.

"‘Today *too*,’ you mean."

"Yes, today too."

There was a wry smile in Rundelhaus's voice, and Isuzu closed her eyes again. She spread her arms out, hugging the table. Its size was almost the same as a wood bass. The thought naturally brought a smile to her face, and her fingertips moved involuntarily.

Because today had ended, tomorrow would come.

Because this gig was over, she'd be able to play the next one.

"You really do like instruments, don't you, Mademoiselle Isuzu?"

"I love 'em."

"And yet you won't become a professional musician? You were very insistent about this tour, you know."

"Yes, that's because..."

Isuzu sat up, gave a satisfied sigh, and looked at Rundelhaus.

The glow from the tavern filtered through the window, edging his golden hair with light.

Facing her companion, who looked puzzled, Isuzu began to speak, slowly.

"It's my dad. I might have told you already, but he's a pro musician. It's something called a studio musician; I'm not sure how to explain it... Um, when it comes to playing instruments, he's a professional among professionals. That sounds about right. He performs at a place where they record sound, and he helps all sorts of people do things with music."

"Hm. Then your excellent skills must be due to your father's blood and training."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Noooo, it's nothing like that. My dad is, umm, a free spirit. A rock 'n' roller. He's really cool. He's got long hair, and he wears a leather jacket. His legs are thin, too! He lives in a town that's sort of out in the country

now, but even so, he's pretty famous. He has groupies, too—er, fans from a long time ago."

Isuzu took another swallow of water.

This wasn't something she normally talked about. *My father is a musician*. It sounded like something out of a girls' manga, but she didn't think it was really such a good thing. After all, it meant that her father was practically unemployed. She'd even gotten teased about it when she was little. Just being different from the people around you created friction. That had been common sense, at least in the world where Isuzu was born and raised.

However, in this world, it was the night of a gig, a night with all sorts of secrets inside it, and her listener was the other-dimensional puppy dog she was so proud of. She'd always had these thoughts, and there wasn't a single reason for her to hold them back now.

"When I was a kid, my dad bragged to me all the time. I'm not sure what you'd call them—heroic exploits from when he was younger, maybe? Stories about when he worked part-time and bought a junker van, loaded his instruments into it and went on tour. See, my dad toured, too. He said he did it all the time after high school. He was in a band as a kid, and when he got out of school, he worked part-time and went long distances to live music venues, and when he ran out of money, he'd pick up another part-time job. He said he based himself in Tokyo and traveled around to all sorts of places."

"The way we're doing now?"

"Yep, exactly! The way we're doing now!"

It had been something Isuzu had longed for when she was a child. He'd seemed to be a genuine hero.

"Back before he was famous, even when he played gigs, they didn't pay very much, so he said he had to work a lot of part-time jobs."

"What are those?"

"Um, things like working at a restaurant or being a security guard."

"Hm."

“Still, if he was going to tour, he’d need to take a lot of time off from those jobs, so in the end, he had to quit them. He’d quit his job and go traveling.”

“A desperate endeavor, then.”

“Huh?”

Was that what it had been? Somehow, when Rundelhaus put it that way, it sounded like a really aggressive act, something cool. Isuzu wanted to say that it hadn’t been like that. Her father wasn’t anything that cool... However, it was hard to deny that it had been a desperate endeavor.

Isuzu shrugged her shoulders and went on.

“I swear, all the stories my dad told were dumb. When I was in grade school, he’d tell me about how popular he was when he was young, and that he’d had tons of girlfriends. He said every time he went to a show venue, he’d make a cool, long-legged girlfriend. He said he drank and got really rowdy, and that he sped down roads at night to go eat ramen. He even bragged about how poor he was. He told me how he borrowed money and bought a Fender, then broke it two weeks later and went berserk. And how he went to the beach with his friends, and they took their car down onto the sand and drove around, trying to look cool, and then it stalled and they had big problems. And how they bought instant *oden* at the convenience store and ate it under a bridge while they were sheltering from the rain—”

Isuzu was sure she’d never forget the look on her father’s face as he told her those stories.

He’d worn a proud, mischievous smirk, and she’d said, “You’re creepy, go away,” and shoved him. In truth, though, she’d been incredibly jealous.

Her father had looked happy. If you put it into words, you probably would have ended up with the trite expression “an exceptional adolescence.” He’d spent his youth his way, and even now, he was running at its leading edge. To Isuzu, a very average high school girl, “heroic exploits” really was the only thing to call these old stories.

They were fairy tales that were out of her reach.

“Those sound like entertaining tales,” Rundelhaus said.

“No. Absolutely not! I’m telling you how dumb my dad was!”

She was embarrassed, so she denied it, but even she knew.

Isuzu was bragging.

Her father was frivolous, long-haired, thoughtless, and mean, and she didn’t want to admit it, but she was proud of him.

“He didn’t have much money, so he’d play at live music venues—um, in other words, at taverns like this one. He said they’d play at taverns and get pocket money, and sometimes they’d let them sleep on the dressing room floor. Unlike us, the group he traveled with was all guys, so they’d fight at the drop of a hat. I mean... I hear they’d compare the types of girls they liked, then fight over that. Idiots, right? Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh! Still, they couldn’t play the next gig like that, so they’d make up, get in the van...in the cart, I mean, then head for the next town.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Rundelhaus gave a small nod, just to show that he was listening. Reassured, Isuzu began to talk about her father again.

“My dad went around like that, being a rock ‘n’ roller, and then he made a major label debut.”

“What’s a major label debut?”

“It’s when a record company distributes your music... Uh. Um...in other words, uh...”

Isuzu groped for the words to explain, but she couldn’t find them, so she just skipped over that part.

“In other words, he became a famous musician. So famous that they played songs by my dad’s band all over town.”

I’m not lying, am I? Isuzu inspected her explanation.

In a world where goblins screeched and brandished axes, it was really hard to explain record companies and online stores and music downloads. Isuzu wasn’t Minori.

Still, she thought the nuance had probably gotten across.

Isuzu's father was a musician.

No matter what was said, or who said it, Isuzu knew that.

"He's amazing, then."

"He really is. Pretty amazing. Even if he doesn't look like it. The thing is, though..."

The pale moonlight and the perfectly clear night enfolded Isuzu and Rundelhaus.

"Major label debuts are awesome, but in the world where we lived, there are a lot of amazing people. I think there are more than a hundred major debuts every year. Even if you manage to get famous, it's not enough. Lots of people just stop selling. That's what happened to my dad."

She almost sighed, but managed not to.

"That's why he became a studio musician. It wasn't the major label route, but he probably wanted to play forever. I never asked him, but I think that's what it was."

Even her wild father, bursting with talent, hadn't been able to stay in the spotlight. She hadn't seen any bitterness in his profile, but the situation had seemed unbearably bitter to Isuzu. If her father hadn't been able to do something, there was no way Isuzu could manage it.

"I still think your father's blood runs in your veins, Mademoiselle Isuzu, and you should make your major debut."

"No, I'm telling you, that's not it. Major debuts are for pros."

"But when I listened to you sing at today's gig, I was happy. Your songs seemed even more gentle and resonant than usual. Aren't you happy when you sing?"

"Well, but that's..."

The words wouldn't come.

"Listen, that just isn't me. I mean, yes, of course I like my lute. I love it. I love

singing, too. I just don't think you can compare me with my dad. He's the kind of pervert who can say he'd sleep with his guitar... Besides, I'm not talented."

"....."

"Dad told me I wasn't."

The air that hung around Rundelhaus seemed to reproach her. She knew what he wanted to say: It probably looked as if she was running away. Still, Isuzu had a point, too: You couldn't make it in music if you were ordinary. It took more than yearning to become a professional.

I think even people with talent have to work hard just to make it to the starting line. Even Dad couldn't become a star.

Music was a fantastic thing, but the way was long and treacherous. Isuzu had heard her father suffer and complain. It wasn't the sort of thing she could promise easily.

"But look, I do love music."

Isuzu intentionally made her voice cheerful, trying to change the mood by force.

"Indeed."

"Today was fun, yeah? Everyone really seemed to like it, too. Those old guys actually treated me to things, even though I'm just, you know, *me*. I got so many compliments I swear my head's going to swell up."

"I love your songs, too, Mademoiselle Isuzu."

"You were the first one who ever said that. That's what made me start wanting to perform in front of everybody, and what let me suggest this tour. I'm really nothing special, but being able to play like this is—"

"The music you play is wonderful. We know that. All of us. You're the one who doesn't understand."

Rundelhaus interrupted Isuzu. A hint of frustration appeared on his face.

When his expression was tense like that, he seemed far more mature than usual.

It frightened Isuzu. She tried to gloss it over with an “Oh, come on, Rudy. You’re just being nice,” but as she started to open her mouth, Rundelhaus stopped it with a fingertip.

“Instruments, songs, performing... Sounds, scales—the forty-two are the forty-two.”

“Huh?”

“The forty-two.”

“Huh?”

“Music: The forty-two.”

“What’s the matter, Rudy?”

A significant amount of time passed. Then Rundelhaus gave a smile that was far too gentle, one that seemed to lodge right in the center of Isuzu’s heart. Quietly, he took his fingertip away, but Isuzu didn’t notice. All she could do was gaze at his face.

“Since becoming an Adventurer, I’ve learned several things. Adventurers have the divine protection of words, don’t you? You don’t speak the language of the People of the Earth. You merely hear the words and understand their meaning, and you respond in words the People of the Earth can understand. That is a magical power. The divine protection of translation.”

Isuzu nodded, although she didn’t get it.

She had no idea what Rundelhaus was trying to tell her.

“In the language of the People of the Earth, ‘music’ and ‘the forty-two’ are the same thing.”

He was probably talking about the automatic translation function. She understood that, but she didn’t know what he was attempting to say. Feeling uneasy, Isuzu tilted her head, puzzled.

“To us, ‘the forty-two’ is all the music there is. There are no other songs in this world. Our ancestors didn’t write any more of them, and we aren’t able to write new ones... Listen, Isuzu. The music you sing, all the songs you shout out so cheerfully...they’re precious to us. They make us happy, and we really, truly love

them.”



We've reached the
lower Kumanashi River,
south of Saphir!

PROGRESS
OF TRAIN

► 1

“Oh... Huh?”

Isuzu heard a sound like a wordless sigh. It seemed to come from the man beside her.

Which made sense, because she hadn't really understood the meaning of what Rundelhaus had said.

“That is all we have. All our music. We love our familiar old melodies, of course, but no other music exists. It's been that way ever since I was born. I think it's probably been like that for a very long time. I thought it was only natural, and I never questioned it.”

“Rudy.”

“When you Adventurers appeared, all sorts of things happened. Many of them were frightening and sad, but at the same time, lots of wonderful things happened as well. Food proved to have flavor, articles we'd never seen nor heard of filled the markets, and the sort of music that throbs in our chests and makes us want to shout came into being.”

“But that's—”

“And you—both the Adventurers and you, Isuzu—went around giving it to us as if it wasn't important at all. You played songs without discriminating between Adventurers and People of the Earth. Do you remember Bloom Hall? The serving girls who work there are all enthusiastic, but have you noticed that they change regularly? Among People of the Earth, serving in that hall is very popular work. That's why they change at set intervals. Did you know there are several young elves who visit that hall regularly, drinking money in hand? They're

traveling bards. They learn new songs at Bloom Hall, work frantically to memorize them, and then spread them all across Yamato.”

Isuzu realized that she looked so flustered that even *she* could tell.

She desperately clenched her hands into fists on her knees, and they sat trembling. But even when her nails dug into them, the pain felt distant and unreal.

Yet the words Rundelhaus spoke drew her ears and eyes to him, forcing her to understand.

“Do you remember the inns and taverns we’ve visited since we began our journey? One modest song from you, and they were so happy they cried. Remember? They really were happy. We’d never heard such cheerful, noisy songs before. The kind of songs that raise our spirits and make us want to start dancing or break into a run. Or the kind that make us want to be with someone special, and to express our gratitude to those close to us. We’d never heard anything like them. You brought them to us, Mademoiselle Isuzu, and it made you a hero. ‘Thank you’ is an inconvenient phrase. It’s too simple, and no matter how grateful we are, we can’t find any better words. Even so, everyone was truly happy.”

“Ah, oh... Rudyyy.”

Fat tears were rolling down her face.

All sorts of emotions were swirling inside of her, but she couldn’t put them into words.

Of course it made her happy to be wanted. When people complimented her, she could tell there was a risk she’d get a swelled head over it. Still, when she looked at the big picture, that feeling was trivial—barely there at all.

The feeling of wanting to tell them they were wrong was much greater.

She felt guilty that they’d been so moved by an amateur performance like hers, that she of all people had made them feel that way. Isuzu hadn’t been the least bit serious about it, not in that sense. Of course she loved music. She’d nearly sung herself hoarse, had strummed her lute vigorously enough to break her arms. Still, she really couldn’t imagine that was enough to justify the

gratitude the People of the Earth felt.

What an awful thing, she thought.

Having only forty-two songs ever since you were born? It was unthinkable.

A world like that was impossible.

In that case, what were they supposed to do on lonely nights? What about when they were congratulating their friends? Or when they were so happy they could shout, or when they felt crushingly inferior?

Without songs, how could they live?

Isuzu had simply had fun as she'd played gig after gig. That was all. She hadn't had even a speck of the nerve or the resolve it would take to be that sort of person, to play music someone had never heard, to change other people's lives, to change everything like that.

"I mean, I..."

She couldn't find the words.

Everything seemed to have swelled and solidified inside her chest, and she didn't know what to say. She'd spoken only because her tears had pushed her to. Rundelhaus simply met her gaze, quietly.

"I'm...a fake, and..."

She hadn't meant to do it.

Up until now, she'd never even thought about what the People of the Earth were feeling.

Isuzu groaned miserably, wordlessly. Her fists were trembling disgracefully. "What I do isn't like that. Those are songs from my world, and I'm..."

"But it is true that we were happy."

She'd never meant to do anything like that.

She hadn't meant to give them something so outrageous, so enormous.

She'd only sung songs she missed, familiar tunes from her father's collection.

What Rudy was grateful for was her father's property, not Isuzu's.

In other words, Isuzu was just an amateur, and a cover act at that.

The shame and guilt wouldn't let her stop crying. On the contrary, she sobbed harder. Isuzu realized she'd been deceiving crowds of people. They weren't even her songs, but she'd gotten puffed up and sung them, had let herself be flattered and carried away, and this had been the result.

She'd never even imagined it, but it was only natural. Isuzu had stolen the achievements of the bands and singers she'd loved so much and had acted as if they were hers. To people who were hearing them for the first time, they had sounded like Isuzu's songs, and on top of that, they'd even been grateful to her.

This world was far more of a blank than Isuzu had ever dreamed.

A world that, up until now, had had only forty-two songs.

Her heart felt as if it were being crushed, and her lips quivered.

That meant she was a horrible thief.

Isuzu had taken this pure, white world, where music was limited, and soiled it with her vanity.

"I mean, I'm a-an amateur, a cover act— So you've got it wrong, and..."

She was sniffing so hard that her nose hurt. It made her feel even more wretched, and more tears came.

The mucous membranes in her nose hadn't been very strong to begin with, and they made audible snuffling noises.

She wanted to apologize. She desperately wanted to say she was sorry.

She just had no idea how to do it.

She had done something irreversible.

"Mademoiselle Isuzu."

"I-I didn't mean to, I wasn't trying to trick..."

"Isuzu."

He'd spoken firmly, and although Isuzu's eyes had been on her hands, she looked up, startled.

Rundelhaus was there, right in front of her.

In the light that filtered through the window, the night wind ruffled his soft golden hair.

He was gazing at Isuzu, his usual clownish expression nowhere to be seen. His pensive eyes stared straight at her; the will and solicitude they held pinned Isuzu in place, and time froze.

Right now, Rundelhaus seemed more gallant than she'd ever seen him.

Abruptly, Isuzu realized something.

Rundelhaus was older than she was.

"Sometimes the People of the Earth assemble at the guild center in Akiba."

"Waeh?"

The only response she could manage was a miserable one, choked with tears and snot.

"More and more People of the Earth are gathering in Akiba. It's affluent, it's safe, and it offers all sorts of excitement, so it's a place they dream of going. It isn't just the bards I mentioned; blacksmiths, tailors, chefs, and even simple servants and maids come to Akiba. By spending several months there, they can learn techniques they couldn't learn in other towns even if they spent their whole lives trying. They can become all sorts of things."

"L-like you, Rudy?"

"Hm. Yes. That's right. I became an Adventurer. They have things they want to become, too."

Isuzu's question had been hoarse with tears, and Rundelhaus went on in a gentle voice, "However, living in Akiba is difficult for People of the Earth. The Adventurers are kind, and you aren't unjust. You seem to be fair, and I think you are good neighbors, but that doesn't mean there are no differences. There are all sorts of them, and worries and trouble besides. We gather in order to discuss those things."

"I...see," She scrubbed at the tears that were still falling.

When he put it that way, lots of things made sense. Once or twice a week, Rundelhaus went out in the evening. He didn't seem to be adventuring or going shopping, so she hadn't known where he went, but apparently he'd been going out to talk with the People of the Earth.

"It's a formal group; advisers are sent from Water Maple Manor. That said, all we do is split into teams of about ten individuals and discuss our concerns over dinner. Since I live at the Log Horizon guild house as an Adventurer, I often advise others... At any rate, that is what the gatherings are like. What do you think we talk about most often, after our concerns?"

Isuzu shook her head, like a child.

Rundelhaus seemed to have gone far away. It made her lonely, and she felt as if she were a fool who understood nothing.

"We tell one another, 'Such-and-such is amazing, really excellent!'"

He spoke firmly, smiling as if something made him proud.

Isuzu couldn't follow the conversation, and Rundelhaus continued, explanatory. "Do you know the skill that involves folding iron and striking it? How about the method of sifting flour so that the grains are uniform? Did you know that if you put strong Black Rose Tea in a mister and spray it on your tomatoes, you'll drive the bugs away? Have you seen the fishing gear that allows you to catch fish without using bait, or the sturdy futons that are resistant to dirt? There are so many, many new things. It's a wonderful town. All that abundance, and the Adventurers don't hide it. Of course the People of the Earth have a difficult time there, but they're lucky, too. Every day, something happens. The things we couldn't do yesterday might be possible today. Tomorrow will be different from today. In Akiba, those words mean exactly what they say. —And your songs are part of that brilliance, Isuzu."

Isuzu couldn't say anything.

She just kept her eyes fixed on the smiling Rundelhaus, and tears continued to roll down her cheeks. His words had cut her deeply.

His encouraging look had shaken something in her, something she hadn't even noticed. The enigmatic, powerful, hot feeling that had been born inside

her brought her very near to panicking.

Isuzu had thought that Rundelhaus was a great friend.

This was because he had clearly said that he wanted to become an Adventurer. When she'd learned that this friend—someone only a little older than she was, someone on the verge of changing from a boy into a young man—had decided what his future would be, Isuzu had felt a touch of respect for him. It had nothing to do with the results. She'd admired the strength it had taken to make that declaration. He had a firm sense of self, something she, a country high school girl, didn't have at all.

Even as she blustered about puppy dogs and walks, on that point alone, inwardly, Isuzu thought she couldn't measure up to Rundelhaus. Even if he was an easygoing, thoughtless, corny friend, she knew his true self was noble and proud.

But it hadn't just been Rundelhaus.

It was likely that all the People of the Earth who gathered in Akiba were like that.

They all had something they wanted to become, and they spent every day working to get there. Apprentice blacksmiths, apprentice tailors, regular tradesmen and street vendors, probably even the salesclerks at restaurants—each of them had an image of the self that they wanted to be someday.

To the People of the Earth, the town of Akiba was something completely different from what it was to Isuzu. It was a shining place that could make actual dreams come true. Or, no, it was possible that this entire world required dreams and determination from the People of the Earth who lived in it.

They were said to be far weaker than the Adventurers, but their words and their spirit completely floored her. It made her terribly embarrassed that she—an irresponsible high school kid with no particular dreams for the future—had sung songs for people like that.

Isuzu had sung about dreams and hope and love. She'd sung about sunny tomorrows, and the counterculture, and highways, and even Snoopy. She'd sung without really thinking about it. She realized that she hadn't given any

serious thought to the meaning of the lyrics she was preaching.

That was so embarrassing, and so pitiful, that it made her want to run away.

The idea that she hadn't given much thought to the songs she'd sung and their meaning came as a shock. She had said she loved music, but she hadn't thought about what that meant.—even though the People of the Earth had seen their dreams in her.

Isuzu felt a fierce sense of inferiority and guilt.

She'd never felt this wretched before, not once in her entire life.

Heavy tears welled up endlessly in her eyes, as if she were a child.

The most miserable thing of all was that even then, Isuzu liked music. Even though she'd made such a horrible mistake—even so, songs echoed inside of her.

“Rudy.”

“What is it, Mademoiselle Isuzu?”

“I want to be alone.”

“.....”

The words just weren't there.

Isuzu gazed at Rundelhaus with red eyes.

She knew that unless she said something, Rundelhaus would stay with her the whole time. He'd probably give her words of sympathy and encouragement, too... But that would be too dishonest. Isuzu needed time alone, and she needed it this very night.

The feelings of inferiority and guilt, the shame and the pain, were all hers. She had stolen songs, so these were natural penalties, and while she faced that pain, she wanted to be alone.

After all, even without that, Rundelhaus had given her many, many things.

“Go back t-to the room. I...have to do this myself.”

“.....”

Rundelhaus watched Isuzu, concerned.

She knew he felt that way, but she stubbornly refused to meet his gaze.

“All right, Mademoiselle Isuzu.”

“Mm.”

Rundelhaus stood there for a moment. He seemed as if he was about to say something, but after a little hesitation, he left.

There, frozen in the night, Isuzu made up her mind. She would fight.

She had prepared to face herself, and for Isuzu, it was the first real battle of her life.

► 2

In the morning mist, Touya quietly slipped out of the inn, checked his surroundings, and drew a deep breath.

The town was still cold, but the pale light of early spring shone down upon it.

From far away, he heard a series of tiny shouts. People were fishing from boats in the river. When he looked around, he saw a group of People of the Earth walking toward the hills, probably for farmwork. It had been that way in Choushi, too: As a rule, the People of the Earth were very early risers.

That said, the town wasn't filled with noisy energy, either.

Even if it didn't feel that way to Touya and the other Adventurers, for the People of the Earth, mornings in March were still pretty frigid. They'd used up all their fuel over the winter, so in this season, the People of the Earth tried to maintain constant temperatures in their houses by keeping everything shut up tight. The people out on the streets were trotting instead of walking. Of course, this was because it was early morning; once things warmed up a bit, people would probably be drawn out by the sunlight, flooding the avenue. After all, Saphir was one of the biggest towns in this area.

Without settling on any particular destination, Touya began to wander

around, arms crossed behind his head.

Rundelhaus, who seemed to have been up until late the night before, had been asleep, and he hadn't heard a sound from the girls' room. Touya could have just gone back to sleep, but he hadn't felt like it, so he'd stolen out of the inn quietly, being careful not to wake the rest.

Even in Akiba, Touya preferred to spend his time outside, rather than cooped up indoors. On Earth, there would have been a wealth of indoor entertainment, such as WebTV, handheld games, manga, and tablets, but Theldesia was different. In a revolt against his past, when the simple desire to go outside had been selfish, his tendency to want to spend time outdoors had grown even greater.

Touya sauntered down the wide avenue.

This avenue was the highway they'd followed to get here. Near the town, there was still ancient asphalt on the ground, so it was solid and tough. It was also wide enough that two carts could pass each other.

In the old world, this place would have been a built-up urban area, too. Touya remembered Shiroe saying that it was a large city on Suruga Bay. Here in Theldesia, it was one of the larger People of the Earth towns. At this hour, there weren't any shops open, which meant he couldn't kill time by looking around in them, but since Touya wanted to walk all alone, it was actually better that way.

On the outskirts of the town, he greeted some People of the Earth and helped them carry a little cargo.

He also drew his sword, took a few practice swings, and tried out some stances.

Time passed slowly in this town, and Touya liked that. Isuzu and the others had spent all their strength on the show, and Minori wanted to gather information. Taking their wishes into account, they were planning to spend at least one more night here.

Touya had plenty of time, and he used it to enjoy his first solo excursion in a long while.

He liked having fun and getting noisy with his friends, too, but walking alone

like this, as if testing his legs, gave Touya a sense of satisfaction. It didn't feel bad at all.

Once it was past noon, people grew more active, and children and housewives hanging out laundry appeared on the short main street. A Person of the Earth who was grilling fish by the roadside gave Touya some, and as he ate, he watched the town at his leisure.

This wide avenue was made of red clay, and he knew it continued farther west.

When he'd walked ten minutes west of the town, the streets petered out and the fields grew more numerous. Before long, he came out on a big river.

"Come to think of it, Choushi was on a river, too," he said to himself, absently.

When he wondered why that was, he realized that water would be more plentiful near a river, and that would make it a more convenient place to live and plant fields. He'd also learned the term "alluvial plain" in school. As the river flowed, it created the plain. *Hey! In other words, this Saphir town is on an alluvial plain,* he thought, and felt like smacking his hands together in recognition.

One thing he'd learned over several stints of camping was that slopes were startlingly inconvenient. Both camping on them and cooking on them took a whole lot of work. Creating fields would probably be brutal. After all, there was this thing called "gravity," and as long as everything was acting normally, water wouldn't flow uphill. If there was a flat area near a river, it was only logical for people to gather there and build a town.

When Touya had thought that far, he muttered to himself: "School actually comes in handy, huh?" He hadn't thought there was any point to social studies, but apparently he'd been wrong.

When he reached the water's edge, he turned right. That was upstream.

He had no particular reason. He'd remembered the back of a woman with hair the color of dry grass plumes, and his thoughts had wandered aimlessly.

The surface of the river was calm. This was probably because the ocean was near, and also because the river was fairly wide. Several small boats floated on

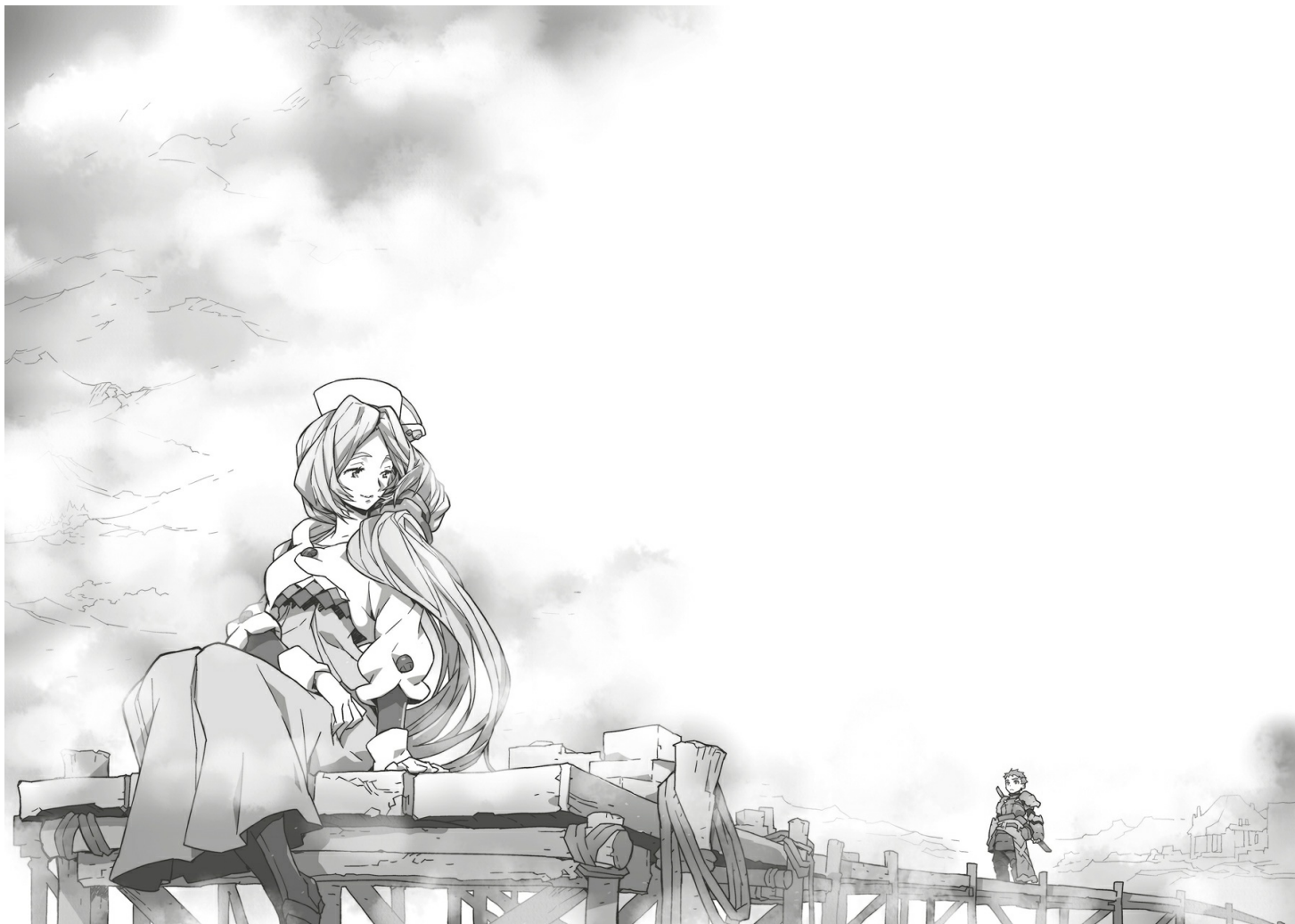
it, and fishermen were untangling whitish clumps on their decks. Apparently those were nets. If he strained his eyes, he could see fish jumping, wet and inky black.

Touya walked along a path that ran by the river. There were pine woods, and he crossed a plank-floored bridge over a thin stream that looked like an irrigation canal.

Upriver and to the right, he could see Mount Fuji. “Sacred Mount Fuji,” in this world.

Over half of it was wrapped in a cloak of pure white, and it certainly did look majestic. Since there were no other mountains around to interrupt the view, it was far too beautiful.

There was a boat shed at the far edge of his vision, with a pier that jutted out over the river. There was a woman out on that pier with her back turned to him, causing Touya to pause. He was starting to think he had a bone to pick with the gods. This had to be some sort of cosmic setup.



He hadn't meant to avoid her or hide from her, but he hadn't been able to call to her for quite a long time.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Touya."

Dariella seemed to have noticed him when he approached the pier; she turned and smiled at him. Even as Touya greeted her, he felt ill at ease.

When he was with this woman, he often felt that way.

He stopped knowing what to talk about.

In the first place, up until now, beautiful women past twenty hadn't been part of his life. When he thought back to last year, the only women around him had been Minori, their mom, and his homeroom teacher, who was about fifty. Naturally, he'd had some female classmates whose names and faces he remembered, but he didn't know enough about them to say he'd *known* them.

Even in his current life, Minori was his little sister, and Serara and Isuzu were comrades, even if they were slightly older. Since they formed parties with members who were part of the same generation, that was only natural. He went to the West Wind Brigade to study sword fighting, and there were lots of women who made a pet of him there, but since they were just treating him like a kid, that was probably a bit different.

Tetora didn't count, of course, and Akatsuki didn't really seem like an older sister type... Not that he could tell either of them that.

If he'd had to say, Marielle and Henrietta might be close. They weren't this type, either, but they were pretty women. Still, no one had ever made him feel as bewildered as Dariella did.

"Won't you sit down?"

"Umm, okay."

There were several wooden crates on the pier. They were old, but still sturdy.

The fishermen probably used them as chairs. They were perfect for casting fishing lines from, but they also had a beautiful view of the Favorwell River,

hazy with morning mist.

Dariella was sitting in an elegant, flowing pose, her knees neatly together. Touya kicked his legs out in front of him and sat down, holding on to the edge of the crate.

There was a faint, sweet fragrance in the wind.

Touya couldn't think of a single thing to talk about, and he sat there feeling uncomfortable. He thought it was odd that even though he'd known full well that he'd feel this way if he sat down beside her, not speaking to her hadn't been an option. Maybe it was because they'd been traveling together, even if it had only been for a short time, and ignoring her seemed as if it wouldn't be right. Still, Touya didn't know whether that was really the only reason. Ignoring this woman was difficult for him, that was all.

"You're up early, Touya. Were you out on a walk?"

"Yeah. I'm not always up early, though. It just sort of happened today."

"I see. Mornings are cold at this time of year, but that makes beds all the more heavenly, doesn't it?" Dariella smiled gently, then giggled at her own sentiments.

Her soft-looking hair was bound together and spilled across her shoulders, swaying over her cape.

"Did you go for a morning walk, Dar—um, Miss Dariella?"

"Yes. I've never been able to sleep soundly, so I often spend this time of day outdoors... Provided I'm somewhere that allows that sort of thing."

Touya had averted his eyes, feeling uneasy, but Dariella didn't seem to mind his attitude. She smiled happily and went on, calmly.

"I live an itinerant life, you see. My job sends me here and there; I see and learn all sorts of things, and then I write about them. When I'm traveling, this time of the morning is precious. After all, I can see and hear lots of things without anyone getting in my way."

"Where do you usually live, Miss Dariella?"

Her velvety words made Touya a little uncomfortable, and he asked his

question to block them out.

“I make my home near... I suppose it would be near Ikoma.”

“Ikoma?”

“It’s much farther west than we are now. In the terms you use, it would be beyond Kyoto.”

“Is that right...”

Geography he wasn’t used to surfaced vaguely in his mind.

All Touya knew about it was that he thought Kyoto *might* be above Osaka on the map, to the right.

The only thing he knew about where they were now was that it was roughly halfway between Tokyo and Osaka, on the Pacific Ocean side. “Beyond Kyoto” might be about midway between Kyoto and Osaka. As he thought about those general spatial relationships, Touya felt something unexpected.

In his old world, if you were going by bullet train, it took about three hours to get from Tokyo to Osaka. In this world, it probably took more than ten days. Even if the Half-Gaia Project had shrunk the distances, traveling through dangerous, undeveloped mountains and fields was a lot of hard work.

Even so, what Touya had felt was that it was also unexpectedly *close*.

On this journey, Osaka and Kyoto had seemed much closer than they had in his old world. Closer than in twenty-first-century Japan, with its bullet trains.

It was probably because Touya knew that they’d journeyed this far on foot, and if they went that far again, they’d be there. Right now, Touya knew how they’d manage to get there, and how hard it would be. He also had the confidence that he could make it happen.

When he’d gone to that distant city, three hours in a bullet train had seemed like forever, and when he’d arrived, it hadn’t felt real to him somehow. Now he could walk there on his own two feet.

“Still, I live alone in a little hut in the mountains. It isn’t the sort of place people visit, so when I want to breathe the atmosphere of a town, I go traveling.”

“Isn’t that kinda dangerous?”

“I’m used to it. Besides, since Plant Hwyaden began to provide security for the highway, it’s much safer.”

This was a term he heard often lately—the name of the enormous guild that governed western Japan. Touya had heard it was similar to the Round Table Council. It was an organization based in Osaka, and it supervised lots of Adventurers.

“That’s the guild in Minami, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s a band of knights headquartered in Minami, and it protects the peace in Yamato.”

“They’re knights?”

“I’ve heard they are a new band of knights that have appeared to maintain order in Yamato, now that the Ancient Knights of Izumo are no longer here. People also say they’re a sign of the transition from the age of the Ancients to the age of the Adventurers. As a matter of fact, Plant Hwyaden has some very impressive achievements to its name.”

Was that how it looked to the People of the Earth? Thinking that made sense, Touya asked, “What sort of achievements?”

“First and foremost, they restored order. From Minami westward, damage inflicted by monsters has declined significantly. We think their new machines and river management may make farming easier as well.”

So they do the same sort of stuff the Roderick Trading Company and Shopping District 8 do, Touya thought.

“Employment has increased, too. In Minami and elsewhere, the People of the Earth say that there are many more jobs that pay well now, and they’re happy. There is a lot of work that involves looking after the needs of the Adventurers. Minami is a wealthy, lovely town.”

Touya had heard something of the sort.

She smiled softly. “It doesn’t interest you, Touya?”

“No, it does...sort of.”

He did think he'd like to see a town like that. There was more to the world than just Akiba; this journey had really brought that fact home to him. He'd also learned that traveling suited him even better than he'd expected. He'd thought it might be harder or more boring, but it was fun. If he was with his friends, he thought he'd like to go see it.

However, visiting that town was the subject of just his curiosity and idle interest.

He had no intention of heading there now, or of going there with this woman.

"In that case, Touya, if you get the opportunity, do come to visit me."

Touya had turned away from her, and she stroked his head.

She ran her slim, white fingertips through his hair; it tickled, and Touya grimaced.

"If you come, I'll be your guide. Let's go places together."

In response, Touya shrugged.

"You've been avoiding looking at me for a while now."

"No, I haven't."

Dariella had sounded as if she was teasing him, and his reply was cross. The moment he said it, he started to feel as if he'd fallen for a trick. She'd seen through his childish rebellion. He knew this, and he felt himself getting very cranky.

"You don't hate me, do you, Touya?"

"I hate when you're like that."

Words have tails on 'em, Touya thought.

The tails were linked to other words, so when you were talking about something, you had to make sure you knew where the other ends of the tails were. If you didn't, you'd end up blabbing stuff you hadn't meant to say. Touya had thought he'd learned that when he was in his wheelchair. All he could think was that, this time, the devil had made him do it.

Touya felt the tail on his words drag the next words out of him:

“Because you’re always smiling.”

Dariella’s expression clouded.

They’d met by chance, and they’d be parting before long. This wasn’t the sort of thing he should be saying to someone like that. Touya already regretted it.

“What of it?”

He hated the way Dariella smiled as if she was trying to gloss things over.

He couldn’t stand the way she smiled with those black eyes, like monsters’ eyes.

He hated the gentle attitude, and the way she’d touched his hair.

“Even if you’re not smiling, your face is weird.”

And so, when hurtful sorts of words came out of his mouth, even he was taken aback. He must have been far more irritated with this woman, this beauty with hair the color of dried grass, than he’d thought. He felt the sharp words trace the outlines of his own emotions.

Dariella’s expression grew fainter, as if it had cooled down, and her eyes were just as he’d thought they’d be. They looked as if she’d given up, as if nothing mattered to her anymore. Her lips were drawn into the shape of a crescent moon, but there probably wasn’t anyone who would have considered it a smile.

There it was: The expression Touya had seen in a mirror, long ago.

It was terrifying, but it was still better than the just-for-show smile she’d worn up until a moment ago.

At least this one showed a little of the real Dariella.

“That one’s better.”

“Why would you say that?”

Touya looked away.

He hadn’t meant to say it, which meant that even he didn’t know why he’d said it. He thought it had probably been chance, or coincidence, or some other dumb reason like that. He just hadn’t liked it, that was all.

He'd seen the inside of Dariella's clenched fist, so he'd done something uncalled for.

"No real reas—"

Touya started to speak, but broke off.

He'd spotted something small but clear in the northern sky. An ominous black shadow.

It was the first sign that an ordeal was bearing down on the town of Saphir.

► 3

After midday, Saphir was bustling and lively.

There were lots of small settlements on this plain, where harvests were abundant. As their central hub, it was Saphir's job to accumulate resources. On top of that, the town was right on the highway that linked the East with the West. It was a city of commerce, and it saw lots of merchant traffic.

In early March, it was still too soon to say that spring had really begun, but the snow had started to melt, and the water in the Favorwell River was rising. This was the time of year when wild vegetables began to sprout and dishes celebrating spring appeared on dinner tables.

Recently, as the high-performance vehicles made in Akiba and Minami began to flow to merchants, the amount of traffic had gradually increased. The choice of whether to build another inn or add on to the existing one had been the biggest topic in town for the past few months.

Minori and Serara were walking down the town's avenue together. They were on their way to stock up on food and consumable items and to gather information.

As a city of commerce, Saphir had a market and shops with a decent selection of merchandise. They weren't shops for Adventurers, but considering the articles they were looking for, it was actually more convenient this way.

They'd made proper preparations in Akiba, and the bulk of their supplies were seasonings and goods that kept well. They'd made sure to eat the fresh foods first, so they were nearly out of them. They'd always intended to replenish their stores at the towns they visited.

"They've got potatoes, greens, and strawberries!"

"Should we buy some strawberries?"

"Yes, let's!"

The pair put clusters of wild strawberries into their tote bags, adding them to the things they'd already bought.

Since the bags weren't the magic sort, they were quite stuffed and bulky already. As the bags hung from the girls' hands, the People of the Earth teased them, calling them "young wives." There was really no help for it.

"Wahh... Oh, don't call us *that*."

"We, um, we're not! We aren't that yet."

Serara squirmed and Minori protested (tentatively, her face red), but the mood didn't last long.

They were shopping, according to plan, but there was something that worried them.

"Telechats aren't getting through."

"It's true..."

They'd noticed that telechats weren't connecting while they were camping, but at the time, they had brushed it off as "one of those things." In any case, the telechat function wasn't easy to activate well if you couldn't use both hands. You had to gesture in order to select another party from your friend list or accept a telechat. In consequence, if the other person was fighting or doing some other type of work, the telechat might not get through. That was the difference between regular telechats and party telechats, where you could get a message to the whole group just by shouting.

As a result, it was fairly common for the other party to not respond to a telechat, particularly if that "other party" was Shiroe. He tended to be in

meetings quite a lot.

However, Boreas' Moving Temple had worried them, and when they'd investigated, they'd learned that it really did have the effect it was rumored to have. It seemed certain to them that the telechats weren't simply "not connecting." They were being jammed.

They didn't know what the range of the effect was, but at the very least, telechats seemed to be restricted throughout the entire town.

The range seemed far too wide to be the effect of the Moving Temple they'd passed near the Boxroot fortress, and Minori thought there might be another Moving Temple somewhere in town. However, they had no intention of searching for it. Even if they found it, they didn't know how to shut off the effect, and if they broke it or something, they'd probably call another sort of trouble down on their heads.

"I think it's probably because of that Moving Temple," Minori said. "I don't know where it is or what sort of effect range it has, but even so."

"I think you're probably right."

"Yes..."

This was a headache for Minori as well.

The white wolf cub at Serara's feet seemed to have picked up on the mood. It looked dejected, too.

"What should we do?"

"Um..."

Minori's eyes went to the notebook in her hand. There was a folded map of the vicinity between its pages. It wasn't something she'd drawn herself. It was a map of the surrounding area that Shiroe had copied for them.

Their destination wasn't that far away. They were planning to make their preparations here, in Saphir, then go into the mountains. It wasn't a reckless move. If they left from this town, they'd be able to follow the river up the mountain. That was why they'd traveled along the Pacific side in the first place.

In terms of distance on the map, it was probably about twenty kilometers.

Even taking into account they'd have to climb mountains and would need to find and hunt their targets, it didn't seem all that hard. At the earliest, they'd be able to return to the town in three days, and no matter how long the trip dragged on, it probably wouldn't take a full week.

"I don't think it's going to take very much time," Minori said decisively.

"Maybe about three days...?"

"A little more than that."

"Once we come back here, we'll be safe, right?" Serara asked.

"I think so."

In fact, it was that very thought that had brought them to the town.

Minori had meant to ask Shiroe for advice once the telechat function was back, but right now, the circumstances wouldn't allow it.

"If we could only talk to Shiroe..."

"If we could talk to Nyanta..."

Their words overlapped. The two of them gazed at each other, seriously, then burst out laughing. Apparently they'd been thinking the exact same thing.

As a matter of fact, they had a lot of things they wanted to ask about.

The Odyseia Knights.

The disquieting magic item known as Boreas' Moving Temple.

Roe2, the woman who overlapped with Shiroe in Minori's mind, no matter what she did.

Something was changing in a big way. Minori could feel it clearly, the way the echoing rumble of the earth traveled across great distances.

Still, she didn't know what it meant. It felt as if she'd gotten a secret message, but bits of it were written in a foreign language. It was terribly irritating.

"This is so frustrating. I'm sure Shiroe would understand it, but..."

"Minori..."

As Serara consoled her, Minori mentally switched gears.

She was still quite inexperienced, so she didn't have time to wallow in pessimism. She had to solve the problem in front of her. The current issue was whether they should make for the Redstone Mountains or abandon their journey here and turn back.

There were advantages and disadvantages to both courses of action.

Pressing forward when they couldn't report in or ask for advice via telechat was definitely dangerous.

However, on the other hand, Minori couldn't say whether turning back now would be any safer. Since they didn't know the effective range of that peculiar magic item or how to disarm it, they might not be able to use telechats even if they returned to Akiba.

Bringing back a report was important, but this was Shiroe they were talking about, and Minori had the feeling he'd gotten information about that temple just about the time she and the others had.

In that case, should they go forward, or start back? Staying in this town and investigating was another option. Under the circumstances, letting the Magic Bag quest determine their moves didn't seem like something Shiroe would advise.

The question *What would Shiroe do?* was the only clue she had regarding how to think indicated to Minori that she clearly wasn't experienced enough, but lamenting that wouldn't get them anywhere.

"I wonder what Roe2 is going to do."

"You know, that's a good question."

"She said she was going to Ikoma..."

"Do you suppose she'll go with Dariella? She doesn't need to go mountain climbing with us."

"True."

Having realized this, the two of them quickly made their remaining food purchases and discussed returning to the inn.

They'd told Roe2 about going to the Redstone Mountains, but depending on

the situation, they might part ways here. It wouldn't be a bad idea to look around the town to see if there was anyone who could repair Adventurer summoning pipes.

They'd passed several Adventurers as they were walking around, and it had planted the idea in Minori's mind. If it came down to it, they were prepared to sell the cart in town, but if possible, they wanted to buy horses and take it back to Akiba with them. It was the first cart they'd ever purchased, after all. Minori was rather attached to it, and she thought her friends probably were as well.

"But Minori, we're staying here tonight, the way we planned, aren't we?"

"Yes."

"Then do you think Isuzu will be feeling better by this evening?"

"She's staying shut up in the room, isn't she...?"

Isuzu had remained in their room, saying she wasn't feeling well. Rundelhaus seemed to know something about the situation, but all he'd say was that she'd be better soon. Isuzu had been a bit strange since the previous night. They thought she'd finally returned to the room early in the morning, and she'd seemed to be brooding. It worried them.

"I'll make Isuzu's favorite *mentaiko* potatoes tonight!"

"Can you make those, Serara?"

"Of course! We bought potatoes, and we have mayonnaise."

As they made their way back up the avenue, their conversation died away.

The wolf that had been gamboling around Serara's feet pricked its triangular ears bravely, then began to run around in circles, glaring up at the sky and howling a warning.

"Hmm? What is it?"

Distantly, Minori heard Serara's easygoing voice.

Something had bled into the color of the hazy March sky and was moving slowly, with Sacred Mount Fuji behind it. The flock, which was closing in on them from far in the distance, was obviously what Minori's group had come this

far to find: wyverns.

More than a hundred wyverns were approaching the town of Saphir.

► 4

One individual had sensed the wyvern stampede.

Nyanta had touched down once—lightly, on tiptoe—on the angular train, and he used Unicorn Jump to leap again without killing the momentum of his plunge from the griffin. Taking a trajectory that would have been possible only in fantasies in the old world, he slipped between the trunks of the trees using Quick Step, while using Lightning Step in the direction of his fall.

Putting his body's superhuman abilities to work, Nyanta sped up among the rustling green of the forest.

He felt burning sadness and anger deep in his gut.

With all his might, he slashed at the black spirit monsters that were invading the forest below him. Heavy bodily fluids clung to the tips of his swords, and he wasn't able to finish the creatures off in one attack. Even adding a special skill that sent the damage of his range attacks through the roof—a Swashbuckler specialty—wasn't enough to kill them instantly. Still, that didn't mean he couldn't win. Nyanta was level 90, and the Nightshade Servants in front of him were just a bit over level 40. Silently, Nyanta swung his rapiers twice, cutting down shadows that had been trying to slip past him on either side.

Nyanta was aware of the general situation, or at least of its visible aspects.

As a representative of Log Horizon, he'd been sent to provide support for Minori's group, and he'd come this far by griffin, keeping an eye on them as he went. A black cloud of wyverns had appeared in the town of Saphir, about twenty kilometers from him as the crow flew. In the process of trying to discover where those wyverns had come from, he'd realized that they'd been driven from their home in the Redstone Mountains as the result of a siege, nearly a mountain hunt, by Nightshade Servants. He also knew that the battle

between the two forces was escalating, threatening to engulf Saphir.

When he'd expanded his reconnaissance upstream, he'd discovered this train and had learned that the struggle was the result of an intentional plot.

That was why he was angry.

His heart was screaming that it was a completely unbelievable, impossibly stupid move—until his eyes found a lone magician on horseback.

“Rondarg.”

“Oh-ho... To think we'd meet here.”

There was a distance of about ten meters between them.

The forest had been warped by magic, and the dismal-looking Sorcerer who answered Nyanta was in an odd sort of clearing.

Neither of them was a stranger to the other. Where Nyanta was concerned, they'd seen each other several times from a distance in the player town of Susukino, and they'd come into conflict during Serara's rescue. Rondarg seemed to have remembered that as well: The look he turned on Nyanta was somewhere between irritation and hostility.

However, Nyanta didn't have the leeway to go along with Rondarg's hurt feelings.

On the surface, Nyanta's usual calm was intact, but his anger underneath was so strong it was nearly unmanageable. It was bad enough that, if possible, he would have liked to slash apart all the Nightshades in the area with his rapiers.

“What are mew doing here, Rondarg? What is that train? What are those black shadows, and what do mew intend to do with Saphir?! What's going on, Rondarg?!”

More demanding than asking, Nyanta confronted the other man with crossed swords.

“Rondarg!”

“Bwah-ha-ha.”

He responded to Nyanta's reprimand with a terribly superficial laugh.

One of his cheeks warped sardonically. He seemed like a completely different person from the man he'd been in Susukino. The atmosphere he wore was degenerate: terribly shallow, irresponsible, and disheveled. His cracked laugh really didn't seem like an expression of relaxed confidence.

"What am I doing here? I'm here for work I was hired to do: guarding and guiding the train. As you can see, the train's a magic vehicle. The black shadows are summoned creatures, Nightshade Servants. We don't intend to do a thing with Saphir, or at least, I don't. What's going on? —That's no concern of mine."

Rondarg didn't seem inclined to hide anything.

To Nyanta, it looked as if he didn't see enough value in anything to try to cover it up.

Even so, that answer hadn't held a single one of the things Nyanta wanted to know. Rondarg's reply hadn't shown him anything beyond what he knew already—in other words, what he could see by looking.

"Don't glower like that. I don't plan to fight you. It's the same for you, no? I'm not doing anything. I took a job request and I'm on guard duty, that's all. That business in Susukino... Okay, sure, I regret that. Threatening People of the Earth just might be a bad thing. Is that good enough? Out of the way, Swashbuckler."

Up on horseback, lazily dangling the staff he'd taken from the holder at his waist, Rondarg gave a little smile and sighed, speaking to Nyanta as if he were tired. He seemed casual, disinterested, and as if he just didn't care.

"Do mew know what mew're doing, Rondarg?"

Sensing something suspicious about the man, Nyanta took a step closer.

"I know. I'm getting paid and doing my job."

"I mean the consequences of that, Rondarg!"

The man responded with a tense smile.

"That bit wasn't in the manual—but I didn't get one, mind you, so that's only natural."

He couldn't have sounded less concerned, and that pierced something very deep inside Nyanta.

It wasn't because Rondarg's words and the future they indicated had caught him by surprise. On the contrary: He'd been afraid someone would say those words to him at some point. But they were something Nyanta had hoped he wouldn't have to hear.

When the Round Table Council was established, Krusty, the leader of D.D.D., had asked Shiroe whether there was a possibility of war with the People of the Earth. Shiroe's answer had been, "I understand that that's something for the Round Table Council to consider, not for me to think about now."

How many of the people in that meeting had accurately caught the meaning of that response? It was something Nyanta thought about, now and then. Krusty seemed to have gotten the message. In his own warped way, he'd tried to help Shiroe. However, Nyanta didn't know how well the other youngsters had understood.

Shiroe's words had been both a prediction and a warning.

That response hadn't admitted the possibility of war, nor had it denied it.

It wasn't a question of whether or not there would be war. It was at an earlier stage than that: It pointed out the fact that they were in a world where war could occur, and it was advice to the effect that each individual who lived there needed to come up with a way to confront the possibility of war.

Shiroe had tried, more earnestly than anyone else, to face the question he'd detected. Nyanta knew that Shiroe harbored secret pain. In this one matter, he thought that he might be closer to Shiroe than Naotsugu, who was young and optimistic, or Akatsuki, who admired Shiroe.

Nyanta respected his too-serious friend, who was less than half his age, and he himself had also faced the fact that Shiroe had pointed out.

Shiroe and Nyanta thought that the possibility of a war between the Adventurers who lived in Yamato had fallen low enough to ignore early on. Fundamentally, Japanese people had a strong aversion to war. Especially if it was a war with other Japanese, emotional inhibitions would come into play. There might be violent incidents and desperate, stress-fueled crimes, but the possibility of all-out war had always been small. That was true even now, when Yamato's Adventurers were divided between the Round Table Council and Plant

Hwyaden.

The possibility of war between the Adventurers and the People of the Earth was higher. In particular, if there were a lot of Adventurers who didn't acknowledge the People of the Earth as human, the issue would probably develop into a big problem. However, although the possibility was high compared to war among the Adventurers, they hadn't thought it was large enough to worry about. Their combat abilities were too different. Domination and conquest were far more likely than war.

In this warped world, Adventurers and People of the Earth complemented one another. It was structured so that they supported each other in production, in consumption, and on every other front. Nyanta thought that the Round Table Council's achievement in making that fact common knowledge at such an early stage was great beyond measure.

The remaining combination was war among the People of the Earth, and neither Nyanta nor Shiroe had been able to give an answer with regard to that one.

After all, neither of them were People of the Earth. They'd been brought up to believe that war was bad, and they had a strong desire to reject it, even if it was between People of the Earth. However, if the People of the Earth resolved to go to war, did they have the right to stop them? They weren't sure. In theory, it was true that the other party had sovereign authority as well.

On top of that, considering the technological development that had followed the Catastrophe, there was a fear that if the People of the Earth went to war, even if the Adventurers didn't actively contribute, they would end up playing a part in expanding the scale of the conflict. He hadn't spoken with Shiroe about this, but it was likely that it was a fragment of the future Shiroe had his eye on.

"Rondarg, do mew intend to seed war across this world?!"

"I intend no such thing. The ones who might be thinking that are the People of the Earth who issued this quest for me."

Those words touched off the clash between Nyanta and Rondarg. Nyanta performed repeated thrusts, loading them with accusation, closing the distance between himself and his foe.

“Mew’re aiding them!”

“So what?”

Rondarg waved a hand, and five spheres of light appeared. Impatience Bolt cut between the caster and Nyanta, emitting tiny arcs of lightning. It was a defensive Sorcerer spell that would automatically retaliate against any close-range attack. Sorcerers were almost never on the front lines, so this wasn’t an important spell for them, but its force was comparably large, and it could serve as the starting point for player-versus-player tactics.

Nyanta’s left arm was smacked away and went numb.

He should have been able to avoid that attack, but an impulse he hadn’t been able to control had driven him forward.

“Many People of the Earth will be lost!”

“It’s what they want. They’re fighting because they want to.”

“Mew could head it off before it starts.”

“Haven’t seen a quest like that around here, Swashbuckler!”

Nyanta struck down Rondarg’s Frost Spear and Burned Stake the moment they were unleashed. Nyanta, who fought with twin rapiers, was among the fastest of the Swashbucklers at sensing activations and interrupting the chants; he was particularly good at it. However, at the same time, his own biggest skills had been sealed. Rondarg was trying to shut down Nyanta’s mobility with Astral Bind, which meant he couldn’t use any finishing skills that would leave him wide open.

Even so, ordinarily, Nyanta would have been able to use calm, clever countertechniques to make the match go his way, and he sensed a bitter immaturity in the fact that he couldn’t do it now. His rising emotions were disturbing his control more than he’d anticipated.

“So mew can’t do it without a quest, Rondarg?!”

“Silence, hypocrite. I—I— This world didn’t invite me.”

A cry of bitter grief rang out.

Rondarg, who still wore that shallow, apathetic smile, was crying.

“Look. This world didn’t send me an invite. I’m not needed. Did you get asked, ‘Do you want to go to another world? Yes/No’? Did you choose? I didn’t. I just got pulled in here; nobody asked me. I didn’t get a choice, and I wasn’t welcomed, either. You people were invited, right? That’s why you can be so laid-back, right?!”

“No. Not a single one of us was ‘invited.’”

“I don’t care how it was for you. At the very least, though, I wasn’t asked. I got dragged into this world; it didn’t matter what I wanted. The world didn’t care what I thought; it just tried to use me for its own ends... And so I’m going to use it however I want. Am I wrong, Swashbuckler?!”

A fireball burst into existence. It split into two, then four, then flew at Nyanta with a groaning howl. Nyanta intercepted the attack spell with a throwing card he’d taken from his coat. The silver scrap of iron punched through the fireballs, blocking three of them, but the remaining one made it to Nyanta’s slim swords and scarred them.

You’re wrong.

He wished he could tell him that. Nyanta wielded his rapiers, feeling as if he were being crushed. He slashed through Rondarg’s howling, raging spells and knocked them away, but although this was a fight he should have been able to win hands down, its end was a long ways away.

Rondarg wasn’t wrong. At least in Rondarg’s world, he wasn’t wrong. Even burning with anger as he was, Nyanta understood that. That was what was tearing him apart.

Rondarg’s rage and howls were justified. Rondarg was a victim, and that situation should be rectified. The Adventurers who wanted to return to their old world should have their wish granted promptly and should be compensated.

Of course, it couldn’t possibly be all right for Rondarg to hurt other people or trample on their rights in order to make his own wish come true. Those were the rules of society. However, that society itself hadn’t invited Rondarg. At the very least, he said it hadn’t.

Rondarg was admitting that he wasn't a participant in this society.

Rondarg was an outsider. He was an outsider to everything there was.

Here, Rondarg was at war with the world. Since he was fighting a war, he thought it didn't matter what he did to the world, and he wasn't wrong. It was easy to say that ethics should be observed even in war. However, if asked whether the Catastrophe had acted ethically as far as Rondarg was concerned, the only answer was the bare fact that it hadn't. In other words, he only wanted fairness: Ethics had been ignored in his case, so he would ignore ethics in return.

There were many Adventurers in this world who harbored the same pain, and they were the ones the town of Akiba had averted its eyes from. Rondarg's pain was something Nyanta had felt once, something all Adventurers had experienced. In fact, he couldn't object to his anger.

If someone who thought like that had existed on Earth, if an individual there had considered themselves at war with society, society would probably have been able to use physical force to suppress them. It could use its police force to apprehend, restrain, and imprison them. Depending on the situation, the army might be mobilized. After all, their revenge would be the equivalent of terrorism.

By doing this, society could hand down some sort of punishment. However, the punishment would be "elimination." It wasn't the absolute justice of society that made this possible. Society could eliminate individuals with violence only because it had greater numbers; in simple terms, because it was strong, because it could fight.

This didn't absolve the world of its sin in forcing injustice on an individual without their consent.

"...It's the same for everyone."

Nyanta had lowered his swords, and Rondarg's air disturbance spell Turbulence leapt at him.

Rondarg was frightened and desperate, and his attack sliced into Nyanta.

However, Nyanta couldn't bring himself to block it, or to return the slash.

It wasn't that his anger had disappeared. Enough sorrow had enveloped him, surpassing his rage, and all that remained was a crushing pain.

Nyanta couldn't solve Rondarg's problem. It was likely that no one could.

It would be possible to eliminate Rondarg with violence, but Nyanta couldn't believe that to be just.

There had been meaning in rescuing Serara. It was probably lucky that he'd been able to confront the Briganteers in Susukino while he was shielding her. It had meant that Nyanta and his companions had been able to get by without really looking at Rondarg face-to-face. Even now, Nyanta's Log Horizon comrades were at his back. Because he knew this, he kept desperately searching for words that would reach the man.

► 5

"Rondarg... It's the same for everyone."

In a fight, he could win. He could send Rondarg to the temple, and he could wipe out ten or twenty black spirits. However, that would be a kind of defeat. That awareness was slowly stealing into Nyanta, awakening a pain so great he wondered where his desiccated heart had been hiding it.

And so he frantically searched for words that could reach him.

He thought of Touya. He thought of Minori. He thought of Isuzu and Rundelhaus.

His thoughts went to the children of the Crescent Moon League.

Serara's bashful expression rose in his mind...

Nyanta remembered all of his young companions.

"It happens to all children, Rondarg. As far as they're concerned, people, or at least children, are all brought into life unfairly."

Thin lightning bound Nyanta's arms like briars. His HP bar was falling.

He didn't have much time left, and there were only a few words he could get out.

Nyanta knew that those few words probably wouldn't reach Rondarg. It would take a miracle to get a message like that through to someone in pain, and unfortunately, Nyanta was only a powerless commoner who was unable to work miracles.

"There are parents who will tell them, 'Mew were born because we loved mew.' Those are very mewtiful words. However, they're nothing more than self-satisfaction on the part of the parents. They can't overturn the fact that the children weren't asked for their consent before being dropped into the world. Some children are saved by them, but others are not... All people receive life that way. In this world, and in our old world, and in every world!"

So tough it out.

He couldn't say that.

Even if it was suffering that everyone experienced, each separate instance of that suffering was an original, something felt only by that particular person. If someone had said that to Nyanta when he was drowning in pain, he would have responded with his fist, just as Rondarg was doing now. In addition, Rondarg wasn't the only one raising a fist.

In that sense, this world was filled with sorrow.

Rondarg couldn't be judged by the laws of the People of the Earth. The laws of the Adventurers couldn't do it, either. Rondarg hadn't agreed to participate in either group.

To Rondarg, his own injury and destruction were outside his sphere of interest. Nyanta felt as if he understood that pain. When people lose someone important to them, they lose the world. Nyanta had managed to regain it, but it had taken a long time. He'd also been lucky.

"Kill me, Swashbuckler! It doesn't matter if you do it. Death doesn't exist here. I'll never end, and even if you can preach at me, you can't conveniently exile me. Am I wrong?!"

He wasn't wrong.

That was certainly one possible ending.

There was an abyss in front of Nyanta, a divide. Rondarg's irresponsible, careless attitude was directed at the whole world. He'd decided he wasn't a resident of the place any longer. As a result, he didn't care what happened to himself or it. Of course, to keep his body alive, and to kill time, Rondarg had to do *something*, and he called those things quests. He'd decided the world was "that sort of place." For that reason, Nyanta's words probably wouldn't reach him.

However, even if this was the truth as far as Rondarg was concerned, the world held other things. All worlds did.

Nyanta finally realized the true identity of this twisting pain.

Rondarg's suffering and curse were things all Adventurers could experience. Even Nyanta and Shiroe weren't exceptions. Not even Minori and Touya, Rundelhaus and Isuzu, or Serara, a girl like a place in the sun.

Nyanta had been searching for words to say to Rondarg, but that hadn't been all. The root of Nyanta's pain lay in wondering what he would be able to do for his precious young friends if they were possessed by a similar curse. It was a real possibility. Any Adventurer could become a Rondarg. That was why Nyanta wanted to save him. He wanted him to be saved.

He remembered Minori. That solemn little girl had resolved to follow in Shiroe's footsteps. Touya's resolution was to protect his sister, and Rundelhaus's was to become an Adventurer.

Young people were reborn.

Children who'd been brought into this world unfairly, by force, became young people and resolved to be born again voluntarily.

They carved their identities on their hearts, were born a second time of their own accord, and began to walk into their own lives as infants. It was a sacred contract, and it had been made by a succession of people. It had linked people together, all the way to the present.

In order to protect that, Nyanta thought, he wouldn't mind turning himself into ashes. He would have done absolutely anything for Rondarg, if doing so

meant the man would understand that.

After all, even Shiroe, someone Nyanta liked very much, had concluded that sort of contract and ended up with his own guild.

However, his wish was in vain. The staff Rondarg brandished emitted a flood of unlimited mana, and half-crazed magic that had abandoned both aggro and control swelled and grew.

Then, just before it engulfed Nyanta, it vanished.

“‘Screech, screech, screech.’ Talk about noisy.”

The military saber that had impaled Rondarg’s neck from the back slid out of it again, and a red-haired woman appeared from behind him. Her eyes were narrowed in a smile. Her expression was cruel and bewitching, filled with joy, yet simultaneously like steel.

Rondarg’s bloodshot eyes rolled in their sockets. As his body collapsed, he looked up at the woman and seemed to mutter something, but the words came out as a welter of bloody foam.

The woman looked just a little surprised. As if to prove that the surprise was artificial, her face crumpled, and she spoke downward at Rondarg. “My, my. A message?” There was a viscous, bubbling sound. “Ah, that’s a shame,” she told him. “That’s not a language I know.” Kicking him out of her way, she gazed steadily at Nyanta.

The way she giggled softly, even though there was no telling what was funny here, seemed to warn of deep abnormality.

“Aren’t Adventurers great? You can kill and be killed all you want.”

“Why—?”

“Huhn? ...Oh. I just shut him up for a bit. It’s nothing—just like sending him into the next room. Isn’t that right? For you Adventurers, anyway.”

“No!”

Nyanta had shouted it, but he couldn’t prove it.

Rondarg, whom he’d failed to persuade. The People of the Earth woman

who'd killed him.

In this world, where death did not separate everything, what “wasn't right”?

“Whoops, beg pardon. I'm Mizufa Trude, ‘the General Who Dominated the East.’ I'm the field commander here.”

She was gorgeous, bursting with vitality.

Her tall, toned body was wrapped in a military uniform, and the saber she held was wet with blood. He was forced to admit that there was a certain beauty about her, although it wasn't the sort you'd find in a painting. She had looks that might have earned her the envy of the lovely princesses of Eastal, but she warped them with a coarse smile and blocked Nyanta's way, her attitude suggestive.

“So mew are Rondarg's client. Is this how the People of the Earth do things?”

Nyanta felt as if his body was enveloped in white flames. He couldn't hold back his hostility.

In all likelihood, it would have been impossible to persuade Rondarg. Even so, it felt as though the woman in front of him had stripped him of that chance. His irritation was a bit like self-reproach, and it was merciless.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. Still talking in your sleep this late in the game... People of the Earth? Adventurers? It doesn't matter.”

Nyanta was gritting his teeth, and Mizufa smiled at him, her voice beguiling.

“Everyone that's born into this world uses the cards they're dealt to kill each other. The strong use their strength as a weapon. The weak use their weakness.”

With that smile still on her face, almost as if this were routine for her, Mizufa slashed at him. As Nyanta parried the saber, his expression twisted in surprise. It was heavy. From the force behind it, it was hard to believe this was a Person of the Earth's sword.

“You're questioning domination and military rule? You don't even die.”

“Why do mew want war?!”

He thought of Shiroe. Of that clumsy young man's dream.

Nyanta's guild master's oblique goodwill had probably predicted this fight. Shiroe's insight was correct. Too correct. So much so that even their very best attempts hadn't been enough to prevent it.

"I'll burn my own life with the alcohol of war. Dance, undead Adventurer!"

"Viper Slash!!"

He'd intuitively understood the meaning of the word.

Undead.

Since they didn't die, the People of the Earth didn't even consider them living creatures.

The name was ominous, but Nyanta couldn't deny it.

He couldn't tell her she was wrong, either.

However, that had no bearing on the battle. Like a poisonous snake hunting its prey, the Swashbuckler's sword techniques slipped through Mizufa's guard, slashing the top of her shoulder open. Nyanta was a veteran swordsman. He was also burning with fury. He had no intention of forgiving this soldier, female or not.

But Mizufa paid no heed to the blood that dripped from her wound like rose petals. She held her saber at waist level, thrusting and swinging, pressing Nyanta hard.

"Odysseia's in that town! That band of suicidal cretins. Spoiled little brats who've gone crazy from homesickness. Don't you worry, they'll spread death around for you!"

"Why?!"

"No need to ask for reasons. If people get stabbed, they die. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! This is amazing! Fantastic! I just might fall for that keen sword of yours. There's no intent to kill in your blade, though!"

"Are mew proud of that? Of having the intent to *kill*?!"

Lightning sketched a lacy pattern in midair.

Striking the line of the blade up again and again, burning with white rage, Nyanta aimed for the base of Mizufa's throat. Early Thrust, launched as a follow-up attack, had already knocked the woman off balance.

When the world had gone still for the decisive blow, the clash was halted by the hilt of a sword, still in its plain wooden sheath.

With a deeply troubled expression, the long-haired man who'd come between Nyanta and Mizufa sent both of them flying.

► 6

A flock of wyverns were attacking the towns on the plain.

It was probably one of the residents' and administrators' nightmares.

As a rule, if an attack on a town or other residential center was predicted, considered in terms of damage to living spaces and production bases, the best plan was to get as far away from the town as possible and counterattack from a remote location.

Even if they managed to drive them off and there was no direct damage to humans, if the town and its surroundings took damage, it was very likely that the indirect damage would harm their ability to live normally. In the world of Theldesia, with its medieval methods of food production, damage to the production bases could prove to be fatal. Therefore, town walls were a medieval wisdom, intended to protect living spaces from external enemies.

However, there were situations when this wasn't possible.

They might be midclass monsters, but Wyverns were a serpentine type of flying dragon with tiny arms. Although they didn't breathe flames, strike with their front claws, or boast magic attacks, they specialized in aerial mobility, and in this they were the equal of more legitimate dragons.

Their levels depended on the area in which they lived and were distributed over a fairly wide range—their lowest levels were 40, though some individuals approached level 90. The wyverns that lived around the Redstone Mountains

should have been comparatively easy to deal with.

“Checking individual levels: Forty-two, forty-six, forty-three...fifty!”

Minori made her report, a telescope held to one eye.

With levels like those, it would be possible for even Touya and the others to bring them down with relative ease. That was why they’d come to the Redstone Mountains from Akiba in the first place.

However, that was true only if they were going up against a few at most. Alternatively, if they holed up in a shallow cavern and took the attacking wyverns down in an orderly fashion, Touya thought they might be able to defeat ten or so.

They didn’t have the sort of force that could stand against the several dozen wyverns that wheeled freely in the sky.

“Minori, big sis Serara! Let’s get out of the town first!”

“Right!”

Besides, the town’s location was a very bad one.

The surrounding terrain was open country with sweeping views, and the town of Saphir, which they needed to protect, was right in the middle of it. Wyverns were characterized by their high-speed flight, and for a fight with monsters like that, it was very nearly the worst possible battlefield.

Although this wasn’t like being attacked by a horde of demihumans, the way they had been in Choushi, it was just as hard to deal with, or possibly even harder. Defending against groups of demihumans was difficult because of their numbers. When they infiltrated, demihuman armies used repeated wave-type invasion units that outnumbered the defending forces.

On the other hand, the wyverns’ numbers weren’t that great, but they had despair-inducing aerial mobility. Defending forces that weren’t able to mount long-range attacks would be no use as a wall, and if the defending unit fell apart and the town’s residents fled, they would be pursued, and the result was sure to be a tragedy.

Wyverns excelled at flight, and they probably thought that bringing their steel

tails down on the backs of fleeing People of the Earth to eat their soft meat was an appealing form of recreation.

Under the circumstances, it would be hard to have a projecting mobile defense: The enemy's mobility was greater. Of course, their group was currently short on fighting power in all senses of the word, not just mobility. Even if their group had been level 90, they couldn't protect the town completely with a single party of five.

Even if they were on the distant horizon, a flock of flying dragons had appeared like a black mist and was making for the town. The uproar that erupted in Saphir was no small thing, but it didn't reach panic levels.

People of the Earth with frightened faces seemed to be fleeing into the town's sturdiest buildings. Touya's group of three Adventurers ran between houses whose windows were being slammed shut.

When the outskirts of town came into view, they learned why the People of the Earth were evacuating more calmly than they'd expected.

Although there was no telling where they'd assembled from, they came across a group of more than ten Odysseia Knights heading into battle. The Knights wore matching mantles, and one after another, their expressions fevered, they broke into a run on the road that ran beside the river. They were bound for the cultivated fields that lay farther out, and they clearly meant to intercept the approaching beasts.

"Move!"

With one brusque word, another group of Odysseia Knights ran past Touya and the others. There were six members in the group; two of the rear guards were carrying the Moving Temple. Together, they sprinted toward the battlefield, eyes bloodshot, swords drawn.

"Touya, don't go out in front."

"I know."

"Even if we joined that fight, we wouldn't be any help. Let's handle the defense here."

“Right.”

Following Minori’s instructions, they made for a reservoir one street over from the avenue. It would be a good location both for keeping an eye on their surroundings and for meeting up with the others.

“Minori, what about Isuzu?”

“I just contacted Rundelhaus. They’re both getting their equipment together and are on their way here.”

“O-okay.”

“It looks like there’s still time. Don’t panic.”

As Touya spoke to his companions, he was watching the combat in the distance.

The figures looked no bigger than miniature dolls, but it was a strange battle to begin with.

The Odysseia Knights fought by charging, swinging their swords as if they’d gone mad, clinging to the wyverns and summoning enormous pillars of lightning. Naturally, they got wounded, and the animals were growing progressively bloodier.

Viewed one way, they were a brigade of ten-odd knights making desperate charges, fighting valiantly to defend the town without a thought for their own safety.

However, Touya felt a horror that made the hair on his arms prickle up at the sight of the figures sprinting through puddles of blood without even being ordered to charge.

“Touya. Touya...”

Minori’s voice was trembling.

His twin was observing the battlefield with a telescope Naotsugu had given them. Straining his eyes in the direction the cylinder was focused, Touya realized what she was looking at.

The Odysseia Knights’ levels were nearly 90.

That was almost double the wyverns' levels. However, the wyverns' numbers were several times greater than the Knights'. Their Guardians and Samurai kept using Anchor Howl to draw the wyverns to them without a thought for the surrounding balance. If they hadn't done this, the dragons might have headed for the town.

However, if they summoned an unlimited number of enemies, even if their levels were higher than the monsters', it would be hard for them to stand against them. As a matter of fact, they were falling.

Then they turned into light and scattered...

...And resurrected at Boreas' Moving Temple, which wasn't far away.

Over and over, Touya clenched the sweaty hand that was resting on the hilt of his katana involuntarily. The quiver in Minori's voice was only natural.

They recognized that iridescent light. They'd grown used to the light that shone when monsters were defeated, and while they didn't want to remember it, Touya, Minori, and the others had gone through losing Rundelhaus and regaining him at the temple.

What they were seeing now was the same thing, or at least something very similar.

But this felt more like a nightmare.

The resurrected Odysseia Knights got up as though nothing had happened, joyfully retrieved their swords, and returned to the battlefield. Touya even thought he heard crazed laughter as the knights abruptly turned back to the fighting, although it couldn't have been real.

Being resurrected by the temple wasn't an easy thing.

According to Shiroe's explanation, the action cost you a commensurate amount of experience points. Right after you resurrected, you didn't even have enough HP. That was true of the Assassin who'd just resurrected and set off running. With his Health still low, he dashed over, leapt at a wyvern as it skimmed close to the ground, and clung to it. He struck at its wings with his great sword, and they fell in a tailspin.

Didn't they value their own lives at all?

The words "brave charge" rose in his mind, but Touya couldn't think of it as anything but an unfunny joke.

"...Yeah."

Touya tried to encourage Minori, whose voice was shaking, but the reply seemed to stick in his throat, and his voice wouldn't come out normally.

Sharp lightning seared their retinas.

It was Lightning Nebula, a wide-range Sorcerer attack spell. The swirling electricity inflicted lightning damage over an area with a ten-meter radius. It was a powerful offensive spell, one Rundelhaus had learned only recently.

They'd tested it out several times and had learned that it made it hard for the vanguard to hold on to its aggro, so Touya's party had decided not to use the spell in actual combat until they'd practiced with it a bit more and had worked it into their team plays.

Out on the battlefield, that spell burst open, pulling in a few wyverns and nearly the same number of Knights. With a sound that didn't match the gruesome sight, iridescent bubbles popped.

After the space of a breath or two, the Moving Temple shone with the same light and resurrected the knights.

The magical coffin vibrated with a low-frequency sound. To Touya, it almost seemed cursed.

"They come up with some pretty interesting stuff, don't they?"

"Huh...?"

"That's a resurrection device, isn't it? A guide beacon that marks a place of rebirth, just like the temples. I don't have any memories of it, but it seems like a very useful item... I wonder if someone invented it."

"Big sis Roe2."

Touya looked up at the woman standing next to him.

Roe2's white coat-mantle fluttered, and her expression was relaxed and

confident. It made her seem reliable, but right now, it also looked vaguely alien.

“You look pale, young Touya.”

“That thing’s bad! A thing like that—it’s weird!”

Touya shook his fist.

He was trying to get this uneasy feeling across to Roe2.

“No, it’s not weird. It’s aligned with the laws of this world. If it weren’t, it wouldn’t work. Since it exists, there must be some sort of structure and principles behind it. You’re free to deny it, but that won’t make it go away, you know.”

“That’s not what I meant...”

Apparently Touya’s words hadn’t reached her.

Or, no, they probably had gotten through; the conversation was meshing, after all. However, that meant only that his meaning had gotten through to her; it wasn’t that she shared Touya’s impatience and fear.

“Besides, from what I’ve seen, they seem proactive about providing Empathiom.”

“Huh?”

“If they’re obliging enough to die that much, the collection efficiency rate will be high. I’d imagine it’s really helping the Genius-collectors out. Or, no... Did they arrange this in the first place? That would call for surveillance in and of itself.”

“What are you talking about?! They’re dying! We’ve got to do something!”

Touya was flustered, but someone restrained his hand.

When he turned to look, Minori was standing behind him. She was biting her lip and watching him—no, watching Roe2.

Minori’s eyes were blazing, and Touya knew she was thinking about something in earnest. To her, thinking and making resolutions were indivisible from each other. Touya’s twin wasn’t yet specialized on that point. At the sight of her expression, his head cooled down all at once.

When Minori's eyes looked like that, she was strong. It was weird for Touya to say this, but she had become so fierce, straightforward, and tough that it was hard to believe she was his twin.

Still, on the flip side, she was also very fragile, so Touya held her hand tightly.

"I understand that that's a point of contention, but Touya, Minori... It looks to me as though it's what they want."

Roe2 went on in a singsong voice, her cool eyes still turned on the battlefield.

"They want to die. They want that temporary, kaleidoscopic flashback, like an anesthetic. As the toll, they donate Empathiom."

"Roe2..."

"Not that I know much about it. I don't understand why you're building such an inefficient society in the first place. Still, come to think of it, the knowable world has always been far smaller than the unknowable world. Since the understandable territory is as tiny as the tip of a needle, there's nothing odd about not understanding."

With the distant fight as the background, Minori's palm, damp with sweat, conveyed to Touya how unsettled she was. At some point, she'd stepped forward, as if to shield Serara behind her. Minori met Roe2's gaze, and after significant hesitation, she asked a question, quite plainly.

"Who are you, Roe2? Where did you come from, and where are you going?"

During the moment of anxious silence that followed, Roe2's eyes went round.

Then she swept her coat out lightly, throwing her shoulders back as if this were a first meeting, and faced Touya and the others squarely.

► 7

Abruptly, interrupting their conversation with Roe2, a lump of heat appeared.

It was Burned Stake, one of the Odysseia Knights' attack spells. Even through a layer of air, the high heat became pressure and bore down on its prey,

dashing the wyvern it targeted out of the sky. Pebbles and dust mingled with the hot air, and Touya shielded his eyes with his left arm. When he looked over, Minori, Roe2, and Serara were protected by the faint gleam of barrier spells. That was enough to satisfy Touya, and he released a sharp flash from his right arm.

He'd activated Izuna Cutter without a weapon, and it became a whirlwind, ripping apart the area in front of him and clearing his field of vision. Then he saw the Odysseia Knights retreating toward them en masse and the flock of wyverns.

"What are they doing?!"

The words were almost a yell, and they came out involuntarily.

In order to keep the damage to the town to a minimum, they had to keep moving forward as they fought. Hadn't the Odysseia Knights moved away from the town to fight because they knew that? Until just a moment ago, both sides had been evenly matched. Although the Wyverns were large in number, they were all around level 50, and so even without the Knights' disturbing suicide attacks, the wyverns and the level-90 Adventurers had been keeping each other in check. It had looked like a battle of attrition, and for that very reason, Touya and the others had watched, white-knuckled, with the town at their backs.

However, in the moment they'd been distracted by Minori and Roe2's conversation, that balance had crumbled easily.

The wyverns glided low, slicing through the wind with the moaning sound unique to living creatures, one never heard with airplanes or helicopters. Touya drew his weapon and slashed at one in the same movement, intercepting with Helm Splitter, but the blade only slid over the tough hide.

The wyvern's level might be far below the Odysseia Knights, but it matched Touya's, and on top of that, it was a party-rank monster. It wasn't an opponent he could defeat with one attack. That said, the fighting was too confused for him to gather aggro.

"Ruuuun!!"

Beyond Touya, who screamed fit to burst his throat, a steel dragon slammed

into the base of a ruined building like an enormous throwing axe. The whole building shook with the impact, leaning like an ancient tree.

If People of the Earth had been hiding in that building, there had definitely been casualties. In fact, People of the Earth had burst out of the surrounding buildings, their eyes wide with terror. They'd realized that this area was no longer safe. It wasn't clear whether anyone had been hiding in the building, which was beginning to crumble, but there were definitely still People of the Earth in the area.

"Touya, over there!"

Serara was pointing at a black shadow. A Nightshade Servant. Touya had no idea what they were doing here, right in the middle of combat, but that wasn't the important part. What *was* important was that the thing several Nightshade Servants were lifting up, then slamming into the ground, was Boreas' Moving Temple.

It was clear that they had been the ones who'd broken the Odysseia Knights' battle lines. However, on the other hand, the Nightshade Servants were attacking the wyverns as well. Although their movements conveyed intelligence, their actions were filled with the intent to plunge the battlefield into further chaos.

"Erg! I'm going!"

"Oh! Touya?! Ah, wa-wait! I'm going, too! Wolfie!"

Touya, who'd broken into a run, put on a burst of speed.

Lone Dash was a Samurai special skill that greatly increased Touya's movement speed for a brief time. Ordinarily, the skill was adjusted to suit the support spells provided by the rear guard. When combined with Electric Flash, it was possible to leave any companions far behind. However, Touya flung away even that hesitation and charged at the Nightshade Servants.

In the midst of concentration so fierce it narrowed his field of vision, he used Floating Boat Crossing, leaving the whistle of the wind behind him. Soujirou wouldn't teach him attack skills, but he'd been almost obsessive about drumming the walking method into him. Lowering his body using this method,

he remembered the attitude Naotsugu had taught him: *Get a good look at the enemy's positions, then seize a place for yourself right in the center.*

Twisting his body through slight openings, he ran as though he was skimming the ground, vigorously cutting loose with his katana. He swung Whirlwind Cutter like a cyclone, sending the Nightshade Servants flying.

“Touya!”

With a cry that was almost a scream, Serara ran up to Touya and cast Pulse Recovery on him, even though she was still out of breath. As his scrapes faded, Touya glared at the Nightshade Servants with blazing eyes.

The Moving Temple at his feet was probably unusable.

It was emitting a sound like a low moan, and from time to time it ejected gouts of crackling lightning. It was obvious that mana was leaking from the destroyed parts.

From what Touya had seen, the Odysseia Knights had been guarding three or four Moving Temples. That meant they wouldn't be wiped out immediately just because this one had been destroyed, and they probably even had spares.

However, even so, there was no doubt that these Moving Temples were vital points for the Odysseia Knights. The Nightshade Servants were edging back, as if they were keeping wary eyes on Touya's gaze. Their movements were strangely human, and it was creepy. Touya felt malice in them, a spiteful intent to throw the battlefield into confusion.

...But those Nightshade Servants were shattered by a single, enormous attack that plowed into them from the side. Without even taking proper aim, a maul that was over two meters long and looked a bit like an industrial tool had pulverized the group. The Adventurer who held it was swaying on his feet, and tarry-red blood leaked from the gaps in his armor.

The armored Adventurer probably held an important position among the Odysseia Knights. Touya swallowed hard at the sight of the level-90 destruction that had been inflicted right in front of him. He'd known an attack at that level was strong, but its power was insane. The circular dent in the ground seemed more like the result of an impact from construction machinery than a person.

Touya watched the knight with wary awe. However, the other man ignored Touya, or rather, he didn't even see him. Turning toward the wide avenue on unsteady feet, the man shouted:

"From this point on, we move the battle into the town!!"

Behind him, he knew Serara had gulped at those terrifying words.

"Nightshade Servants have appeared! Kill them all! As long as we keep the wyverns earthbound, they're just targets. Lure them into the buildings and kill them! Kill them all, don't let a single one escape! Kill, kill, and die!"

A wordless answer went up from the knights.

At the arrogance of it all, something inside Touya finally snapped.

The roiling emotion he'd kept shut inside ever since they crossed the Boxroot Pass burst forth, overflowing, raging with a force he couldn't control.

"Touya?!"

He'd struck the knight's armor with his fist. His fist shuddered and ached.

He didn't care; he hit him again.

As he'd expected, hitting the heavy metal armor was like punching a dump truck. He wasn't sure whether the other guy had even noticed.

"Hey!"

However, as Touya struck, he also yelled. Compared to this giant, imposing man, his own arms and legs seemed as skinny as disposable chopsticks, but he didn't stop.

"Hey!"

He'd gotten worked up, and he couldn't control his cracked voice. As he struck him over and over, his fists split and bled, but were healed by the dancing light of Pulse Recovery.

"Hey!!"

On the third yell, the Adventurer stirred slightly, as if he'd finally noticed him. Touya felt it, even though, due to the helmet, he couldn't tell where he was looking.

“Why? Why are you doing stuff like that?! Why...? They’re all gonna—why are you *like* that?! The Nightshade Servants, and the wyverns, and the Odysseia Knights!”

The feelings were too strong; they burst inside him, and he couldn’t turn them into words.

In response to the pain, Touya squeezed his weaponless left hand into a fist near his chest. It was a gesture he’d repeated over and over again in his wheelchair. However, this wasn’t like before, when he’d stared at the ground. Touya didn’t even spare a glance for the pain. Instead, he lifted his head and glared at the knight.

“Why are you doing crap like this?! People live here!”

“We don’t live here.”

It was a curt response.

The words made him so mad he thought he might go crazy.

“That’s not what I meant! Why are you so... There’s gotta be some other way, right, brother? Another way to fight, a better way—”

“Kids should mind their own business.”

“Why are you doing that? It’s basically suicide! You know you guys could do better...”

In the end, that was what it was:

What Touya had felt had been unfairness.

These people had to be able to fight some other way. There had to be another way to do it.

The Odysseia Knights were level 90, and adults. If they were adults, shouldn’t they be able to do better than this? Even in a hell where Touya, who was just a kid, could only grit his teeth, they ought to be able to do something.

He’d had to be quiet and obedient to avoid causing trouble for his family. He’d learned to clown around so that they wouldn’t worry about him. All the time, at any time. No wonder he’d been caught by Hamelin. He’d been doing as

he was told in order not to cause trouble for adults, so it was almost as if he'd intentionally let them trick him. It was all Touya's fault for being a kid. Because he was a kid, because he was weak, his wishes slipped through his fingers. Or rather, he wasn't even allowed to wish in the first place.

The rage at this unfairness, the stuff he'd always held in check, roiled up. Touya had cursed himself for being a child for a very long time. Adults were able to determine their own lives, and yet...

He hated being treated like a kid. He couldn't allow it.

He remembered Dariella's white fingertips with a twinge.

The soft sensation as they'd combed his bangs off his forehead.

The fist he used to strike this knight was an extension of that past. It was true that Touya was a kid. However, if this Adventurer was going to call him "a kid," shouldn't he show him something else? If he was a proper adult, he should have shown Touya the answer Touya wasn't able to find.

If he didn't, Touya's heart would break.

"It's none of your business."

"That's not what I'm saying!"

He lashed out at the man, letting the anger inside him take control, but the man stopped his fist with his iron gauntlet, then squeezed it hard. Touya wouldn't budge, and the man leaned forward a little, speaking to him in tones that seemed to be cursing him.

"It's not suicide. Nobody dies in this world. That means there's no such thing as suicide. We want to go back—we're going home. If we die, we get to see our families. Did you know that? If you die, you get to see just a little bit of our old world. You get to dream about that world. That place has to be connected to it."

It was like a voice that blew from a long-term care ward at night.

A voice reminiscent of the dim blue light late at night in a ward that held patients who would be in the hospital for a long time, a ward that almost never got visitors. A voice that had nowhere to go.

Touya had been burning with anger, but at the sound of that voice, he felt terror, as if he'd had icy water dashed over him.

“Listen. I was supposed to get married in summer. Once that happened, I was planning to quit this game. I even went to a condo exhibition. I’m going to have a wife. I can’t keep messing around with this kid stuff. I’m going home.”



The man matched the angle of his helmet to Touya's face, as if he were peering into it.

However, Touya sensed that the man's eyes weren't looking at him; that they weren't actually seeing anything at all. The knight in front of him wasn't seeing this world anymore.

"Next time the rent renews, I'm moving. My girl's kind of a pain; she wants to move out of her parents' house, and she keeps griping to me about it every day. I have to get hitched soon and bring her over to my place. She's high-strung, so I've gotta take care of her. Over there. See? Even you hate this farce, right?"

If Touya said he didn't want to go back, he would have been lying.

But it wasn't that he wasn't toughing it out.

Still, Touya knew: There were some words that shouldn't be said. He might be a kid, but he was a guy. There were words guys just had to swallow. Once, those words had been, "I want to play soccer." Touya had gotten used to swallowing them. Life was much better if everyone was smiling.

Why didn't this guy understand that?

His raging emotions overflowed. Tears poured over his cheeks.

"The world is always the real thing. There are tons of people who are living like it's important!" Touya howled.

As he spit out the words, the idea that this was all he could say made him feel hopeless.

"Quit spouting crap. There's no way in hell this world is the real thing. Like there's any reality where you don't die even if you die? If you die, you have to actually *be dead*. If you die and stuff doesn't go quiet, it's a game. Because people like you don't die, because you let 'em call you 'Adventurers' and butter you up and then live on and on and on—because you people won't die, we can't get out of this world."

"That's not true. I don't know what you guys think, but this world is—"

There was something he wanted to say.

The young knight was wrong.

He wanted to scream, *Is whether we die or not really that important?!*

He wanted to ask the guy if he'd ever died in the old world. Of course he hadn't; there was no way he had. If he'd died, he wouldn't have been playing *Elder Tales*. He wanted to yell, *Who decided that if you die it's real and if you don't die it's a game?*

Touya remembered getting hit and sent flying like something out of a cartoon, and the way the asphalt had shredded him like grated radish. He'd seen for himself that his bones were white. Not only that, he'd seen his trapped pelvis tilted at a weird angle.

Touya had seen death. It meant "the end." The driver who'd hit Touya had passed away in the next bed over in the ICU. After a long, painful stretch of rehab, Touya had recovered enough to live in a wheelchair, but the driver hadn't made it through the night of the crash.

The university hospital where Touya had been was almost like the netherworld.

Late at night, through a painkiller-induced haze, the hospital ward had looked as still as the grave. Someone died practically every day, and speechless patients were carried in. The nurses were all kind in a professional way, but none of them said much. Touya's attending physician was an individual whose gloomy expression seemed stiff, as if it had been pasted on. From what Touya knew, hospitals were entrances to the next world, and the people who lived there were beings halfway between the dead and the living.

...And so Touya knew death.

After all, for a little while, he hadn't been alive.

That was why he wanted to tell this guy that this was the wrong way to resolve things.

If he wanted to get back to the old world where death had been, if he was seriously thinking about death, then he *really* shouldn't do anything suicidal. He shouldn't be able to fight a battle in which all the People of the Earth might die. He wanted to scream that at him.

But Touya couldn't voice a single word of those feelings.

He'd glimpsed the young man's dull eyes through his helmet, and he recognized them. They looked like Touya's when he'd been told he'd never walk again. They weren't the eyes of the living.

"If you've got a problem, report it to the admins. At worst, I'll get banned. And if you don't, you go die, too."

Shoved away, Touya looked up at the world from a pile of rubble.

The battle around him was growing fiercer every moment, and the world of death was expanding.

► 8

That world of death was simultaneously unfolding within the sea of trees as well.

"Kazuhikocchi."

"It's been a long time, Captain."

Kazuhiko, a young man who looked like a *ronin*, wearing an undershirt, a riding *hakama*, and a sleeveless campaign jacket known as a *jinbaori*, looked far more mature than Nyanta remembered. The wrinkle between his furrowed eyebrows clearly showed his distress.

He'd always been a young man with a sense of responsibility.

Kazuhiko had been the Tea Party's offensive commander.

"Out of my way, Kazuhikocchi! There's something I must set right."

"No. I can't stand down."

Nyanta had taken a step forward, and Kazuhiko directed a sharp slash at the ground near his feet, opening a crack in it.

Nyanta didn't stop. Glaring, he closed in on Kazuhiko, his former companion, who had changed beyond recognition. Kazuhiko glared back at him with eyes

that were just as intense.

“Are mew involved in this?”

“My social obligations demand it.”

Kazuhiko spit the words out. He was the old comrade Nyanta knew, and at the same time, he was a different man. His eyes held a determined will, but they were also dark and dull. He looked like a man who’d charged ahead even though he hadn’t yet sorted things out in his mind, and who carried many scars while he did so.

Nyanta had heard about Kazuhiko’s current situation from Shiroe, in general terms.

Shiroe had said he’d taken on the task of making Plant Hwyaden healthy from the inside. However, Kazuhiko’s eyes really weren’t the sort of color anyone could have called “healthy.” They were like a bottomless swamp that had swallowed intense anger and sadness without releasing a single bubble, and yet they radiated a rigid, steely will.

“You Adventurers are such slugs!” Mizufa interjected with a sneer. “Always so terribly *nice*. Operation Crimson Night has already succeeded!! This is why you can’t be the heroes in this world. Go on, go sleep! I mean, it’s not like you’ll die, right?!”

Apparently as far as Mizufa was concerned, Nyanta and Kazuhiko’s chance meeting was just a waste of time. Even as Kazuhiko held her back, she unleashed a slash that used her whole body.

As he struck Mizufa’s saber away, Nyanta was forcibly separated from Kazuhiko.

He wanted to interrogate his onetime companion about his real motives, but this female soldier insisted on following him around.

“You could probably run right through Hades’ Breath and the Nine Great Gaols of Halos, couldn’t you?”

“I *did* run through them.”

The good old Debauchery Tea Party days—those were memories like a

bygone summer afternoon. In his memory, they sparkled and shone with exquisite brightness. However, what had been days of adventuring for Nyanta and the others meant something else to Mizufa. She laughed, her beautiful red lips twisting with humiliation and indignation.

“Ah, yes, I bet. Your sword, your boots, and even your gloves are just dripping with magic. I can feel it! That and the strength of the spirit that fills you from head to toe! People like me don’t have that stuff.”

Nyanta didn’t understand what her smile meant.

Nyanta was a resident of Akiba, and when it came to the vicious malice the People of the Earth held, he was as innocent as a child. In the next instant, that fact would be brought home to him.

It was a scintillating sword dance:

On one side, Mizufa, a warrior far above the People of the Earth; on the other, Nyanta, a Swashbuckler who wielded twin rapiers and was famed for being the fastest of the Adventurers.

The battle went on for three rounds, then four. Both sustained shallow cuts, but neither made a fatal mistake. Depending on how you looked at it, they almost seemed like a perfectly synchronized team.

However, the end came suddenly.

“You Adventurers are strong, aren’t you? Yeah, you’re strong. Strong. It’s no good, though. —Your kindness will kill you. Your desire to save the People of the Earth will kill ’em! All right, what are you going to do about *that*?!”



Mizufa had exposed her white throat to the tips of Nyanta's blades.

Nyanta's swords didn't stop. The high-speed battle had stolen that leeway from him. Joy had appeared in the woman's eyes. There was no way he could kill her, and even if she did die, she'd be able to kill Nyanta with her death. She had a strange, malicious confidence that if she died, she'd be able to drag not Nyanta's body but his spirit along with her.

In the moment he understood this, fear ran up Nyanta's back.

This world was filled with death.

There were creatures that lived by breathing death. That terror trapped him.

Just before Nyanta skewered Mizufa's throat, Kazuhiko, the ally who'd charged through so many raids with him, grabbed his sword.

"Mizufa. It's over."

The woman had stepped forward in an overly familiar way, and Kazuhiko put out his left hand, stopping her.

His lips were tense, and only his eyes were turned toward Nyanta. He seemed to be making some sort of appeal.

"What do you think you're playing at?! You're just a guard, Kazuhiko! Did you forget the code of the Ten-Seats?!"

"Orders from Nureha. Plant Hwyaden just got orders from the very top. We're retreating. The maneuver's been canceled."

"Kazuhikocchi..."

Nyanta's former comrade's voice was like cold mud.

The tone of that voice alone was enough to make Nyanta not want to forgive the organization called Plant Hwyaden.

However, one of the people who led that group was Kazuhiko, and another was Indicus. In other words, Nyanta's old companions.

What had happened?

Loathing for the darkness he'd just touched in the Person of the Earth soldier

warred with worry for the onetime companion he was on the verge of losing.

Nyanta brooded over this, ashamed and irritable. “What is Plant Hwyaden thinking? Kazuhikocchi, what are you—”

“That’s enough hot air out of you.”

Mizufa nearly took a step forward, but in one motion, Kazuhiko drew his sword and slashed at her, and at Nyanta, too. The impact of the bright white blade went deep enough to crack the earth. It was probably the Assassin attack known as Extermination, but even to Nyanta’s eyes, its force was far from normal.

It went beyond the realm of the Adventurers.

“This could have been much worse, you know.”

“.....”

Sheathing his sword with a heavy, resonant sound, Kazuhiko turned his broad back on the speechless Nyanta. To Nyanta, it felt like the dark clouds that covered this world had come to his former companions in the Debauchery Tea Party as well.

“You get by without killing a Person of the Earth, Captain. And...”

“And...”

Kazuhiko gave a little smile. It was an ordinary smile, the kind that was heartrending when seen on a battlefield. The wry smile his old friend wore was the same as it had always been.

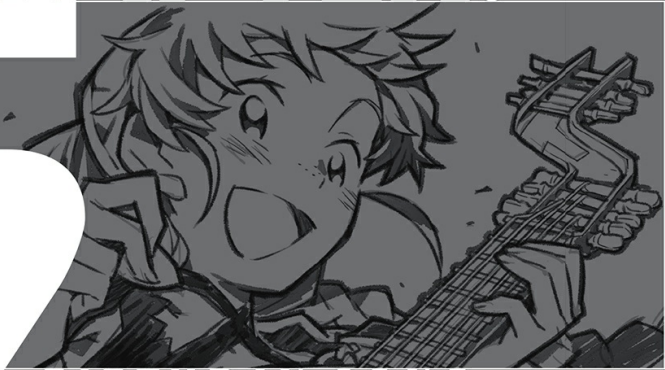
It was that smile that stopped Nyanta in his tracks, more than the sword.

Accepting the smile, like a riddle that had been handed to him with no answer, Nyanta stood stock-still in the forest for a very long time. He looked like a statue, and even after he no longer sensed any humans in the vicinity, he didn’t move.

Even when the sun set, even when the area sank into darkness, Nyanta couldn’t move an inch, not even to sheath his drawn sword. Even the moon, which rose after a little while, was unable to move him.

CHAPTER.

BIRTHDAY SONG



▶ NAME: ISUZU

▶ LEVEL: 57

▶ RACE: HUMAN

▶ CLASS: BARD

▶ HP: 5376

▶ MP: 5526

▶ ITEM 1:
[FLYING DOLPHIN]
A LUTE MARIELLE MADE, MODIFIED BY THE RODERICK TRADING CORPORATION. WIND-SPIRIT POWER RAISES ITS SOUND TRANSMISSION EFFICIENCY, EARTH-SPIRIT POWER IMPROVES ITS DURABILITY, AND A BALANCE OF FIRE AND WATER-SPIRIT POWERS PREVENTS HUMIDITY AND DRYNESS.

▶ ITEM 2:
[PLAIN OF A HUNDRED DANCING SONGS CAPE]
EXCLUSIVE BARD DEFENSIVE GEAR MADE FROM WOVEN CLOTH SPUN TOGETHER WITH FLOWERS AND POEMS. A MATERIAL THAT CAN BE OBTAINED FROM FLOWER FAIRIES THAT LOVE SONGS AND DANCES. WHEN ITS WEARER SINGS, SUPPORT SONGS' EFFECTS INCREASE.

▶ ITEM 3:
[NOMAD'S HAIR BAND]
A HAIR BAND MADE FROM COLORFUL CLOTH KNIT FROM DYED AND UNDYED WOOL. IT LOOKS SIMPLE, BUT NOT ONLY DOES IT BOOST THE EFFECT OF NOMAD SKILLS—IF THE PERSON WHO EQUIPS IT IS A BARD, IT ALSO SLIGHTLY BOOSTS THE EFFECTS OF SUPPORT SONGS.



► 1

“Mademoiselle Isuzu, Mademoiselle Isuzu.”

Rundelhaus had contacted her with a party telechat first, so he knew she was awake, but that didn't make it all right for him to just walk into a lady's boudoir, so he called at the door of the girls' room.

He'd received a report that wyverns had been sighted near the town.

Touya, Minori, and Serara said they were already headed for the reservoir to help defend the town. Rundelhaus had been ready to run to them, but they'd told him to meet up with Isuzu. The monsters hadn't invaded the boundaries of civilization yet, but under the circumstances, there was no telling what could happen. Meeting up with Isuzu first and going to join Touya's group together was probably the right decision. Rundelhaus felt that Minori wasn't the sort of girl who'd issue poorly conceived orders.

After a few moments, just as he raised his hand to knock again, the cheap-looking wooden door swung open, revealing the room's interior.

Isuzu had fastened her equipment to herself, and she nodded, ready, but Rundelhaus fell speechless.

Her face looked awful.

Her eyelids were swollen, and her nose was red, as if she'd rubbed it too much.

When he'd left her in the back garden that night, she'd been crying pearl-like tears. She'd probably continued crying when she was alone. Isuzu was kind, and Rundelhaus had indeed thought she might blame herself, so he'd also thought

he should stay near her despite her directive. However, he'd reconsidered, thinking that it might be presumptuous, and had gone away quietly. It had only been about fifteen hours since then. Rundelhaus had waited for dawn in his room without sleeping a wink.

That meant that Isuzu's tear-swollen face wasn't something he hadn't anticipated. Yet, even so, he found it hard to speak. There was a lump in his throat. Faced with this, he felt as if he'd done something terrible. Rundelhaus was the one who'd made Isuzu cry, and he'd left her when he should have stayed to dry her tears.

He didn't think it was the wrong decision, but of course that didn't make the pain go away. Needless to say, Isuzu's grief was clearly several times greater than his own.

"Rudy."

"Y-yes, Mademoiselle Isuzu."

"Quit looking dumb."

"What do you mean, dumb? Who's dumb?!"

"Hm."

Mouth set in a cross line, Isuzu pushed Rudy's shoulder, making him do an about-face, then pulled him down the inn's corridor.

"C'mon, let's go. Minori and the others are waiting!"

"I know. I'll walk on my own."

"Look sharp, Rudy."

You're the one who isn't looking sharp.

You look awful.

Here, wipe your face with this.

Rundelhaus swallowed all those words.

If he said anything like that, Isuzu would hit him with a fist more powerful than a Frost Spear, but that was only a very tiny part of the reason. It was because imagining himself saying those things and wiping away Isuzu's tears

had made his chest ache strangely.

Having left the inn at a trot, the pair quickly looked to either side, then hurried toward the northwest section of the city, as instructed. There were no figures on the road. The townspeople seemed to be hiding in their homes. As proof, shapes watched them through narrow gaps in the shutters and cracked doors.

Rundelhaus knew that feeling very well.

Before he left Nine-Tails, he'd been just like that. Even when you knew you didn't have the strength to stand against a disaster, you couldn't keep from peeking out at it. If you shut yourself up in your house, closed your eyes, and plugged your ears, it made the terrible things you imagined swell and grow, and that was really hard to take.

Without speaking to Rundelhaus, Isuzu set off at a jog. She seemed out of sorts, but Rundelhaus was relieved.

It showed him that she'd recovered from her depression of the previous night. Besides, for some reason, he could tell she wasn't as angry as she looked. It must be the magical telepathic ability peculiar to Adventurers: Sometimes Rundelhaus could tell exactly what Isuzu was thinking.

She looked angry right now, but she wasn't actually all that mad. She was troubled, or flustered, or sulking, or embarrassed; something along those lines. At times like this, he knew from experience that if he gave Isuzu practical advice—"Your nose is red," for example, or "You should go wash your face"—he'd get hit.

This was a point that was particularly worthy of note: Astonishingly, Isuzu would strike him even when she wasn't angry!

In fact, it happened faster when she wasn't mad.

He might have learned to read her feelings to some extent, but that didn't mean he was any faster at evading (and Sorcerers' defensive abilities were lower than Bards'). In any case, as a rule, he didn't understand her feelings at all. Rundelhaus had decided that, whether or not one was an Adventurer, this was based in the difference between the sexes, and had given up.

In any case, Isuzu jogged away, and Rundelhaus ran through the streets after her.

A sizzling, fizzing tension hung in the air. It was the atmosphere of combat.

“Rudy.”

“What is it, Mademoiselle Isuzu?”

“I feel kind of scared.”

That was a statement he had to agree with.

According to what Minori had said, the enemy was wyverns. Although they were powerful and their numbers were great, the Odysseia Knights had rushed them on the outskirts of the town, and the results of the charge were currently unknown. It wasn't yet clear which side would win, but either way, it would take time for the conclusion to appear.

No matter what outcome presented itself, it would be a while before it made its influence felt in this district, near the center of town. The fizzing tension seemed as if it might be an overreaction.

Rundelhaus concentrated on searching for the sword attacks he could hear in the distance.

Right beside him, Isuzu was listening hard, her expression serious. Her adorable, shell-like ears worked much better than his did, and they were able to probe the state of the battle.

“How is it?”

“It sounds all right. They aren't close, anyway.”

“I see.”

“Let's go, Rudy!”

“Oh—Mademoiselle Isuzu.” On reflex, Rundelhaus stopped her.

Isuzu turned back, looking puzzled. He searched for words to say to her, but couldn't find any. He gazed at her face, trying to think of what he should say to her, but since it was so sudden, he came up empty. All he felt was that the longer he looked at Isuzu, the crosser she got.

“Um?”

“Right. Mademoiselle Isuzu.”

Rundelhaus threw out his chest. At this point, as a guy, he should probably do his best to dispel the unease of a girl disturbed by the atmosphere of battle.

“I know the sudden monster attack has made you anxious, Mademoiselle Isuzu. However, while the Adventurer Rundelhaus Code is here, you have nothing to fear! My Orb of Lava is sure to protect the town of Saphir, and you, and Mademoiselles Minori and Serara! In any case, we are a party seasoned by combat! This hardship is no more than a modest trial... And so, Mademoiselle Isuzu, have no fear!!”

She hit him.

Even though he hadn't been joking.

Still, the attack completely dispelled the haze that had hung over his heart.

His vision cleared, and even the things which had been clouded over for him were sharply visible. He'd probably managed to dispel the unease Isuzu felt, and because of that, at the same time, the dismal feeling inside Rundelhaus had disappeared as well. He didn't really know what he'd been holding inside or why he'd hesitated, but the fact of the matter was that his heart had grown lighter.

Unconsciously, he felt that this very lightness of heart was the Adventurers' nature. After all, it was the treasure he'd gained in the village of Choushi.

At the time, he'd thought that there was a secret to Adventurer strength. Adventurers' combat abilities were many times greater than those of the People of the Earth, and he'd assumed that they had some sort of secret magic or tool that they used to develop those abilities. He couldn't tell Isuzu and the others, but when he'd resolved to participate in the summer training camp, Rundelhaus had been planning to steal that secret method from the Adventurers.

But he'd had it wrong.

The Adventurers didn't have any secrets like that.

They were strong because that was the sort of beings they were, and it seemed to be more like a curse than a secret or any sort of training. They were unable to return to their home, and in exchange for that tragedy, they'd been given their current combat abilities. Rundelhaus thought one would have to call that a curse, not a blessing.

Then, too, Adventurers were noble people.

Just as they'd done for him, they never abandoned those who were struggling. That was the sort of Adventurer Rundelhaus had wanted to become.

During the battle for Choushi, when he'd clung to the Dire Wolf and shoved his gauntlets into its mouth, his heart had been light.

There had been no terror or regret in it. Only his companions and his mission.

Shiroe, the man who'd saved him, had said that Rundelhaus was already an Adventurer—that by then, his heart had been one of theirs.

Rundelhaus thought that he'd had an Adventurer's soul, and that was why Shiroe had come along.

Just as it had then, his heart grew lighter. The fist Isuzu had landed on his forehead hadn't hurt at all.

It had struck him with a *thunk*, and it seemed to be a method of Adventurer telepathy that Rundelhaus hadn't yet learned. Masses of heat were born with every heartbeat, and he could tell with clarity that they were racing around inside his chest, carrying energy throughout his body.

"Mademoiselle Isuzu!"

"Honestly. What now?"

Isuzu turned around, pouting, and Rundelhaus waved his staff at her. Invisible mana gave the power of the wind a physical shape, forming a shining blue force field. The force field raised the two of them about ten centimeters off the ground.

"Whoa! Wh-what is this?!"

"It's the flying spell Lark's Shoes. At my skill level, we can't run through the sky, but it will ignore bad roads and increase our movement speed."

“Whoops—! Um, so... You mean it’ll make us faster?”

Isuzu stepped lightly, testing the transparent platform with her toes, and grinned. Her eyelids were still puffy, but her smile was like a rainbow after rain.

With this, they’d be able to go to the outskirts of town, to the battlefield, or absolutely anywhere. When they broke into a run, their progress was smoother and several times faster than it had been earlier.

Rundelhaus felt deeply satisfied by his choice of magic. It was a spell that demanded prodigious study and vast talent. At this point, unfortunately, he wasn’t able to exercise its full potential. It was all he could do to levitate Isuzu and himself slightly and get them to the battlefield. However, if Isuzu’s smile was his reward, it wasn’t bad at all.

“Nice, Rudy.”

“But of course, Mademoiselle Isuzu. I *am* a genius Sorcerer, after all!”

“Don’t get full of yourself!”

Even as they bantered, the two of them glided along, roars raining down around them alongside striking metallic echoes. It was the wyverns. Even though they weren’t out of the town yet, a wyvern wounded by arrows dropped out of the sky, shearing away the wall of a ruined building. At its roar, Rundelhaus knew something with certainty.

The fizzing tension he’d felt up until now had belonged to the townspeople. It wasn’t his own. The anxiety and fear of people with nowhere to run had been clinging to the two of them. That was what Rundelhaus had sensed as eyes trained upon him.

However, at this point, it was no hindrance whatsoever.

One step ahead of him, a girl was running through space.

Her braid looked like a brown tail, and Rundelhaus leapt with all his might to keep from losing to it. He’d manifested a fireball near his hand, and he condensed the energy of its magic, then released it all at once. Flare Arrow joined the tip of Isuzu’s spear and ran the wounded wyvern through.

Fearlessly, Rundelhaus and Isuzu joined the defense of Saphir.

“I’m going, too! Wolfie!”

Serara broke into a run, worried about Touya, who’d been sent flying on the front line. However, without sparing a glance for her, Minori looked up at Roe2. Technically, Touya and Serara might need her support, but she chose to stay where she was.

She knew instinctively that this conversation with Roe2 was important and that she would probably never get another chance to have it.

Abruptly, her vision grew sharper, and a premonition whispered insistently in her ears. It was the same agitation she’d felt when she’d run off to defend Choushi from the goblins. The same feeling she’d had when she’d decided to support Shiroe at the Production Guild Liaison Committee.

Something had come to Minori and presented her with a choice. Minori held her breath and, inwardly, chose to take a great leap. She might be wrong, and she might regret it. However, she had to choose. She opened her eyes wide. The assumption that she couldn’t do anything was a chain that bound her. She’d learned that earlier in Hamelin. It had been an expensive lesson. For that reason, she’d never forget it.

Touya had run off toward the battlefield. It might not be the same one, but Minori had to stand on her own battlefield.

Minori instinctively felt that her most important opponent was the one currently watching her with great interest.

“You’re sure you don’t need to go over there, Minori?”

Swallowing, Minori nodded.

“I see. That’s the second time you’ve heard that question, isn’t it?”

Minori nodded again. Roe2 gazed at her.

Behind the round glasses, her eyes were intelligent, and Minori knew she was reflected in their luster. It might have been those eyes that made her think

Roe2 looked a bit like Shiroe. Her eye color and the shape of her eyebrows were very similar to his. Even more than the shape of those eyes, that pensive expression reminded Minori of her teacher.

“.....”

“.....”

The two watched each other wordlessly.

Even with the tension in the air, Minori wasn't the least bit frightened anymore.

This was very odd, and she thought about the reason. This was an Adventurer she didn't know, someone she'd only met a few days ago. Because the woman spoke candidly, she was easy to warm up to, but considering what she'd said a few moments ago, even if she viewed it favorably, she had to consider her an unknown.

It should have been all right to feel fear or alarm regarding someone like that, but although Minori felt tense, she couldn't feel any of those other things. The fact that she felt this way struck her as odd, and she remembered it.

Abruptly, Roe2 raised her eyes and looked in the direction of the battlefield.

Following her gaze, Minori saw an ugly fight. The broken battle lines had made systematic combat an impossibility. She didn't know where the Moving Temple was, but members of the Odysseia Knights who'd probably resurrected there charged indiscriminately at Nightshades and wyverns alike.

Ordinarily, the level difference should have given the Knights an overwhelming advantage, but the decrease in abilities that followed on the heels of resurrection meant they couldn't exercise their true power. Not only that, they weren't even attempting to. They just attacked blindly, killing and being killed, with no regard for aggro management by the Warrior classes or status management by the Recovery classes.

It was a chaotic war of attrition, a lunatic battlefield.

Confusion she'd never seen even in this other world, let alone on peaceful Earth, unfolded before her eyes.

“Awful, isn’t it?”

After she’d nodded in agreement, Minori realized it had been Roe2 who’d spoken.

“That’s really ugly. I’ve never been there, but I think hell’s probably a lot like this. There’s not a single thing to be gained here. Getting involved is terribly risky and lacking in merit. I really can’t understand why they’re doing this... Not that I particularly want to. I doubt it would be possible to recoup the cost of doing so.”

Roe2 spoke to herself, in a voice that was unusually low for a woman’s.

Minori didn’t fully understand what she had said, but her tone seemed to resemble Shiroe’s somehow.

Roe2 and Minori gazed at the battlefield for a while.

A wyvern that had been dragged down to earth and was writhing around as if it had gone mad was killed, the Knight who’d killed it took a Nightshade’s black, flame-like spell in the back, and the confusion deepened.

“That’s not what I meant! Why are you so... There’s gotta be some other way, right, brother? Another way to fight, a better way—”

She heard Touya’s heartrending shout, physically struggling against something.

His voice reached Minori and Roe2 over the party chat. The yell was filled with anger, but what Minori felt was Touya’s sadness. She heard herself in it, the one that couldn’t do anything, that wasn’t *allowed* to do anything, because she was a child.

That’s not true, she wanted to tell him. *There are things you can do*. She was saying it to herself as well: There were things she could do. They might be little, trivial things, but she wouldn’t get discouraged over how small they were anymore.

In order to prove this, Minori kept gazing at Roe2.

Lately, the distance between her and Touya had been growing, and although Touya’s thoughts and feelings had once been as close to her own as nested

spoons, she understood them less and less often now. However, even so, they were twins. She understood Touya's anger. His wordless wail was grief for their own powerlessness. It was pure white rage at themselves for being mere children. As his twin, Minori knew this.

The world was far too big and powerful. It was so unfair, it was overwhelming, and it didn't care one bit about Minori and Touya's feelings. Everything was like massive construction equipment. It carried Minori and Touya along like a conveyor belt, taking them to the future whether or not they wanted to go, and that future consisted of nothing but being small and overawed. To Minori and Touya, that was how the world was.

At school, at home, and even when they walked down the street, there were far too few things that they had any real control over.

They could choose the color of their sneakers, for example, and the patterns on their notebooks. Sometimes they were able to put in requests for the dinner menu. However, not a single one of the important things was up to them. Not when they'd transferred schools. Not when they'd wanted to spend their birthday with their parents. Not when it came to making Touya's legs normal again.

Minori knew that Touya, who'd played the part of an obedient kid, had hated his own powerlessness twice as much as anyone else. Precisely because they'd been powerless, they'd tried to push themselves just that little bit further. Because they'd been helpless, they'd dreamed of having their own strength and had fallen into Hamelin's trap.

Because she understood Touya's wail, Minori gazed at Roe2 without wiping away her own falling tears.

"Touya is howling. Serara is casting Pulse Recovery on any Person of the Earth she can reach. Isuzu and Rundelhaus are on their way here, protecting the townspeople as they go. —And yet, even so, there's nothing to be done about this."

Roe2 gestured theatrically with her right hand, indicating the whole battlefield. Minori nodded in agreement. It was a fact, plain and simple. No matter how her heart ached, facts were facts.

When she saw this, Roe2 asked Minori a question.

“I’m going to ask you something, right here. I hope you’ll tell your answer, Minori.”

“My answer...?”

“Since you asked a question like that, you must have an answer, correct? What are you, Minori? And who am I? Where have I come from, and where am I going?”

The woman’s questions stopped the world.

The roar of the battlefield abruptly receded in Minori’s mind, turning into something like white noise in the background.

Minori thought about what those questions meant.

She had no idea who Roe2 really was. Shiroe, who was an outstanding *Elder Tales* player, might have been acquainted with her. Alternatively, he could have used his excellent powers of reasoning to solve the mysteries that surrounded Roe2. However, Minori couldn’t do it. She *did* think there was some sort of secret here, but she had absolutely no idea what it was. Something about the atmosphere Roe2 wore made it seem as if she had come from very far away. That was about all she could say.

Even so, as Minori gazed at the woman, she searched for the answer in her eyes.

She thought not about the parroted question, but about the intent behind it. She thought about the meaning of Roe2’s intelligent smile. She thought about her wish.

And in the midst of that question, Minori found herself.

Roe2 wasn’t asking about Minori’s insights regarding herself. Who was Roe2? What was the truth? Right now, in this moment, even those questions grew less important.

Minori realized the real reason she was so calm: She liked Roe2. She’d felt close to her from the very beginning. She’d wanted to hear what she had to say, and she’d wanted to know what she was thinking. That was why she hadn’t

been afraid.

She wanted to get closer to Roe2. That was a strange emotional development.

“That’s not true. I don’t know what you guys think, but this world is—”

“Like that’s even possible. We’re always—”

As she heard the pair’s yells across the party chat, music drifted down with them.

In the midst of a world where wyverns fell from the sky in slow motion, she heard a nostalgic melody. It was Isuzu’s voice, singing as if she was desperately gathering up thoughts that were on the verge of being shredded and stitching them together.

She hadn’t thought she wanted to get closer to the woman because she knew everything about her.

Minori had started wanting to know who she really was *after* wanting to get close to her.

She hadn’t wanted to be born because this world was fair, because everything was right and brimming with benevolence.

She’d set out on a journey in order to meet something she didn’t yet know.

In other words, the self Minori had encountered was her own wish. Roe2 had been kind enough to ask about the shape of Minori’s wish. It was possible that even the guess about “asking out of kindness” was no more than wishful thinking on Minori’s part. Still, simply having the thought made her feel a gentle light.

The time for solving riddles was past.

All Minori had to do was say her wish aloud, just as it was.

For that reason, she told Roe2 the one answer she needed to say at this point:

“I am Shiroe’s apprentice. You are our big sister, Roe2. You came from far away, and you’ll go far away again, but here, right now, you’re with us.”

Roe2’s eyes went wide, startled.

She really did look a lot like the person Minori loved.

“Elegant Act!”

Isuzu, who’d sent a Nightshade Servant flying with a close-range attack skill, detected a counterstrike through the delicate wave that surrounded her body like a cape and spun to dodge it.

The evasive maneuver had opened up a line of fire, and a ray of flame traveled down it. The Nightshade Servant was already wounded, and after a moment’s delay, it turned into iridescent bubbles and vanished.

“What on earth *are* these things?”

“I don’t know. They sure showed up suddenly, though.”

Isuzu and Rundelhaus had been making for the outskirts of the town, where Minori and the others were waiting. That said, Minori had said that the battle was still far off, so they’d taken her at her word and helped with the evacuation in town, with the result that they were quite late. While they were doing this and that, for some reason, the northern side of town seemed to have been overrun by confused fighting.

For the moment, there weren’t many enemies, and very few of them were big ones, so even with just the two of them, they were managing somehow.

If they stuck to defeating individual enemies, a Bard-Sorcerer combination had solid attack power and wasn’t bad at all.

There was also the fact that Rundelhaus had ended up in high spirits after a look at Isuzu’s face and was fighting even more energetically than he usually did. Having anyone see her disgraceful, tear-swollen face was the last thing Isuzu wanted, but she chased the shame out of her mind. There was too much to think about, and she was in the middle of a battle.

The truth was that, although Isuzu had treated Rundelhaus harshly to camouflage her irritation, she hadn’t even begun to prepare herself. She’d blown off steam, and it was true that her feelings were lighter now, but the question she’d agonized over all night wasn’t that simple. It was the first “real”

problem Isuzu had ever faced. It wasn't the sort of thing she could produce an answer for on demand.

For that very reason, she couldn't just leave it alone, either. She had really, seriously worried about it. Many wishes went to and fro in her heart, messing her up inside. The truth was that even she wanted to take that first step.

Admitting it to herself was scary.

Even now, when she was fighting, when she let her mind go that way, the thought made her want to scream.

In a word, Isuzu was an ordinary high school girl. She was a supporting character, the type you could find anywhere.

She knew she'd be a laughingstock if she tried anything overambitious. Her skinny, pipelike arms and legs, her obstinate hair, and the freckles that wouldn't disappear no matter how well she cared for her skin all seemed to be warning her to remember her place.

"Honestly! What a mess!"

"What's wrong, Mademoiselle Isuzu?"

She'd accidentally grumbled to herself out loud, and Rundelhaus, ahead of her, turned around.

"No, it's nothing—ack!"

"Hm?"

"That's dangerous, Rudy. This way, over here!"

Isuzu pulled Rundelhaus's arm, taking him over to a ruined building off to the side. Rundelhaus's MP had fallen to 30 percent before she'd realized it. Cautiously looking from side to side, the pair went into the leaf-covered ruin. The walls on the second floor had fallen, leaving only pillars, and they sat down with their backs against the rubble.

"I wonder if we'll be okay here, enemy-wise."

"I didn't sense any Nightshades around this building. I'd wager we'll be all right for a little while." As he answered, Rundelhaus pinched his chin between

his fingers, looking pensive.

Of the twelve main classes in *Elder Tales*, Sorcerers had the greatest firepower. However, in exchange, they consumed MP ferociously, and no one could have called them fuel-efficient. Even if you ignored the demerit of increased aggro, the more attack power they wanted, the faster they ran through MP, so it was absolutely necessary to take short breaks like this between battles.

Since they had Isuzu's support song, Rundelhaus's MP would recover in five minutes or so. That said, even if it was only for a few minutes, getting this type of rest was pretty difficult. If a monster found them, the break would be interrupted and they'd end up fighting another battle immediately. If that happened, his MP would hit bottom, and they might even be wiped out.

Even if they were only resting for a few minutes, it was best to make sure the area was safe and, if possible, to get out of sight.

Since they'd done lots of this during group training, the pair was very used to it.

"Mademoiselle Isuzu, are you having any trouble? You aren't out of breath?"

"Mm. I'm fine. What about you, Rudy?"

Rundelhaus was a show-off, but he was a Magic Attack class, and Isuzu, who was a Weapon Attack class, had better stamina. Rundelhaus knew this, so even as he asked, he was consciously getting his breathing under control. He might not look it, but he was very competitive. Isuzu knew that he trained on his own, in addition to their basic training.

In the distance, explosions and ruptures echoed. They were sounds unique to large-scale magic.

They strained their ears to listen to them. It was the noise of the battlefield.

Apparently things had turned into a complete melee. In addition to the ocean side, pillars of flame were going up all over the north side of the town, and the ring of steel echoed. Since the Nightshade Servants were the same size as humans, they could break through the front line, and the wyverns used their flight capabilities to lay waste to the battlefield. Defense had been impossible

from the very beginning. That was the only way to put it.

Through the party chat, they heard Touya's scream.

"People live here!"

At Touya's voice, she felt Rundelhaus clench his fists. Minori's brother was right: Saphir was a People of the Earth town, and lots of them lived in it.

Rundelhaus had become an Adventurer, but he hadn't stopped being a Person of the Earth. Isuzu knew this. She'd known it during the defense of Choushi, too, but she hadn't really understood it.

Back then, all she'd been worried about was protecting Rundelhaus's life. When Rundelhaus tried to dash out recklessly, she'd thought that he was a young man who didn't think nearly enough, but she'd been wrong. He'd been trying to protect the People of the Earth, *his* people. He'd been trying to fight, not as a fool who didn't fear losing his life, but as a hero who didn't hesitate to risk it.

After all, that was the type of Adventurer Rundelhaus had wanted to become. In the village of Choushi, he'd been an Adventurer even before he signed that contract with Shiroe.

"Spread out! Use the buildings as shields!"

"Why?! Aren't you our protectors, sir Knights?"

"Shut up!"

The screams from the avenue were far too ghastly. The Odysseia Knights seemed to have finally abandoned even the pretense of defending the town. It was clear that, now that the fighting had grown this confused, they didn't have the leeway to protect what lay behind them.

She couldn't tell them to protect it. The Knights weren't being paid to be guardians. They'd just happened to be in this city; they stayed all over, in all sorts of places. Isuzu didn't know, but they probably had goals of their own. It wasn't okay to selfishly look up to them and expect things from them, and to demand their protection because an enemy had come. Not even if Adventurers were immortal.

However, next to Isuzu, Rundelhaus's fists were trembling. He was biting his lip, glaring at his remaining MP as it crept back up.

It's not suicide. Nobody dies in this world. That means there's no such thing as suicide. We want to go back.

Isuzu heard that yell across the telechat.

It was a lone man's scream, and it seemed to pierce her heart. It was a straightforward confession of homesickness: He just wanted to return to their old world. Isuzu wanted to make it happen for him. However, at the same time, she thought, *What an awful thing to say*. People—the People of the Earth—certainly did die in this world.

Isuzu could still hear the sound of the surf from the night of the gig.

Hadn't the hands that had waved in response to her clumsy song belonged to People of the Earth?

When they'd cheered, what had their shining eyes been trying to tell her?

"Mademoiselle Isuzu."

"Rudy?"

The words that had slipped through his gritted teeth were forceful, and they seemed to be bearing up under something, but they cut off after just one phrase: "Even so, we're..."

What had he wanted to say? *Even so, we're alive, or Even so, we're here?* Isuzu didn't know. In all likelihood, Rundelhaus didn't know, either.

His eyes were as wide as if he were glaring out across the battlefield, holding tears he couldn't hide.

Rundelhaus, who'd held his head high even in mortal combat, and who'd smiled a little even as he was about to lay down his life, was clenching his teeth and fighting back tears. Those tears weren't for himself. They were tears for the injustice the People of the Earth were enduring. His comrades, who had been attacked by calamitous monsters, had counted on a group of Adventurers who had coldly abandoned them, and they were being hurt. That wasn't all: The Odysseia Knights didn't even see the People of the Earth as human.

Rundelhaus's fists were clenched in anger. His people were fragile, but that didn't make it all right for Adventurers to treat them any way they pleased. However, Rundelhaus didn't even have anyone to file a complaint with. Even now that he was an Adventurer, that hadn't changed a bit. How many more times would he feel like this? Probably too many to count.

Even so, he wanted to stand tall. Wanting to live courageously had nothing to do with strength on the battlefield. It was a problem of how one lived. Isuzu thought that all People of the Earth probably shared that wish.

That's right, she thought.

I was...lucky, wasn't I? Lucky to be born on Earth, lucky to be Dad's daughter.

After all, even when I was sad, even when things hurt, I had lots of songs.

Isuzu shut her eyes tightly, asking herself a question.

The feelings that had rampaged all last night, the ones she'd kept a lid on, finally overflowed.

Isuzu had been saved.

She'd been saved repeatedly.

By sad songs in sad times.

By fun songs in fun times.

By brave songs when she was feeling brave.

They'd flooded the world around her.

This place is just too awful, isn't it?

I really have to complain to the gods about this. Things should never be this bad. No songs? Only forty-two of them... I can't stand that.

She'd never even imagined that such a place existed.

Ever since she was born, it had seemed natural for songs to be there. They'd been so close to her that she hadn't realized how fortunate she was.

Not being able to sing when you want to cry? That's not right.

Not having any songs for when you're angry is just too sad.

Having no songs to use to tell off the gods isn't fair.

Sunrises, clear blue days, crimson evenings, and starry nights. All the places Isuzu had walked and every moment she'd lived through had overflowed with music.

Sounds had been everywhere, like countless shining stars.

The People of the Earth...don't have that.

Isuzu threw down the spear she'd been holding. It rolled away with a metallic clatter, but she didn't even look at it. Instead, she readied Flying Dolphin, which she'd been carrying on her back. Her tears made it hard to see, and she scrubbed them away with her sleeve, then strummed the strings roughly.

Isuzu's favorite instrument emitted a menacing tone.

She was sure it felt the same way she did.

Flying Dolphin was shouting: *This sucks. I don't believe this. It's wrong!*

It was wrong to have your feelings betrayed, to be unfairly kept from appealing, to be unable to smile, to not have music. The People of the Earth should live *gallantly*. Being weak or strong had nothing to do with it. That was what songs were for. The People of the Earth should sing at the top of their lungs and tell off the Adventurers. They should protest this misguided world.

Isuzu was just a high school girl, but what was wrong was wrong. Whether she was an imposter or not didn't matter anymore.

"Mademoiselle Isuzu...?"

"We're going, Rudy."

"Huh?"

Her heart was on fire. She thought, *I'll never forgive this.*

She was going to pick a fight with the gods who'd only made a bare handful of songs before they cast this world aside. It was the biggest resolution Isuzu had ever made. Something she loved and had always cherished had been held in contempt. She swore she wouldn't stop, never, not until she or the gods were completely exhausted and dropped in their tracks—no, not until the gods cried

and apologized.

There was absolutely no need for Rundelhaus to clench his fists and be at a loss for words.

“To go fight.”

“Fight?”

Startled, Rundelhaus echoed her words back at her. Ignoring him, Isuzu looked down over the wide avenue through the ruined building’s crumbling floor. Even the idea of using the stairs was irritating to her now.

The first stroke was a warm-up chord.

“Mademoiselle Isuzu?!”

Like a glissando sliding down the strings, Isuzu leapt out into the dusty air.

Rundelhaus, Touya, Minori, Serara.

Isuzu herself.

They didn’t have a single reason to hang their heads.

► 4

“Keh-heh-heh-heh. Ah-ha. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha...”

Roe2, who’d looked startled, bent nearly double and laughed for a while. Then she patted Minori’s head, gently.

“Here, on this battlefield, that’s your answer?”

“On this battlefield, that is my answer.”

The eyes behind the round glasses narrowed softly in a smile. “Even if nothing changes?”

“It means there are some things we can change.”

Roe2’s question hadn’t been intended to make her give up. Minori took it as encouragement.

“Now, at a time when Touya’s huddled up?”

“He’s just resting for a little while. He’ll get up again soon.”

For that reason, Minori was able to answer without hesitation. Predictions of indefinite misfortune were a hammer meant to temper her blade of blue steel. They were the ring of the anvil, so that Minori could obtain the strength she wanted.

“I doubt your words will get through, Minori.”

“But we’re together right now.”

It might be no good. There was a possibility that it would fail.

Still, that mattered a lot less than the fact that she was able to make an attempt now.

Some sort of important choice had been made. It wasn’t that Roe2 had presented the options and Minori had chosen. Roe2 had helped with an answer Minori had carved inside herself. Like the time she’d determined to protect Choushi, and the time she’d decided to act as the rear guard for the Libra Festival, the resolution had welled up from deep inside her and had dyed her in its colors.

A premonition of change set Minori’s heart trembling. It wasn’t a vague assumption. It would truly change her, and had changed the world. Just as she’d experienced before, her vision was rapidly recolored, starting at her feet, and in the midst of it all, Minori gazed at Roe2.

She held out a hand to the woman. She’d been given permission to reach out.

Minori carefully stored Roe2’s kindness away, deep inside herself.

This experience mingled with Shiroe’s words in her and became the root of a new, great tree. She knew this quite clearly.

“I heard the word ‘please.’”

“Yes.”

“Right. Good, Minori. Fine. I am your big sister, after all.”

“Yes!”

“Summon!”

Backlit by the evening sun, Roe2 waved an arm casually, and a powerful magic circle appeared.

The Pale Horse came running up. From where she sat astride it, Roe2 held out a hand to Minori. She took it; it was noticeably tepid.

Startling at the thoroughbred’s energetic movements, Minori clung on tightly. But Roe2 spoke to her merrily: “True. I seem to have overlooked that. We have a duty as those who lead the way. It would be very uncool of us to shake off the hands you’d stretched out to us. Yes, ‘uncool.’ I’m glad that word was in my brother’s vocabulary—we really should live gallantly.”

With the sound of powerful hoofbeats, the Pale Horse raced through the air.

Minori was so taken aback by its true abilities—which it hadn’t shown once while it was pulling the cart—that she couldn’t even open her mouth.

“Big sisters don’t abandon little sisters. I’ll internalize that rule. I’m probably the first Traveler to stand beside you. I didn’t think this would happen, but I feel quite cheerful.”

Minori burned those words into her heart.

Unfortunately, she didn’t understand their meaning in the slightest.

However, every single one was a piece of some important secret.

Without being told, Minori assigned herself the role of delivering them to Shiroe. Right now, Minori was in a special, reborn world; in this world, meetings were part of an important secret ceremony, and they had special meaning. Even now, she could feel Touya’s bitter grief so keenly it hurt, but her heart danced at the premonition of a storm that would blow all of it away.

“The larger element clusters grow, the more stable they are, but their behavior becomes deterministic. That’s true for countries, and for planets, and for the Milky Bridge. They also begin to let tiny pieces fall.”

An iron pole fell toward them, but the Pale Horse knocked it flying, not even bothering to go around it.

“It’s only natural for all people to wish for happiness. However, that’s also the

origin of sadness. For example, in Theldesian history, take the alvs, who shook off their former neighbors' hands, and the humans who destroyed those alvs. Individual anguish is truth, but errors of misunderstanding are compounded, and when they become too great for individuals to manage, they sear the world. Grief, anger, and despair are poisons released into the world."

Roe2's words were mild, but they held the ring of sublime wisdom, something like the echo of a memory keeper relating a legend of irreparable destruction.

"You don't understand, do you?"

Behind Roe2, Minori shook her head.

She didn't want to pretend she had understood.

"Your words are inconvenient things, aren't they? This restriction-riddled protocol is dragging down the inference engine's maximum. You can't even construct proper clouds, and everything you do is peppered with loss. You don't even have a method for stably expanding clusters. You live in the midst of this unfair isolation, as if you were in the Stone Age. That's awful. It's just too much."

There was no accusation in her voice. No pity, either. Only understanding and empathy.

Her cloak fluttered in the wind, and Minori squeezed it tightly.

"But Empathiom is transmitted. So much so that those of us who are suffering from a lack of resources don't understand it. This is how you do things, isn't it?"

An enormous explosion went up.

It was probably a phoenix's suicide attack. The Pale Horse Minori and Roe2 rode charged straight through the middle of the roiling flames. At that point, Minori was finally able to see the state of her surroundings. There was fighting. Fighting everywhere.

Skillfully maneuvering her summoned horse, Roe2 destroyed wyverns and Nightshade Servants the whole way, brandishing the true power of a level-90 Adventurer.

Minori cast Purification Barriers. She cast them on People of the Earth and on

Odysseia Knights.

Yet even as the rapidly changing scenery and battlefield kept her on her toes, Minori came to a curious conclusion.

What she was casting right now were countless barrier spells. They were the foundation of Kannagi healing, barriers to halt falling HP. It was one of the major spell systems from which battles were composed.

Minori had wanted to make them into something that wasn't a combat technique.

She wanted them to be like water to the thirsty and the possibility of rescue for People of the Earth who were fleeing from the flames. For the Odysseia Knights, who were swinging their swords as if they'd gone mad, she wanted them to be a small reminder that their bodies were precious.

In other words, they were Minori's hope, her ego: She wanted to protect all life, to put an end to this. With the wish that that ego would become a prayer, Minori kept casting Purification Barrier to the limits of its recast time.

The confusion of the battlefield seemed endless.

Several times, she saw Serara and Touya. Both were still fighting.

In the midst of the dizzying melee, Minori was on the verge of grasping something mysterious. It was the "full control encounter" she'd been chasing ever since she'd heard about it from Shiroe, but it seemed to have been expanded in places. The People of the Earth parents and children who thanked her over and over as they fled, the knights who knelt as if they were exhausted—they weren't Minori's friends, but in this moment, they were companions who were sharing this place with her.

As Shiroe had shown her several times, in the midst of a mental world without clouds or conjectures, Minori felt as if she'd heard their wordless cries.

They were cries of hatred for this place that brimmed with sorrow, and cries of longing that wished for better choices.

If Minori had used her own awkward words to express them, she would have had to call them prayers of entreaty.

“Little brothers and sisters!” Roe2 called out loudly.

She’d raised her Staff of the Wise Horned Owl high in the air, and white light was drawn to it. With a smirk, she made a mischievous announcement.

“Your big sister will not abandon you! The first friends I made in this world are angry at this place, which generates only sadness. A ruined princess who was once unable to understand or be understood and was abandoned is screaming inside me.”

Touya, who was standing in the rubble and crossing swords with a knight, abruptly looked up.

Rundelhaus, who was encasing countless wyverns in coffins of ice, turned around.

Drawn by Wolfie’s gaze, Serara lifted her head, bewildered.

Isuzu, who was singing without bothering to wipe her tears away, saw white wings spread as if to enfold the town.

It was the white of a snowfall that covered everything.

“Thou who hast broken thine contract, walk with me. Sword Princess: Al Quinjé!”

Roe2’s summoning spell activated with a flash of light that illuminated the area.

Her summoned servant, Princess Lace, revealed her true form. Minori thought it was probably the Combat Skill Summoning known as Sword Princess, a woman holding a harp, but it was completely different from the spell she knew from Shiroe’s classes.

The spirit’s face was covered by a veil-like sealing cloth, and she couldn’t see her expression, but she felt a tranquility woven with sadness. Radiating a divine light, the beautiful woman with the harp raised her arm in a gesture that seemed to trace Roe2’s, layering the sound of her harp over Isuzu’s song.

In the midst of the notes emanating from the legendary Ruquinjé’s harp, Roe2 looked decidedly proud.

She kept strumming the strings intently.

She yelled enough to make her throat hoarse.

She didn't care whether she was for real or a fake. Isuzu was singing all the songs she knew.

She ran and ran, racing down the street. Right now, she was turning into eighth notes and bursting in the crimson evening sunlight. An arched quadruplet, a stroked long-tone chord. Isuzu's footsteps were a snare, and her heart was a bass drum.

Isuzu sang, letting her Bard Style—reinforced endurance do the heavy lifting. The repertoire she played became rainbow-colored melodies that filled the air.

Dirge of the Captured Lion!!

The torrent of a rippling scale froze a group of Nightshade Servants as if they were mechanical dolls who'd run out of oil. Isuzu didn't even glance at them: She knew her partner would slip in to fill the empty solo part.

"Orb of Lava!"

The violent riff wasn't melodious; it was more like a drum solo. By the time she'd transitioned through an interlude and into the song's C section, the Nightshade Servants were already turning iridescent.

She made eye contact with People of the Earth who were peeking out of a cellar like wild rabbit siblings.

The two of them were huddled close together, and they looked as if they were about to cry.

The town had been pulled into this battle, and there was no place for them to run. Their mouths hung half-open, wretchedly, seeming more stunned than angry or despairing. One of the Odysseia Knights fell on the road, turning iridescent right in front of them.

Just now, the world had probably collapsed in front of those siblings. The

hope that would have saved them had fallen.

Isuzu slammed a melody into the scene.

I can't do anything, but I'll sing.

She raised her voice.

She sang at an impossible volume, stinging her throat. But she didn't think about backing off.

I'm looking. I do see you.

She spun those feelings into a phrase.

There really wasn't a thing Isuzu could do. She could play her lute and scream, and that was all.

Evading the Nightshade Servants' spells, Isuzu nodded to the pair. The brother and sister ran away like rabbits. Feeling relieved, she sang a song at their backs.

Songs were trivial things. No matter how recklessly Isuzu raged, there was no guarantee that she'd be able to save those siblings. It was a fact that, in terms of the whole town, there had been lots of casualties. Even if Isuzu sang, she couldn't change that. She liked John Lennon, but she thought the idea of world peace through music was ridiculous.

The music that had saved Isuzu, the famous songs by great performers, probably couldn't do anything that big.

That awareness was endlessly bitter, and it wounded Isuzu with a weight that was completely different from when she'd poked fun at it in a peacetime world. Even Isuzu's father's guitar couldn't save the world. Not even the songs of Japan's King of Rock Kiyoshiro could do that, and Isuzu herself certainly couldn't.

But that was only natural.

Even Isuzu, an ordinary high school girl, knew this.

However, she'd never thought about why they raised their fists in the air. She'd thought it might just be some sort of fad.

Now she felt as if she understood it a little.

It was a bluff, a show of bravado. They raised their fists because if they didn't, they felt as if they'd lose heart. When they played, it was so they could scream, *I'm right here!* They sang to tell people, *It's okay; I see you.* Songs were fleeting exchanges: *I know you. I know what you're feeling. It's all getting through to me.*

So what if you lost?

So what if you couldn't be saved?

If you got discouraged over stuff like that, you wouldn't need songs in the first place.

In order to stand and fight again, songs were necessary.

Throughout Isuzu's life, music had held her close.

At times when nobody understood her, it felt as though music did. On lonely nights when she was all by herself, the ballads she heard from her music pod had seemed as if they were about her. When she was happy, old rock numbers took her for drives down endless coastal highways.

Even as she was surrounded by a host of songs, Isuzu hadn't really understood singers.

Now she did. She was sure they'd been trying to tell her, at the top of their lungs, *I know how you feel. I'm feeling the same way right now, as I sing. Don't let 'em get you down. You can do it!* After all, there wasn't much else they could do. Isuzu's songs were powerless, but her spear was just about as helpless. She knew it wouldn't save this world.

Still, she didn't stop.

After all, she'd started running because she was picking a fight with the gods.

Enveloped by Rundelhaus's magic, she raced through the streets with winged shoes.

She was running to her companions, who were waiting for her help. To Touya, who'd raised his fist against unfairness and been sent flying by it. Leaping onto a glacier-like spell that Rundelhaus had cast, the two of them ran.

Even now, she couldn't say she had any special talent.

When she sang with all her might, her voice wasn't transparent enough. Her fingertips only chased after the melody, and sometimes they stumbled. She was fully aware of it. For that reason, she couldn't say she planned to become a pro. The mere thought of making music for a living scared her so much her knees went weak.

Still, Isuzu was sure she'd never forget this moment as long as she lived.

She wouldn't forget this evening, when she'd worked up reckless courage and started to sing.

She couldn't say she was going to be an artist, but she could guarantee that she'd love music her entire life. That was the best she could do, and in fact, it was enough.

With an explosion that sounded as if the heavens were roaring in anger, lightning ran across the sky. Rundelhaus erased a layered magic circle with a wave of his arm and ran up beside Isuzu. The young man couldn't possibly know about her secret resolution, but his profile warmed her heart.

Rundelhaus had said from the very beginning that he wanted to become an Adventurer, that he wanted to be like the Adventurers. He hadn't meant the class, but the way they'd lived. Even if the occupation of Adventurer really wasn't worth the cost, he probably wouldn't care one bit. This blond guy, who'd chosen to live a certain way to fight injustice, had always known the answer Isuzu had finally managed to reach.

...No. Rudy pulled me closer to it.

She remembered her father's faint, mocking smile, the words he'd seemed to use to inspire her in a roundabout way.

Now that she thought about it, those words hadn't been directed at her alone. They'd been a promise a musician—one who'd harbored bitterness and regret, but had still resolved to spend his whole life making a living with music—had made to himself.

It was just like Dad said. I didn't have talent. Worrying about whether or not I had talent meant it wasn't rock at all.

A little laugh bubbled up inside her.

“Isuzuuu!!”

Their group had grown. Nodding to Serara, who’d come running up to them with a pure white wolf, she swung the head of her lute around. She heard the sounds of combat rising all over: weary sword strikes and attack spells chanted as if they’d lost sight of the way home. Even so, dyed by the fading light, the town was beautiful.

“Mademoiselle Serara!”

“Thank you!”

Serara stumbled clumsily two or three times. Even so, as Rundelhaus’s flight spell levitated her heels and she hopped up and down with an earnest expression, she laughed a little to hide her embarrassment. Isuzu felt warmth building inside her.

“It’s all right! I checked all the buildings from this point west with Wolfie’s nose. We’ve evacuated all the People of the Earth.”

Isuzu, who was still playing, wanted to shout for joy, but she put her feelings into the song instead.

Suddenly, light filled the sky.

The glow belonged to a spell they’d never seen before, and as the three of them stared in its direction, they immediately understood.

They’d heard the loud yell across the party chat, and they launched themselves into a run. Roe2 and Minori—and probably Touya—were under that light.

Isuzu understood Touya’s pain: *There’s no way in hell this world is the real thing*. Touya had heard that heartrending scream; Isuzu and the others had heard it as well, over the party chat. The voice had been excruciatingly sad, as though even the one who’d screamed it had been hurt by it.

That sorrow was Isuzu’s enemy.

Defeating it was her challenge to the gods.

She might not have a shot at winning, but she wouldn’t give up without a fight. Touya was out there, beneath that light.

"Mister, get back!"

"Shut up! Don't get in the way. This is the Odysseia Knights' fight."

"I'm not backing down! Echo Rebound! I'm not gonna give up on you, mister!"

"You're just a kid! What do you know, anyway?!"

She heard Touya's scream. It was coming closer. The sound of that voice relieved Isuzu, and she and Rundelhaus exchanged nods.

"It's okay now."

"Right!"

"Touya hasn't lost!"

"Right."

He was probably all torn up. He probably hadn't managed to persuade the Odysseia Knights, either.

Still, Touya hadn't stayed crouched in the rubble! He'd stood up, latched on again, and was fighting alongside the Knights.

As Serara had said, that meant he hadn't lost at all. *Let's go save him right away*, Isuzu thought. *Perfect! Bring it on.*

"Touya! Don't slip up until I get there! Rundelhaus Code, Adventurer, is coming to your aid!!"

At Rundelhaus's shout, Isuzu smiled a little.

His energy had skyrocketed the moment he'd heard Touya's voice. Like lightning, he'd switched over to his aggressive self. The mature-looking young man who worried about Isuzu was generally cute, but as he was now, Rundelhaus was strikingly manly. If she let go of his leash, he was sure to sprint all the way to the horizon.

I'm just the same, Isuzu thought. Like him, she wanted to run flat out: Just a bit farther, just a little longer, and they'd be there.

"Knock it off or I'll turn you into Onslaught fodder."

"Hey, go right ahead! I'm still not backing down."

When they turned the corner, there was the river, red with blood. The silhouettes of several wyverns were impaled on a collapsed bridge that had gone up in flames. Fighting with the glare at their backs were a group of Nightshade Servants, who'd grown more powerful and ominous, the Odysseia Knights, and Touya.

"This is where we die. Don't block the path to the underworld!!"

Fire blazed up inside Isuzu.

The scream "Don't even give me that!" energized her legs, giving them wings.

Her eyes filled with tears and her vision blurred, but it wasn't from sadness.

This world, where she'd played her lute in the midst of torrential cheers—
This world, where she'd gone on a long journey with friends she loved—

This world, where she'd met Rundelhaus—

—was not a "path to the underworld."

For that reason, right now, Isuzu sang the forty-third song.

Some parts of it are pretty uncool, but...

Even so, it was the first song she'd ever written.

It was meant to tell them *I understand*, and she'd filled it with the message *I'm cheering for you*. Even if no one else acknowledged this world, Isuzu would bless it, all on her own. She'd scatter the forty-third song, the one the gods hadn't made, and the seeds of many, many other songs all over the world.

As her friends plunged into the fray, she saw Minori in the lead. She'd gotten to Touya a step ahead of the rest and had protected him. Roe2 was beside her, her white cape-mantle flapping; she looked like a large bird. She glanced back over her shoulder and nodded. Rundelhaus, Serara, and Minori all exchanged looks with Isuzu.

"I'll protect you."

"I'm not letting you protect me, Rudy."

That brief exchange was enough to fill Isuzu's heart to the brim with courage. Her energy meter was at 100 percent. The intro she strummed loudly was the

best sound she'd produced that day. The bright red sky seemed to be hurrying her on, as well as giving its blessing to eternity.

Isuzu pushed out the first word like a prayer.

As if it were skipping over the surface of the water, the lute sparkled, and every time it danced, rainbow-colored notes encouraged the world. Right now, Isuzu was cheering for every Adventurer on the battlefield and for the People of the Earth.

Ocean wind and asphalt / Once we're past the hill road

The next town will be in view / The gig's sure to shine tonight, too

A little bag, filled to bursting / So much magic

You wave your hand, and so / Come on, we're starting

I won't forget that shine / Sowing all the rainbow's colors

My ambition / Is turning into musical notes

I won't forget that shine / This song's a promise

My lute was timid / But it's something else today

In the end, Isuzu hadn't been able to write a stirring fight song.

She hadn't been able to write a song that would save all the sorrows of every Person of the Earth, either.

No matter how she'd searched, crying all the while, the only important things she'd found lying around inside her were personal ones, the sort ordinary high school girls had.

And so Isuzu had written a song of beginnings.

She wasn't anybody yet, but even so, she'd written a song she could start singing with pride.

She'd created this clumsy first song with the intent that, if someone was beginning something because they wanted to, no matter what type of person they were or what world they lived in, she would absolutely join them and loudly cheer them on.

Isuzu’s new song, unlikely to save anything, cast a spell on the world.



The song, which spread in widening rings, gave its first cry with Theldesia's approval. Magic had been born. Everywhere, small rocks about the size of eggs rose into the air and began darting around like squirrels. They formed an impromptu defense, hurling themselves against all attacks on the battlefield and attempting to turn aside spells.

It really was a trivial song. A song that only little rocks danced to.

It was doubtful whether the song would add even a tiny bit to the combat situation, but Isuzu didn't give up on it.

She struggled precisely because she was limited.

Her heart blazed precisely because she was impatient.

The despair that it might not reach anyone now was also the blessing that, someday, it might reach somebody. Isuzu thought she might be a weakling for needing reasoning like that, but it was possible to walk all the way to the ends of the earth on just one hope. That was "little rock."

Right now, Isuzu was music, "the forty-three." The world was hers.

She splashed bright lemon-yellow notes all across the madder red sky. No matter who this melody reached, it was fine. She wanted it to crumble and scatter, raining down like stardust, over People of the Earth who raged helplessly, and over the Odysseia Knights who were crying for their home like children.

Come to think of it, the rainbow light that rose into the air like bubbles when they died was the same as the rainbow colors of the scale.

The realization startled her.

When the sun set, the rainbow-colored light broke off. After that, it simply drifted upward, toward the moon.

► 6

The graceful woman walked calmly through the streets, just as if she were

moving through the fading light of an Indian summer.

Sometimes she'd stop and think about something, looking up at the sky, only to begin walking again.

Black, burned-smelling smoke mingled with the air, and her surroundings were noisy. Magic flames generally didn't give off smoke, so this probably meant that something somewhere had caught fire. After all, Saphir was currently at war.

Possibly because it had decided that the beautiful woman with long hair the color of dried grass plumes was prey, a circling wyvern plunged into a sudden dive. Its undulating tail lent it a ferocious mobility, and its steel claws could probably pierce a Person of the Earth's soft flesh with ease.

Dariella didn't even look up at it. She raised her left hand and sighed out a spell—Astral Hypno. With only that, the dragon froze, mind and body, as though it had been tangled in an invisible net.

The wyvern fell in a tailspin, disappearing into a cloud of dust and rubble. With this at her back, the white woman's figure blurred, as though she'd been enveloped in a flutter of ebony wings. Phantom tails that held vast magical power waved seductively, as if they were caressing the air, and a beautiful, jet-black woman with fox ears appeared in her place.

Astral Hypno was an Enchanter spell that plunged its target into a deep sleep and froze its spirit. Even though it was a spell with no offensive power, and thus usually used defensively, it had caused massive destruction.

It wasn't just the wyvern. An Odysseia Knights Druid who'd been caught up in its fall had died due to the extensive damage as well.

Glancing at the damage with a dismissive sigh, Nureha began to walk again, just as before.

She passed between buildings, crossed through the shade of leafy green trees, and walked over the sunset battlefield.

Strangely, no one seemed able to see her. Not the Nightshade Servants and wyverns; not even the People of the Earth or the Odysseia Knights.

She swept away the sparks that flew toward her like it was a game, stopping them with small spells. And stopping them was all she did; she still scattered destruction and death across the battlefield.

The Enchanter build that specialized in motion obstruction spells was called *Freezer*. They'd acquired the nickname for their ability to "freeze" all enemies around them like an intensely cold blizzard.

Nureha walked as though she were the embodiment of that word. She moved through the town, sometimes stopping, sometimes muttering.

Melancholy clouded Nureha's expression slightly.

She'd only meant to slip away from her stuffy duties at Plant Hwyaden and take a little stroll around western Yamato, but she'd had a chance encounter.

She hadn't had any malice or ill will toward them. The thought that they were Shiroe's guild members had made her meddle with them, that was all... And then she'd gotten hurt.

Nureha had to admit that she'd been looking down on them, making fun of them. Shiroe was special, but she'd assumed it couldn't possibly extend to his companions. She'd thought that if she smiled her usual ingratiating smile and projected consideration for them through little details of attitude and gesture, she'd be able to blend with their group easily.

As a matter of fact, the girls—Minori, Serara, and Isuzu—hadn't noticed a thing. That was probably true of Rundelhaus, the former Person of the Earth, as well.

She didn't think she'd been careless. It was true that she'd tried to close the distance a bit, but that was because she'd given into the temptation of wanting to see what Shiroe saw.

She didn't know what the boy called Touya had seen in Dariella, the Person of the Earth travel writer. She didn't think he'd uncovered her true identity, but he'd clearly seen through something about Dariella with some sort of special ability.

That young boy had pitied her.

He'd rejected the fingertips that stroked his hair with a cross look:

I hate when you're like that.

That single comment—trivial, silly words—had become a thorn that dug into Nureha. The pain wasn't so great she couldn't ignore it, but it was too sharp and new to forget.

It was a fact that she'd mischievously wondered what would happen if she invited Touya to Minami. She'd only wanted Shiroe to pay attention to her. In other words, she'd meant to make him a substitute for Shiroe.

However, the boy hadn't simply been in Shiroe's guild, just part of the background. Even though he was young, he'd had claws to dig into Nureha. The look of the atmosphere on the battlefield had told her the same thing. The People of the Earth who'd fled, holding their wounds—hadn't their eyes been shining? Hadn't the air held the faint tones of a lute?

Shiroe really was special. The boys and girls who carried echoes of him were keeping the atmosphere in this miserable town in check, one step away from the worst it could be.

Seen through his eyes, this dingy dump of a world might look different. Imagining it, Nureha smiled as if it pained her. Shiroe's teachings were probably that boy's blade. If she thought of the little pain as a tie that bound her to Shiroe, there was an edge of sweetness to it.

At the same time, she felt envy. Shiroe had that boy. He had younger guild members. Shiroe had people he could pass his achievements down to. Nureha did not. The idea stirred up something black like jealousy inside of her. If the scales had tipped ever so slightly, she might have shut Touya up in a sealed temple that would have made death look mild by comparison... But it hadn't happened. In the morning mist, that straightforward boy's serenity had left her with a sympathy that was not unpleasant.

It was envy that gave rise to jealousy, but Nureha managed to accept that envy calmly. Its destination might overlap with the one and only person she wanted.

At any rate, Nureha was the sort of being who might as well not have been

there at all.

The magic in Astral Hypno had revealed her original shape, but when the recast time ran out, she'd retake Dariella's name and figure. Even Dariella was a false form. After all, so was Nureha.

There was no "real" her anywhere.

She was like a ghost. The idea struck her as funny, and she smiled a little.

She'd felt oppressed by the form she'd chosen because she wanted people and wanted them to want her; she'd fled from that form, had gained another that was beautiful and bewitching, but had fled from it as well. Wearying of being spoken to, Nureha had disappeared from the train, and now she'd changed her form yet again.

Even she found it incoherent, and she nearly had to avert her eyes from its misery and absurdity.

Nureha felt as though she'd been cursed: No matter what she obtained, it slipped through her fingers like sand. She'd thrown away far too much, and now she didn't even know what she should try to take. Even if something she'd thrown away had been valuable, she'd already discarded her regrets as well.

The only thing that illuminated her ignorance was Shiroe. In Nureha's mind, he was always in profile, looking at something far away. It was probably because her impression of him on the raid where they'd first met had been a vivid one. Even now, after she'd managed to speak with him, when she visualized Shiroe, the expressions he wore always seemed to be looking into the distance.

Nureha clasped her small, white hands in front of her chest, as if embracing that memory.

"Lady Nureha!"

A knight came running up to her and bowed so low he practically knelt. Nureha glanced at him.

Roreil Dawn. His blond hair, which was normally trimmed evenly and looked rather affected, was in disarray, and even his holy knight's armor was dingy.

He'd probably run all over the countryside like a dog searching for her after she'd disappeared. Nureha felt contempt for his wretched appearance, and she said nothing.

She had no words to waste on the group—imperial guards in name only—who had tried to confine her.

However, Roreil seemed to have interpreted her silence differently.

"Lady Nureha, it's rather dangerous here. With your stasis spells, it may be of no consequence to you, but could I trouble you to evacuate?"

"Explain the situation surrounding this town. What is Mizufa doing?" Nureha asked.

Conditions in the town were abnormal. The fact that Nightshade Servants had appeared in such numbers probably meant that Mizufa had dispatched her Crimson Night troops here. She couldn't imagine that the outbreak of wyverns was unrelated, either.

"From what I'm told, the town has been chosen as a battlefield on Lady Mizufa's orders."

"I see."

Nureha walked.

She gazed at the ground, quietly murmuring Shiroe's name.

She had no particular feelings about this.

She'd approved Mizufa's plan because she simply hadn't cared.

She'd inspected the troops because she'd been asked to.

She understood Mizufa's dream. Everyone, without exception, wanted a world of their own. In their own kingdom, people became king. The kingdom Mizufa dreamed of was a sacrificial sheep that lay under the sword she brandished. She wanted to confirm the fact of her conquest through the choking smell of blood

That dream was close to Nureha's own. Nureha also wanted to live in her kingdom, surrounded by happiness. All people were like that. They simply

wanted their own kingdoms.

However, that cross-looking boy was in this town.

The boy who'd insulted Nureha mercilessly. *Even if you're not smiling, your face is weird.*

If she asked herself whether it was all right to smash the town where he was staying, the answer would probably appear on its own.

Nureha was the master of Yamato, and this place was her garden.

It might be the kingdom Mizufa wanted, but it was Nureha's kingdom now. If Mizufa wanted to make her enemies lie in a pool of blood for the sake of her kingdom, then there was no reason Nureha couldn't interrupt Mizufa's ambition for the sake of her own kingdom.

When they'd passed through the area where the fighting was fiercest, Nureha issued an order to Roreil Dawn, who trailed behind her like a slave.

"Destroy as many wyverns and Nightshade Servants as possible."

"Yes, milady... Are you sure that's all right?"

"It's an order from the State Councilor of the West."

Those words affected Roreil like a high-voltage electrical current.

Still prostrating himself on one knee, he leapt back without another word and sprinted toward the town.

Looking over her shoulder at Roreil's armor, Nureha knew the time had come. Her own shadow hazily changed its shape, and her nine tails transformed as well, caressing the air. She'd paused the effect of Overlay, but now it had reactivated and was forming a new shape.

Nureha's time had ended, and Dariella was returning.

The vague boundary made Nureha smile. Surprised that it was a real smile instead of her usual careless one, she resolved to exercise her right to issue orders as guild master for the first time in a long while.

"Master Shiro. I'll assist those children, too, just a little. Our days together were short, but they treated me as a traveling companion. Will you notice,

Master Shiro? Will you think I'm a nuisance? ...Or will you tell me I've done well? I'll make the Nightshade Servants withdraw. This is merely a whim, not a present. And so, hurry... I want to hear your voice, Master Shiro."

After nine tails stretched away from the shadow, then flew away in an effect like crow feathers, the figure that stood there belonged to a solitary, gentle-featured Person of the Earth writer.

In the midst of the white phosphorescence that streamed down over the battlefield, she began to hum softly.

It was a pop song from Earth, one the People of the Earth didn't know.

► 7

Rundelhaus and the others left town the day after the battle.

They'd talked it over and decided not to journey farther. All sorts of things had happened, and they'd agreed that they needed to report them to their guilds. In addition, since they'd defeated wyverns, they'd gotten the materials for their Magic Bags and fulfilled their original objective.

The journey could probably be considered a success in that respect.

However, several bitter points remained.

The northern side of Saphir had become a battlefield, and including the collapse of the ruined building and the bridge, the damage to the town had been great. There had been several dozen casualties among the People of the Earth.

To Rundelhaus, this was tragic, but not unusual. The world of Theldesia was a harsh one to begin with, and the lives of People of the Earth had always been a series of trials. Even his own birthplace lay buried under ash.

The People of the Earth made no particular attempt to hide the damage that had been done to them, but they didn't make a fuss about it, either. This had been what had worried Rundelhaus: He'd been afraid that Touya and Minori,

with their strong sense of responsibility, innocent Serara, and kind Isuzu would blame themselves after coming into contact with the deaths of People of the Earth.

However, strangely, the atmosphere in the town hadn't grown gloomy.

The People of the Earth were used to supporting one another, and there was still a lot of hope in the town. Its heart remained unscathed, and the town's key industries—fishing and highway commerce—hadn't been damaged. Saphir had taken a heavy blow, but the townspeople told them in no uncertain terms that they would be able to rise again.

The morning after the battle, Roe2 and Dariella said their good-byes to the group and departed.

It had been sudden, but after all, monsters had appeared: Naturally they needed to hurry to their destinations rather than postpone the decision, and so Rundelhaus's group saw the two of them off in the morning mist. Roe2 had really become part of their group, to the point where Serara clung to her with tears in her eyes.

She was a mysterious woman.

Rundelhaus hadn't seen many of the summoning spells she used. For a Person of the Earth, he was an outstanding magician, and he'd accumulated knowledge and combat abilities that made him the equal of a court magician or great mage. For an Adventurer, however, he was still barely average, and although he lived in Akiba, he couldn't claim to have complete knowledge of all magic.

That said, the necromancer magic Roe2 used was unusual, and it had left a vivid impression on him. There were necromancer magic users in Akiba as well, but he'd never encountered one of her caliber before. Her vast magical power and discernment, her excellent combat sense... The Sword Princess she'd summoned had been as elegant as a death-dealing princess, rather than a sword spirit.

Roe2 had given Minori a letter and made some sort of request.

At that point, Rundelhaus readily gave up thinking. From what he knew, Minori was very nearly the finest commander there was, and she was the twin

sister of his good friend Touya. If Minori decided it was necessary, Rundelhaus would probably be asked to help, and if they timed things wrong and ended up in a dangerous situation, he'd simply have to go save them. More than anything, from what he'd seen in Minori's expression, it had been a startling piece of information, but certainly not bad news.

The last thing she'd said to them had been "Later." While brief, it was a promise that they'd meet again.

Rundelhaus and the others had also promised: "Absolutely."

If he'd had to say, it was the other traveler that had concerned him, for a certain reason. Dariella, the People of the Earth writer. A beautiful, delicate lady like that going to Ikoma. No matter how accustomed to travel she was, he'd worried that it might be a difficult journey for a lone woman, but apparently, once she reached Sanaru, she knew where she could find a guard.

Unlike Roe2, the woman hadn't blended with their group to the point where they could call her a companion, but when they left, while Serara, Minori, and Isuzu surrounded Roe2, Dariella had watched them, smiling quietly. Rundelhaus had been born into a lower noble house, and the smile was very familiar to him. It was a wary smile, meant to feign goodwill and affection—in other words, an aristocrat's smile. Rundelhaus didn't have it in him to take it negatively. But while he was accustomed to it, now that he'd been dyed in Akiba's colors, it struck him as slightly remote.

In any case, the two women said their good-byes and departed. They went west, and Rundelhaus's group headed east, toward Akiba.

Dariella had told them, "I do hope we meet again somewhere," and offered that same gentle smile. Rundelhaus and the girls had replied in turn, but Touya had looked as if he was hurting somehow.

After seeing the two of them off, as they walked slowly toward the center of the town, which was hurrying to rebuild, Rundelhaus approached Touya.

"Are you sure it was all right to let her go like that?"

"Her who?"

"Mademoiselle Dariella."

“Oh.”

Touya looked up at the sky. Feeling compelled to do the same, Rundelhaus raised his own head.

Even though it was the day after a battle like that one, the sky was a cloudless, transparent blue.

As they walked along silently in the March sea breeze, their ears caught the idle conversation of the three girls up ahead of them. They were familiar voices, the voices of their companions. In this moment, walking beside his good friend Touya, listening to their comrades, Rundelhaus felt that this was where he belonged. He had a duty to protect his young friends.

“It’s fine.”

“I see.”

His friend’s voice was subdued.

You liked her, didn’t you?

But Rundelhaus didn’t ask. He didn’t understand what had begun and what had ended. Either way, his friend had already waved and seen her off, so it would probably be rude to quiz him about the details.

Romantic matters weren’t Rundelhaus’s strong suit.

He had been born into the aristocracy, which meant that love had been a distant issue for him. He’d had the vague idea that “establishing family ties” probably wasn’t the same thing as “love.”

When Touya addressed older members of the opposite sex, he tended to call them “big sis.” If they were male, it was “big bro.” He’d even called the Odysseia Knights Adventurer who’d taken him to task “brother” with no hesitation.

...But he hadn’t called Dariella “big sis” once. For that reason, Rundelhaus thought it was probably that sort of thing. He wasn’t yet familiar with that particular heartache, but Touya’s profile looked far more grown-up than it had when they’d left on this journey.

As Rundelhaus watched his friend, he felt there was something just a little

dazzling about him.

“Listen. About Dariella...” Looking up at the sky, Touya spoke as if he were talking to himself. “Her nails were all raggedy. Like she bit them because something hurt her too much.”

Rundelhaus hadn’t noticed.

It was likely that Isuzu, Minori, and Serara hadn’t, either.

But Touya had noticed those wounds. Rundelhaus imagined what his friend must have felt at that time. Then he imagined the feelings of the lady who’d done it. There was a pain there that Rundelhaus wasn’t familiar with, and he thought Touya must have encountered it.

He considered giving him some sort of advice, but thought better of it.

He wasn’t enough of a sage to wade into the matter, and he was even less confident about his knowledge of the subtleties between men and women. Besides, his friend Touya was a warrior. If Touya had decided something was all right, it probably was.

“Hm-hm. Touya. If anything’s troubling you, you may discuss it with me.”

“Nah, I’d never go to you for advice, big bro Rudy.”

“What?!”

Apparently Touya had come to terms with the matter all on his own. He was wearing his regular genuine smile, so Rundelhaus was able to respond in his usual cheerful way as well.

By the time they finished preparing for their journey and left the inn, it was already afternoon.

It had been Rundelhaus’s idea to hurry their departure, because—although he hadn’t told his companions—there was no guarantee that the People of the Earth wouldn’t make them the targets of their irritation and slander them.

Their five-person group had fought desperately, but it was a fact that the Odysseia Knights had used the town as a shield.

Currently, Rundelhaus was both a Person of the Earth and an Adventurer. For

that reason, he understood the feelings on both sides. The Odysseia Knights were under no obligation to protect the People of the Earth. It wasn't part of their code, and it hadn't been their mission. They were free to do as they pleased, and they hadn't personally harmed the People of the Earth. There were probably a great many People of the Earth who'd been saved because the Odysseia Knights had been there. At the very least, in the early stages of the battle, they'd prevented almost all damage to the town.

However, Rundelhaus knew that, deep down, people weren't convinced by that sort of thing. When you met with an unjust disaster and someone with the power to help was on the scene, it was only natural to get your hopes up. *All those Adventurers were right there, so why didn't they save my family?* Rundelhaus knew that grief all too well. There were bound to be People of the Earth who were so heartbroken that they screamed their grievances.

If those people lashed out at Touya and Minori, they'd probably feel awful, and Serara and Isuzu would be hurt as well. In the end, even the People of the Earth who said those things would be hurt. Nobody was to blame, but Rundelhaus knew there were wounds that only time could heal. There were moments when people just couldn't be kind; it wasn't anyone's fault.

That meant it was best to get away from the town now.

It would mean leaving the cart behind, but at this point they'd be able to get home just fine on foot. Their entire group was confident about that.

One practical problem was that the town would have to be rebuilt. They probably didn't have the spare energy to bother with Rundelhaus's group, and the inn said they'd be receiving aid from the West, so when Rundelhaus told his group that it would be better to free up their rooms, they let him persuade them without protest.

"It's over already, huh..."

"Things were pretty awful at the end. I wonder if the town will be all right..."

"There's nothing to fear. This is an important stop on the red clay highway. They'll have it rebuilt in no time."

"But we—"

Rundelhaus put a hand on Isuzu's shoulder.

Her expression was clouded. She was probably thinking of the victims. He knew how she felt, but when this hazelnut-haired singer was depressed, it made Rundelhaus very uneasy. It wasn't fair, but he felt responsible for her smile.

In part, this was probably due to that violent declaration at the temple. Although it had been half-compulsory, Rundelhaus had apparently placed himself under her protection. He wasn't entirely okay with that, but even so, a promise was a promise. It was his duty to stay by her side and protect that smile.

...And so Rundelhaus tried to say something to her.

However, at the sound of a whispery voice on the wind, he stopped. He strained his ears, listening.

Far in the distance, he heard a song.

Isuzu had sharp ears, so of course she'd caught it, and her eyes went round.





It was *that* song, the one Isuzu had sung in battle, the song that was hers alone.

A griffin swept down from the sky, and Serara broke into a run. A moment later, Minori and Touya did the same. Their bright, glad cries washed away their companions' dark moods.

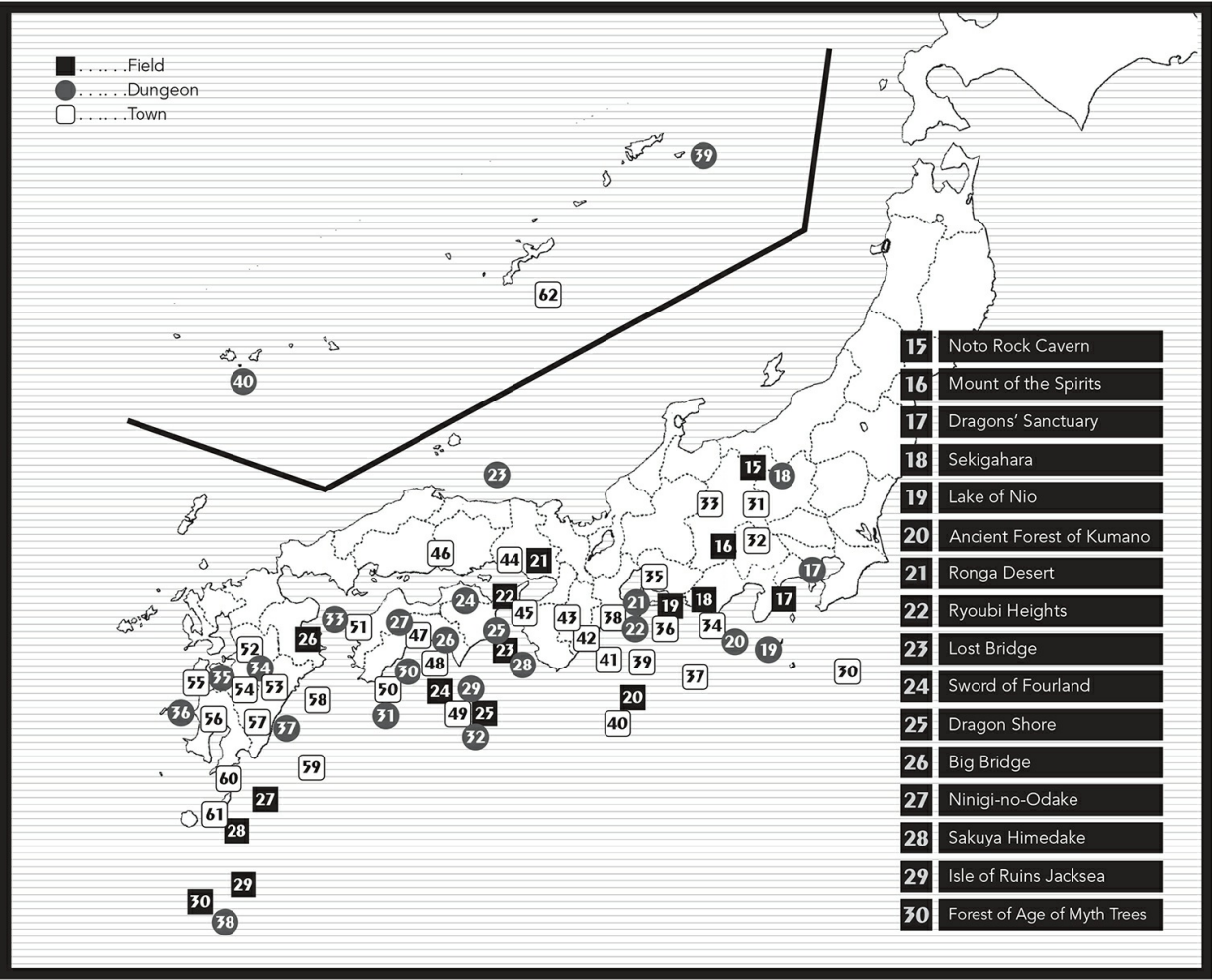
However, Isuzu and Rundelhaus kept listening to the young, childlike voice that drifted to them from the town. This had been the last stop on their tour. Rundelhaus and the others were powerless, and their limits had made themselves felt at the end of their journey.

Even so, that song would probably make its way farther west. Isuzu's song wasn't powerless or meaningless. He began to tell her so, but Isuzu's eyes were so full of tears that they were beginning to overflow. His partner always cried easily. Rundelhaus offered her a handkerchief.

On that day, a modest birthday song for Isuzu and the world echoed through the streets of Saphir.

▶ NAME: NUREHA (DARIELLA)	
	▶ LEVEL: 92
	▶ RACE: FOXTAIL
	▶ CLASS: ENCHANTER
	▶ HP: 8848
	▶ MP: 13351
	▶ ITEM 1: [QUEEN'S RING] A FANTASY-CLASS RING ONCE WORN BY AN ALY NOBLEWOMAN. DIAMONDS ENCIRCLE ITS CENTRAL ALEXANDRITE STONE, AND ITS BEAUTY BEWITCHES PEOPLE. IT BESTOWS REDUCED CAST TIME ON ITS WEARER AND REDUCED ENDURANCE ON ITS ENEMIES. 
	▶ ITEM 2: [CELESTIAL ROBE OF ETERNAL NIGHT] A FANTASY-CLASS DRESS ONLY FOR WOMEN. WOVEN OF SPIDER SILK DRIPPING WITH NIGHT DEW, IT WAS ORIGINALLY SUPPOSED TO BE A SHAWL, BUT THROUGH AN UNSTINTING USE OF MATERIAL, IT WAS MADE INTO A DRESS. AS IF TRAPPING ITS PREY IN A SPIDER'S WEB, IT BOOSTS THE EFFECT OF DEBUFFS. 
	▶ ITEM 3: [LEGENDS OF YAMATO] AN UNFINISHED BOOKLET THAT HOLDS A VARIETY OF TALES TOLD IN WESTLANDE, COPIED DOWN BY DARIELLA. THERE ARE SIGNS THAT SHE'S ATTEMPTED TO WRITE ORIGINAL STORIES IN THE PAGES NEAR THE BACK—STORIES ABOUT THE COUNTRYSIDE, LEGENDS, FAMILIES, AND LOVE—BUT NONE OF THEM HAVE TAKEN SHAPE. 

▶ NAME: ROE2	
▶ LEVEL: 90	
▶ RACE: HALF ALV	
▶ CLASS: SUMMONER	
▶ HP: 7995	
▶ MP: 11730	
▶ ITEM 1:	
<p>[SACRED ROBE OF THE STARS+]</p> <p>A REINFORCED VERSION OF THE MANTLE SHIROE USES CONSTANTLY. IT HAS A +, WHICH SIGNIFIES THAT ITS ATTRIBUTE DEFENSE IS A BIT HIGHER. IT'S A BETA ITEM AND CAN ONLY BE ACQUIRED ON THE TEST SERVER. ROE2 DOESN'T HAVE MUCH INTEREST IN FASHION, AND SHE WEARS IT ALMOST ALL THE TIME.</p>	
▶ ITEM 2:	
<p>[JACK-O'-LANTERN]</p> <p>A LANTERN YOU CAN ONLY GET FROM FIEND PUMPKIN, A SEASONAL LIMITED EDITION MONSTER. IT SHEDS LIGHT ONLY ITS OWNER CAN SEE AND MAKES ITS SURROUNDINGS AS DARK AS THE NIGHT OF A NEW MOON. ITS CUTE DESIGN MAKES IT POPULAR WITH WOMEN, BUT IT'S RARE AND HARD TO GET.</p>	
▶ ITEM 3:	
<p>[A HANDFUL OF MEMORIES]</p> <p>AT A GLANCE, IT LOOKS LIKE A TINY CRYSTAL SHARD IN A VIAL. IT'S A SACRAMENT-CLASS ITEM WITH A FRAGMENT OF THE EMPATHIOM THAT FILLS THE MOON, SEALED WITH A FORCE FIELD. THE TONE YOU CAN HEAR FROM THE CRYSTAL TEACHES THE MEANING OF THE WORD <i>IRREPLACEABLE</i>.</p>	



ELDER
TALES
MAP
WEST JAPAN
EDITION

The towns and
dungeons of *Elder
Tales*, revealed!
Check the next
page for details!



30 Izu

This town is familiar to Adventurers as the point of departure for mid-and high-level dungeons like Shuzen Castle and the Izu Undersea Volcano. If you have a mount, you can make a day trip to it from Akiba, and it's crowded with hot spring facilities. Due to these factors, it used to get a lot of Adventurer visitors, but since the Catastrophe, its population has been in decline.

31 Snowwatch Fishermen

The ocean in the Noto region has good fishing, and in the past, its marine products industry flourished. However, the group of Ichthyos fish-men that use the Noto Rock Cavern as their stronghold caused endless damage, and lots of guard quests were issued to Adventurers. Ichthyos damage to the Fishing Port of Snowwatch is particularly severe, and they're seeking Adventurers to undertake long-term contracts.

32 Ildof, the Town Where Spirits Descend

A town located at the foot of the Mount of the Spirits. It has lots of Summoner-related quests. It's close to the Dragons' Sanctuary, but since it's protected by the power of the spirits, dragons almost never attack. Due to the nature of the location, there are lots of elf settlements in the surrounding area. If you harm the forest, they'll attack you, so be careful.

33 The Golden Book District of Romatrice

A town of culture in the Kaga region, built on top of a ruined building discovered by a certain priest and said to have a collection of written works from all times and places. Its nickname, Golden Book District, was bestowed due to the value of its intellectual assets. A vast trove of unexcavated knowledge sleeps in the ruins of the large library that's said to be located beneath the city.

34 The Town of Kiyosu/ Ruined City of Oosu

The Town of Kiyosu is the stronghold of the human forces in the Owari region, having taken the place of the Ruined City of Oosu, which was destroyed by an invasion of evil giants. It has a stout city wall, and it actively welcomes Adventurers with high combat power. Due to its proximity to the Dragons' Sanctuary, dragon-god worship flourishes in this region.

35 The Port of Tuluga

Ships bound for Marine Town Sado depart from this port town, and it flourishes as a vital distribution center that links Kyou and Oudia. You'll see many Adventurers traveling in search of quests and materials here, in among the merchants looking for business opportunities.

36 The Town of Oudia

A town of merchants that prospers as a marine transportation base on the Lake of Nio. Its lord's policy of tax exemption for businesses keeps the tax on sales low, and many merchants gather here. If Kyou is the center of Westlande's government, Oudia is its center of trade. The intensity of its unique atmosphere seems to make it unpopular with the more conservative aristocrats.

37 Sacred Shrine Ise

A temple town built around a shrine that celebrates two great gods. The House of Saimiya, which split off from the Ancient Dynasty of Westlande, lives here. Branch shrines affiliated with the main shrine are built all over the town, and you'll see People of the Earth offering prayers.

38 The City of Kyou

The capital of the Holy Empire of Westlande, where the House of Saimiya and the administrative duchy houses live. The streets are laid out like the grid on a Go board, and apparently they form a huge magical array for defensive purposes. It has gates in each of the four cardinal directions, but since the southern Suzaku Gate leads to the Heian City of Exorcism, it's sealed.

39 Ancient Capital Yoshino

The place where the capital of Westlande was located before it was transferred to Kyou. The temple at its center houses an enormous statue of a god, which is said to get up and save the people in times of national crisis. It's famous for its cherry trees as well, and even in the days of the game, the beauty of its graphics was loudly proclaimed to be the best in Yamato.

40 Kumano Grand Shrine

Located in the dense Ancient Forest of Kumano in the southern Kishu region, it's said to be one of the oldest shrines in Yamato. According to one theory, it's been here since the age of Yamato's founding myths. The god it enshrines is said to be a bear or a bird or a water-god, but the details have been lost.

41 Minami

Yamato's second player town and the western base for Adventurers. Under the control of the single guild Plant Hwyaden, its public order and discipline are holding steady, but the town is apathetic, and there are obvious problems beneath the surface. Recently, they've been cooperating with the People of the Earth military and actively expanding their forces.

42 Beautiful Port Sixciele

Unlike Minami, which has lots of Adventurers because it's a player town, this is a major city made up of People of the Earth. It's also a lovely port town, and lots of Westlande aristocrats have second homes here.

43 Egret Castle Town

A town built around Castle Egret, which is renowned as a fine fortress. It's famous for its leatherwork articles and silk, and it exports them to the rest of the country through the port of Sixciele.

44 The Oases of Ronga

Oases that are scattered across the vast Ronga Desert. When they cross the desert, caravan traders use the sand dunes as their activity base. Sometimes the oases themselves move.

45 Guardclaw, Town of Kilns

Famous as an artisan town, with an emphasis on pottery. Workshops and kilns are set up all through the town, and it's said the fires are never extinguished. In addition to pottery artisans, swordsmiths gather here, and Adventurers visit in search of fine articles.

46 The Town of Izumo

A temple town that spreads out around the shrine said to be the headquarters of the Knights of Izumo, Yamato's guardians. However, the entrance to the Knights' shrine is tightly sealed, and no one can enter. The People of the Earth are uneasy, but they're still waiting for the Knights to return.

47 Naval Port Kuore

A port town established in an inlet on the Seto Sea. It plays a prominent role as a naval port, and for Westlande, which is threatening Nine-Tails and Fourland, it's a vital point of defense. There are rumors that cutting-edge battleships that use Adventurer technology are being built here...

51 The Town of Saikyo

Formerly the only area under Nine-Tails control on Honshu. All the feudal lords dispatched strong soldiers here to form a line of defense against Westlande in case of emergency. However, since it was a combined force, each group was very conscious of its own turf, and when Minami did invade, they took advantage of their imperfect teamwork.

48 Abandoned Port of Maval

A port which is thought to have been the gateway to the route through the Seto Islands to Fourland, but which has fallen into ruin. At present, it's a den of Sea Dragons and other monsters, and any ship that dares approach will find itself at the bottom of the ocean before it knows what's happening.

52 Nakasu

Yamato's fourth player town. It was brought under Minami's control soon after the Catastrophe, and most of its Adventurers were absorbed into Plant Hwyaden. A faction of Adventurers who oppose Minami's rule have formed an active resistance movement, but so far they haven't managed to produce any notable results.

49 The Ruins of Claysap

It seems to have been a central city in southern Fourland, but at present, it's nothing but ruins. There are quite a lot of ruins like this in Fourland, and if restored, they could probably be used as bases for Adventurers. There are reports that abandoned Fairy Rings have been seen there, too.

53 The Town of Akizuki

A town governed by the House of Quartz, one of the Nine Merchant Houses of Nine-Tails. Partly because it's close to a player town, there are lots of quests and events that use it as their starting point. Although it's a People of the Earth town, it has a very close relationship with Adventurers. Apparently, quite a few Adventurers privately idolize its young female ruler.

50 Ruined Castle of Masaki

An abandoned castle that has crumbled away. Nobody lives there, but at night, they say will-o'-the-wisps glow everywhere. In addition, hordes of flying monsters live around this castle and they sometimes fly across the ocean to the cities of Nine-Tails.

54 The Town of Pannaile

A town governed by the House of Leaf Turk, one of the Nine Merchant Houses of Nine-Tails. Since its lord is a felinoid, it has many felinoid residents as well. Its castle town is lined with the workshops of blacksmiths and clockwork specialists, reflecting the insatiable curiosity of its ruling family. Depending on your subclass, there are lots of important quests here, and the rewards are impressive.

55 Naval Port Longcape

A port city established as Yamato's western defense. There are lots of islands with ruins from the age of the ancient alv kingdom offshore, and it's swarming with speculators and Adventurers scheming to salvage relics and make a killing. Due to Minami's invasion of Nakasu, they seem to be keeping a wary eye on Westlande's movements as well.

59 Hyuga, Town of Sunlight

A town in southern Nine-Tails said to be under the protection of phoenixes. The climate in the area around Hyuga is stable, and there are an unbelievable number of sunny days. The beauty of the Himuka Flower Meadows that bloom in profusion under the constant sunlight has made it a famous spot since before the Catastrophe.

56 Baywind, the Closed Window

A trading port built as a point of contact for commerce with the western region of distant Eured. It has many consulates from other countries, but in the confusion of the Catastrophe, they lost contact with their homelands and have been isolated. Internally, opinion is divided on whether to open the sealed gate and seek help from the people of Yamato.

60 Rice-Growing Area Ranbas

A town located in the heart of the Iisa Basin, a famous rice-producing region, surrounded by sweeping rural landscapes. Since it's possible to unearth high-quality ores in the gold mine on its outskirts, in addition to merchants who come to buy rice, many Adventurers visit in search of materials.

57 The Town of Eisuo

A town governed by the House of Calfania, one of the Nine Merchant Houses of Nine-Tails. The House of Calfania is a distinguished elf family, and many residents are elves as well. Castle Silveria, which towers at its heart, is renowned as a magnificent castle on par with Egret and Maihama. The town's specialty is medicinal herbs, and there are some that can only be found here.

61 Basketa, Town of Millennial Snows

A town governed by the House of Oiduo, one of the Nine Merchant Houses of Nine-Tails. It's distinguished by its streets, which are made as white as snow by ash from Sakuya Himedake, an active volcano. Unlike in the days of the game, if the volcanic ash is left untouched, it buries the surrounding area, so quests to sweep the ash away are issued frequently.

58 Yufin Hot Springs Town

A place that's famous as one of Nine-Tails' best hot spring towns. Since they have trouble with the monsters that sometimes fly over from Fourland, they tend to welcome Adventurers who can use projectile weapons and spells. Due to the height of demand, there are lots of Bow Artisans, and people sometimes find amazing items.

62 Shuri Crimson Palace

The Ryukyu region is a tropical area covered in dense jungle. In keeping with the local climate, its capital, the town of Shuri, and the People of the Earth who live there prefer open, airy buildings and loose clothing. A unique food culture has developed here, and you can find lots of foodstuffs that aren't carried on mainland Yamato.

►DUNGEON

17 Ancient Shrine of Suwa

The altar of an ancient god whose name is long forgotten, built so that it's partially sunken in the lake. The aboveground areas are flooded and already ruined, but there's a hidden passage that leads to an underground area. There, the Nagi Tribe—a race of half-human, half-snake demihumans—have built a shrine and are waiting for the giant snake they worship to awaken.

21 Mount Kurama

Rows of countless *torii* gates in the mountains near Kyou's Demon Gate form an enormous dungeon that's incredibly Japanese. Riddles created by the Tengu Tribe are located all over, and it's set up so that you can't clear it by force. If you manage to get through the trial of the Great Tengu that's enshrined in its heart, you can get Tengu-related items.

18 The Phantasmal Depths

An undersea dungeon that can be entered through a mirage that appears at random over the ocean. The distribution of passageways and rooms changes each time, and the walls and floors are indistinct, making you feel as if you're walking underwater. The marine monsters that appear are all valuable as food, and you can also harvest Arcane Water of the Depths, an ingredient in high-class recovery potions.

22 The Heian City of Exorcism

A dungeon that can be entered once a year through the Suzaku Gate, when its seal is released. Inside, there are countless pitfalls, powerful Oni that have swarmed out of hell prowl around, and its difficulty is literally diabolical. Reports of someone clearing it are very rare.

19 Giant God Arsenal

The ruin of a giant golem production arsenal said to have been used in wars during the era of the ancient alv culture. Most of the facility has stopped functioning, but there are persistent rumors that you can still hear the sound of machinery running, deep underground. They say the "giant white god" sleeps in its depths...

23 Okino Island

Nicknamed "Youkai Island." The whole island is a field-type dungeon, and lots of unique creatures based on the traditional Japanese monsters known as *youkai* appear. There are shops for Adventurers near the entrance, but the staff are also *youkai*, and it actually feels more like an amusement park than a dungeon.

20 Undead Town Toyota

A zone in which the lord who once ruled this area destroyed an entire town for the sake of his research into immortality, turning it into a dungeon. The lord transformed himself into an undead, becoming the Undead King of this impure land, and many powerful undead throng together under his command. It's also famous as the stage of the Dark Campaign of Heaven and Earth raid content.

24 Convent of Regrets

If you cross the Karst Plateau in the Ryoubi Heights, then press on farther into the mountains, there's a convent that retired Assassins are said to visit in order to confess their sins. The convent is a dungeon, and if you reach its heart, they say you can accept a quest that will let you acquire a secret mystery.

25 Washu Midair Garden

A magic alv ruin that floats in the air above a mountain that protrudes from the peninsula. Some say it was a fortress that kept watch over the Lost Bridge and Fourland; others say it was a gaming facility. Because the magic trolleys used to move around inside the zone are a bit too thrilling, Adventurers who don't like heights are advised not to enter.

29 Dicey Road

A route that travels around the eighty-eight power spots said to exist in Fourland. It's rumored that if you visit all of them, you'll gain power, but the condition of Fourland makes the journey incredibly difficult, and at present, it's said that no one has managed to confirm whether the claim is true. Apparently there's a "backward route" that visits all eighty-eight places in reverse order, too.

26 Inushima Coastal Castle

A fortress that pirates who were notorious in Westlande once used as their stronghold. At present, it's a dungeon where monsters—mainly sahuagins—appear. Because items that appear to be pirate treasure are sometimes discovered, it's also famous as a treasure hunting spot, and there are quite a few Adventurers who hope to get rich quick.

30 Inugami's Castle (Castle of the Dog God)

An aboveground dungeon zone consisting of a ruined castle in which a host of dog-type monsters have taken up residence. There is still no detailed information on the boss monster, Inugami Gyoubu, who's said to haunt the castle keep. Some say he's a boss that controls not just this castle, but all the monsters in Fourland...

27 Itsukushima Floating Shrine

A dungeon where ancient ritual articles are said to be stored. It's surrounded by shallows where an abnormal number of monsters appear, making it very hard to reach. Even if you prepare very carefully, the prevailing Adventurer opinion is that it's a lot harder than any regular raid.

31 Fey Silkworm Hellholes

Many caterpillar-type monsters live in the cluster of wind holes that yawn along the coast. It's rumored that a being called "the Queen" dwells deep inside them... Since the threads these caterpillars spit out are sturdy and have a good affinity with mana, they're a top-class cloth ingredient item.

28 Demon Emperor's Temple

One of the dungeons established all around Yamato as stages for the Festival of the New Emperor's Return. Some of the most powerful vengeful spirits in Yamato lie in wait in its depths. The dungeon itself is difficult, of course, and even getting there is extremely hard.

32 Watatsumi Dragon King's Palace

This dungeon is made to resemble an underwater temple, and its entrance is the old shrine that stands quietly near Dragon Shore. The dragon varieties that live in Fourland frequently fly to Dragon Shore and the area around the shrine, so it's dangerous. Of course, many water-dwelling monsters and Sea Dragons appear inside the temple as well.



Nimbus Cavern

A limestone cavern that's filled with a tranquil atmosphere and a multitude of hanging stalactites. The enormous limestone pillar that towers at its heart is famous. Legend states long ago, a swordsman of light meditated in this cavern, cleared the clouds from his mind, and awakened to a secret mystery. Inside the cavern, there's a giant pillar that he's said to have cut down at the time.



Firedrake's Mortar

A yawning, gigantic caldera, the beginning of a volcano. The area around the crater in its center is a field-type dungeon. Since it is a volcano, many monsters with some connection to fire appear, and the lord of the mountain, Lava Dragon Tatsu-no-Mikoto, lurks inside the crater. If you go in under-equipped, you'll be charcoal in no time flat.



Karai Tenjin Shrine

A shrine-type dungeon protected by a vengeful spirit—the most powerful in Yamato—who controls lightning. One of the stages for the Festival of the New Emperor's Return. While he is a spirit to be feared, he also excels in scholarship, archery, and a variety of other fields, and the local People of the Earth worship him as a guardian deity of those fields. Some Adventurers have fought the boss with the intent of being annihilated, calling it a "Shinto mortification."



Crumbled Sky Tower

The carcass of a tower that was built to reach the heavens. It's possible to collect the wreckage of mechanical components whose purpose is unclear. They may be the relics of a prehistoric culture. Hoards of machine-type monsters that were probably manufactured in antiquity prowl around as if defending the ruined tower. They're still waiting for the return of a master who's never coming back.



Monster Cat Mansion

A mansion-type dungeon in the town of Pannaile. Lots of cat-type monsters appear inside. Because the monsters are weak and combat doesn't get difficult unless you go into the depths, even before the Catastrophe, it's said that Adventurers often hung around inside in order to unwind and amuse themselves.



Terukumi Fort

An ancient fortress where the ghosts of warriors walk. Rumored to have been built by the swordsman Segord, who escaped after losing a political dispute—it's said that after defeating his pursuers at this fort, he returned to Nine-Tails and killed his political enemies as well. His descendants went on to establish the House of Oidun.



Heaven's Warship

An enormous, ancient, half-submerged battleship that has become an island of sorts. A residential area was set up on the deck in order to excavate valuable ancient relics, but the machine-type monsters that welled up from inside the battleship turned it into a dungeon. According to tradition, the ship can still move...



Isle of Slumbering Time

The desert island at the southernmost tip of Yamato has been turned into a dungeon, just as it is. This jungle-covered island is a secluded region where many Triceratops and other dinosaur-type monsters appear, but since it takes so long to get there and back, almost no Adventurers visit it by choice.



▶ELDER TALES

A "SWORD AND SORCERY"—THEMED ONLINE GAME AND ONE OF THE LARGEST IN THE WORLD. AN MMORPG FAVORED BY SERIOUS GAMERS, IT BOASTS A TWENTY-YEAR HISTORY.

▶THE CATASTROPHE

A TERM FOR THE INCIDENT IN WHICH USERS WERE TRAPPED INSIDE THE *ELDER TALES* GAME WORLD. IT AFFECTED THE THIRTY THOUSAND JAPANESE USERS WHO WERE ONLINE WHEN *HOMESTEADING THE NOOSPHERE*, THE GAME'S TWELFTH EXPANSION PACK, WAS INTRODUCED.

▶ADVENTURER

THE GENERAL TERM FOR A GAMER WHO IS PLAYING *ELDER TALES*. WHEN BEGINNING THE GAME, PLAYERS SELECT HEIGHT, CLASS, AND RACE FOR THESE IN-GAME DOUBLES. THE TERM IS MAINLY USED BY NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS TO REFER TO PLAYERS.

▶PEOPLE OF THE EARTH

THE NAME NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS USE FOR THEMSELVES. THE CATASTROPHE DRASTICALLY INCREASED THEIR NUMBERS FROM WHAT THEY WERE IN THE GAME. THEY NEED TO SLEEP AND EAT LIKE REGULAR PEOPLE, SO IT'S HARD TO TELL THEM APART FROM PLAYERS WITHOUT CHECKING THE STATUS SCREEN.

▶THE HALF-GAIA PROJECT

A PROJECT TO CREATE A HALF-SIZED EARTH INSIDE *ELDER TALES*. ALTHOUGH IT'S NEARLY THE SAME SHAPE AS EARTH, THE DISTANCES ARE HALVED, AND IT HAS ONLY ONE-FOURTH THE AREA.

▶AGE OF MYTH

A GENERAL TERM FOR THE ERA SAID TO HAVE BEEN DESTROYED IN THE OFFICIAL BACKSTORY OF THE *ELDER TALES* ONLINE GAME. IT WAS BASED ON THE CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION OF THE REAL WORLD. SUBWAYS AND BUILDINGS ARE THE RUINED RELICS OF THIS ERA.

▶THE OLD WORLD

THE WORLD WHERE SHIROE AND THE OTHERS LIVED BEFORE *ELDER TALES* BECAME ANOTHER WORLD AND TRAPPED THEM. A TERM FOR EARTH, THE REAL WORLD, ETC.

▶GUILDS

TEAMS COMPOSED OF MULTIPLE PLAYERS. MANY PLAYERS BELONG TO THEM, BOTH BECAUSE IT'S EASIER TO CONTACT AFFILIATED MEMBERS AND INVITE THEM ON ADVENTURES AND ALSO BECAUSE GUILDS PROVIDE CONVENIENT SERVICES (SUCH AS MAKING IT EASIER TO RECEIVE AND SEND ITEMS).

▶THE ROUND TABLE COUNCIL

THE TOWN OF AKIBA'S SELF-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION, FORMED AT SHIROE'S PROPOSAL. COMPOSED OF ELEVEN GUILDS, INCLUDING MAJOR COMBAT AND PRODUCTION GUILDS AND GUILDS THAT COLLECTIVELY REPRESENT SMALL AND MIDSIZE GUILDS, IT'S IN A POSITION TO LEAD THE REFORMATION IN AKIBA.

▶LOG HORIZON

THE NAME OF THE GUILD SHIROE FORMED AFTER THE CATASTROPHE. ITS FOUNDING MEMBERS—AKATSUKI, NAOTSUGU, AND NYANTA—HAVE BEEN JOINED BY THE TWINS MINORI AND TOUYA. THEIR HEADQUARTERS IS IN A RUINED BUILDING PIERCED BY A GIANT ANCIENT TREE ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF AKIBA.

▶THE CRESCENT MOON LEAGUE

THE NAME OF THE GUILD MARI LEADS. ITS PRIMARY PURPOSE IS TO SUPPORT MIDDLE-LEVEL PLAYERS. HENRIETTA, MARI'S FRIEND SINCE THEIR DAYS AT A GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL, ACTS AS ITS ACCOUNTANT.

▶THE DEBAUCHERY TEA PARTY

THE NAME OF A GROUP OF PLAYERS THAT SHIROE, NAOTSUGU, AND NYANTA BELONGED TO AT ONE TIME. IT WAS ACTIVE FOR ABOUT TWO YEARS, AND ALTHOUGH IT WASN'T A GUILD, IT'S STILL REMEMBERED IN *ELDER TALES* AS A LEGENDARY BAND OF PLAYERS.

▶FAIRY RINGS

TELEPORTATION DEVICES LOCATED IN FIELDS. THE DESTINATIONS ARE TIED TO THE PHASES OF THE MOON, AND IF PLAYERS USE THEM AT THE WRONG TIME, THERE'S NO TELLING WHERE THEY'LL END UP. AFTER THE CATASTROPHE, SINCE STRATEGY SITES ARE INACCESSIBLE, ALMOST NO ONE USES THEM.

▶ZONE

A UNIT THAT DESCRIBES RANGE AND AREA IN *ELDER TALES*. IN ADDITION TO FIELDS, DUNGEONS, AND TOWNS, THERE ARE ZONES AS SMALL AS SINGLE HOTEL ROOMS. DEPENDING ON THE PRICE, IT'S SOMETIMES POSSIBLE TO BUY THEM.

▶THELDESIA

THE NAME FOR THE GAME WORLD CREATED BY THE HALF-GAIA PROJECT. A WORD THAT'S EQUIVALENT TO "EARTH" IN THE REAL WORLD.

▶SPECIAL SKILL

VARIOUS SKILLS USED BY ADVENTURERS. ACQUIRED BY LEVELING UP YOUR MAIN CLASS OR SUBCLASS. EVEN WITHIN THE SAME SKILL, THERE ARE FOUR RANKS—ELEMENTARY, INTERMEDIATE, ESOTERIC, AND SECRET—AND IT'S POSSIBLE TO MAKE SKILLS GROW BY INCREASING YOUR PROFICIENCY.

►MAIN CLASS

THESE GOVERN COMBAT ABILITIES IN *ELDER TALES*, AND PLAYERS CHOOSE ONE WHEN BEGINNING THE GAME. THERE ARE TWELVE TYPES, THREE EACH IN FOUR CATEGORIES: WARRIOR, WEAPON ATTACK, RECOVERY, AND MAGIC ATTACK. SEE THE SECTION BELOW FOR DETAILS.

►SUBCLASS

ABILITIES THAT AREN'T DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN COMBAT BUT COME IN HANDY DURING GAME PLAY. ALTHOUGH THERE ARE ONLY TWELVE MAIN CLASSES, THERE ARE OVER FIFTY SUBCLASSES, AND THEY'RE A JUMBLED MIX OF EVERYTHING FROM CONVENIENT SKILL SETS TO JOKE ELEMENTS.

►MYSTERY

ALSO CALLED OVERSKILL BY SOME PLAYERS. UNIQUE, POWERFUL TECHNIQUES THAT ARE UNLIKE CONVENTIONAL SPECIAL SKILLS. CREATED WHEN INDIVIDUAL PLAYERS EVOLVE AND EXPAND ABILITIES FROM THE DAYS OF THE GAME.

►ARC-SHAPED ARCHIPELAGO YAMATO

THE WORLD OF THELDESIA IS DESIGNED BASED ON REAL-WORLD EARTH. THE ARC-SHAPED ARCHIPELAGO YAMATO IS THE REGION THAT MAPS TO JAPAN, AND IT'S DIVIDED INTO FIVE AREAS: THE EZZO EMPIRE; THE DUCHY OF FOURLAND; THE NINE-TAILS DOMINION; EASTAL, THE LEAGUE OF FREE CITIES; AND THE HOLY EMPIRE OF WESTLAND.

►CAST TIME

THE PREPARATION TIME NEEDED WHEN USING A SPECIAL SKILL. THESE ARE SET FOR EACH SEPARATE SKILL, AND MORE POWERFUL SKILLS TEND TO HAVE LONGER CAST TIMES. WITH COMBAT-TYPE SPECIAL SKILLS, IT'S POSSIBLE TO MOVE DURING CAST TIME, BUT WITH MAGIC-BASED SKILLS, SIMPLY MOVING INTERRUPTS CASTING.

►MOTION BIND

REFERS TO THE WAY YOUR BODY FREEZES UP AFTER YOU'VE USED A SPECIAL SKILL. DURING MOTION BIND, ALL ACTIONS ARE IMPOSSIBLE, INCLUDING MOVEMENT.

►RECAST TIME

THE AMOUNT OF TIME YOU HAVE TO WAIT AFTER YOU'VE USED A SPECIAL SKILL BEFORE YOU CAN USE IT AGAIN. THIS RESTRICTION MAKES IT VERY DIFFICULT TO USE A SPECIFIC SPECIAL SKILL SEVERAL TIMES IN A ROW. SOME SPECIAL SKILLS HAVE SUCH LONG RECAST TIMES THAT THEY CAN BE USED ONLY ONCE PER DAY.

►CALL OF HOME

A BASIC TYPE OF SPECIAL SKILL THAT ALL ADVENTURERS LEARN. IT INSTANTLY RETURNS YOU TO THE LAST SAFE AREA WITH A TEMPLE THAT YOU VISITED, BUT ONCE YOU USE IT, YOU CAN'T USE IT AGAIN FOR TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.

►RAID

THE TERM FOR A BATTLE FOUGHT WITH NUMBERS LARGER THAN THE NORMAL SIX-MEMBER PARTIES THAT ADVENTURERS USUALLY FORM. IT CAN ALSO BE USED TO REFER TO A UNIT MADE UP OF MANY PEOPLE. FAMOUS EXAMPLES INCLUDE TWENTY-FOUR-MEMBER FULL RAIDS AND NINETY-SIX-MEMBER LEGION RAIDS.

►RACE

THERE ARE A VARIETY OF HUMANOID RACES IN THE WORLD OF THELDESIA. ADVENTURERS MAY CHOOSE TO PLAY AS ONE OF EIGHT RACES: HUMAN, ELF, DWARF, HALF ALV, FELINOID, WOLF-FANG, FOXTAIL, AND RITIAN. THESE ARE SOMETIMES CALLED BY THE GENERAL TERM, "THE 'GOOD' HUMAN RACES."

► MAIN CLASSES

[WARRIOR CLASSES]	[WEAPON ATTACK CLASSES]
<div><div>GUARDIAN BOASTS THE HIGHEST DEFENSE. ABLE TO ATTRACT ENEMIES WITH TAUNTS.</div></div>	<div><div>ASSASSIN A FOCUSED ATTACKER. SKILLED WITH A WIDE VARIETY OF WEAPONS.</div></div>
<div><div>SAMURAI USES JAPANESE EQUIPMENT AND TECHNIQUES WITH POWERFUL EFFECTS.</div></div>	<div><div>SWASHBUCKLER A VERSATILE, MOBILE FIGHTER. USES TWO SWORDS.</div></div>
<div><div>MONK A BALANCED TYPE. SHORT ON WEAPONRY, BUT HAS FANTASTIC EVASIVE SKILLS.</div></div>	<div><div>BARD A LIGHTLY EQUIPPED WARRIOR. USES A WIDE RANGE OF "SONGS" WITH MAGICAL EFFECTS.</div></div>

[RECOVERY CLASSES]	[MAGIC ATTACK CLASSES]
<div><div>CLERIC THE ULTIMATE HEALER. HAS THE GREATEST RECOVERY ABILITIES.</div></div>	<div><div>SORCERER SPECIALIZES IN DIRECTLY INFLECTING DAMAGE ON OPPONENTS.</div></div>
<div><div>DRUID A MAGICAL RECOVERY CLASS ALLIED WITH NATURE AND THE SPIRITS.</div></div>	<div><div>SUMMONER SPECIALIZES IN SUMMONING AND CONTROLLING MYTHICAL BEASTS AND SPIRITS.</div></div>
<div><div>KANNAGI A PREVENTATIVE RECOVERY CLASS THAT BLOCKS DAMAGE.</div></div>	<div><div>ENCHANTER SPECIALIZES IN MANAGING ABNORMAL STATUSES AND MP.</div></div>

AFTERWORD

To those I haven't seen in a while, welcome back. To those I've never met, it's great to meet you. This is Mamare Touno.

The book you're holding is the September release, which went pretty much the way we initially planned—I think. I'd like to put out one more volume before the year's over. The first season of the *Log Horizon* anime was still going strong when it ended its run, and as your messages of support echoed like the sound of the surf, I serialized the material equivalent to Volume 8.

Did you check out the anime? Cool (?) Shiroe, cute Akatsuki, dependable Naotsugu, and the dashing Captain! The staff drew each character with a lot of love, and I'm really grateful. The younger group—Minori, Touya, Isuzu, Rundelhaus, and Serara—was especially adorable.

Thank you very much for buying *Log Horizon, Vol. 8: The Larks Take Flight*. The five members of the younger group play an active role in the main story, and they're joined by that shady lady from Minami and the new character Roe2. It's a road movie with all sorts of participating characters. I'd decided that *Log Horizon, Vol. 8* would be a story about the younger group quite a while back, but the story took this shape and ended the way it did thanks to the love from the members of the anime staff.

Setting that aside, let's go to the second-term heroine. This is a story about Ms. F—ta, and no matter how firmly she denies it, I intend to keep backing that *hisssss*.

As a matter of fact, Ms. F—ta has been looking limp these days. Ms. F—ta,

who's always cheerful and peppy, is limp. She's working too much, you see. Well, she's got two or three properties that are being turned into anime, so there's no help for that. No matter how capable she is, she can't create shadow clones of herself. There are anime script meetings almost every week, plus postrecording sessions once a week; if she goes to all of them, that's four anime-related jobs a week, and then there're the writers and illustrators and designers and editor meetings and sales meetings, so she's going to die. She'll die. Editorzania death work.

That's how things are for us at the moment, and when we get together, there's only one subject we talk about:

"I want a vacation."

"I want a vacation."

"I want to go to a hot spring."

"I want to go to Okinawa."

"The beach is pretty nice." (*Hara joins in.)

"It is, huh?"

"Everyone's dumb. That 'n' half-naked."

"I want to sleep."

All three of us seem like something out of *Hamburger Hill*, so when we meet, we drink tea and shoot the breeze for half a day (all the while doing our very best to ignore the words "Get to work").

Come to think of it, I was talking with Ms. F——ta the other day: "Time goes by so quickly lately, and I just can't seem to remember things." "Yeah, I know exactly what you mean." So I asked her, "By the way, Ms. F——ta, what did you do over the past six months?" and she said, "I went to America! (*for a work-related event)."

"Anywhere else, besides America?"

".....I went to America!"

"Did you do any other work?"

“Hissss...? Hissss!” (Jumps.)

She ducked the question.

All my young readers are sensible people, so I doubt you have any real expectations for adults, but as you suspected, this is about all grown-ups are. On the other hand, even if you’re this half-baked, apparently you can still get by. A life lived at a full sprint will easily get you slapped with a “bad work practices” certification, so it’s important to take little breaks. That’s the secret to holding on to your humanity. Parenthetically, I personally have almost no memories of the past six months. *Hissss*.

And with that report on recent events, this has been *Log Horizon*, Vol. 8.

I’m getting on in years, so my student days are in the distant past, but even so, I did spend them in a peaceful district far from the heart of the city. I wasn’t a great student, but I do remember hanging out in the club room after school with my friends and telling really dumb tall tales for hours on end.

Volume 6 was a story about women’s friendship, while Volume 7 was about men’s friendship. This one, Volume 8, is a story about coed friendship. I want the people living through that now to think, “Oh, right, that’s right, that’s how it is. Dumb stuff,” and I’d like readers for whom those days are past to smile in nostalgia.

I think youth is a time when you’re either frustrated by your own helplessness—worried about what you’re going to become, and are crushed by that pain and unease—or you don’t think at all and just get through it on enthusiasm and momentum.

(That said, it’s not as if you “become somebody” when you’re an adult. You think, “It doesn’t matter how far I go; there’s no finish line for ‘becoming somebody.’ In other words, the only thing to do is do the work that’s in front of me,” and give up—or accept it—and that state is called being an adult.)

I think it’s a tough time to have dreams. If you set the wrong goal and fail to reach it, it’s embarrassing, and there’s no telling what other people will say to you. It’s also a time when just having a huge dream is enough to get people telling you, “You really think you can do a thing like that? That’s the sort of thing that a handful of people with talent are supposed to aim for.” Still,

although the world is a harsh place, on the other hand, it's also a pretty random one. The fact that I'm managing to get by is proof. As I wrote *The Larks Take Flight*, I was thinking, *I can't irresponsibly glorify dreams, but I don't want to run down the people who are getting ready to take that first step right now, either.*

When they're acknowledging boys and girls, adults are generally tepid. You can't openly praise them, but I've done awkward stuff like that myself and there's no help for it. It's when you're thinking, *You can do it!* and sneaking glances at them, even as you pretend to ignore them that things are good... So I think it's fine for boys and girls to sponge meals off middle-aged men and women. It's a fair transfer of income.

I don't ordinarily do these, but I'm including acknowledgments this time.

I had the story in *Log Horizon*, Vol. 8—a story about having a fixed number of songs—planned when I began the serial, but it's thanks to the anime that it ended up with the structure it has now. In part, I was influenced by the brightness and optimism of the voice actors for the younger group. *Ms. Matsui's Isuzu is bound to be a font of girlish emotions on the screen. Mr. Kakiyama's Rundelhaus will watch over her warmly. In that case, Ms. Tamura's Minori, Mr. Yamashita's Touya and Ms. Kuno's Serara are sure to use their innate power to create the story.* Because I believed that, I was able to really come to grips with this story as I wrote it.

I'd also like to thank one other person: Yasuharu Takanashi, the composer. I used him as a model for Isuzu's dad, who appears in the story. His passion for music, his stoicism, his cheerfulness. On the pretext of interviewing him, I pestered him for all sorts of stories, and he taught me about the difficulties and joys of making music, not as a hobby or a job, but as a way of life.

Mr. Takanashi's team created forty-two pieces of music for season one of the *Log Horizon* anime. Since season two is beginning, they're making even more music for us. The world of *Log Horizon* has been given new music. That's world-class magic, and I'm sure the readers of *Log Horizon* will recognize it for what it is! Thank you very much.

This time as well, the items listed on the character status screens at the beginning of each chapter were collected on Twitter. I used items from

@5_case, @aiirorakko, @az_val, @Dateryu, @dharma0430, @dok_0015, @gubei_muho, @hidukikou, @hige_mg, @hpsuke, @iron007dd22, @kazamasa504, @kaze_syuki, @makiwasabi, @nyamato299, @root4253, @shisei_ssi, @ssyamono, @telutelute, @touya1818, @usui_takao, and @yutask. Thank you very much!! I can't list all your names here, but I'm grateful to everyone who submitted entries. I actually got submissions from overseas, too. Lately, people are watching *Log Horizon* in Taiwan, France, and all sorts of other countries. Anime is mighty!

For details, and for the latest news, visit <http://lhrpg.com/>. You'll find information about Mamare Touno that isn't *Log Horizon*–related there as well. There's also information on the anime. The TRPG that was released in April is really jumping.

Finally, Shoji Masuda, who produced this volume (*OreShika 2* now on sale); Kazuhiro Hara, the illustrator (I'll come over to hang out again); Tsubakiya Design, who handled the design work; little F——ta of the editorial department! Oha, I'm in your debt yet again! And Tosho Printing! Thank you very much!

Now all that's left is for you to savor this book. *Bon appétit!*

Mamare "Once summer's over, I'm taking a trip" Touno



GREAT
WORK!!
HARA

About the Authors

AUTHOR: MAMARE TOUNO

A STRANGE LIFE-FORM THAT INHABITS THE TOKYO BOKUTOU SHITAMACHI AREA. IT'S BEEN TOSSING HALF-BAKED TEXT INTO A CORNER OF THE INTERNET SINCE THE YEAR 2000 OR SO. IT'S A FULLY AUTOMATIC, TEXT-LOVING MACRO THAT EATS AND DISCHARGES TEXT. IT DEBUTED AT THE END OF 2010 WITH *MAOYUU: MAOU YUUSHA (MAOYUU: DEMON KING AND HERO)*. *LOG HORIZON* IS A RESTRUCTURED VERSION OF A NOVEL THAT RAN ON THE WEBSITE *SHOUSETSUKA NI NAROU (SO YOU WANT TO BE A NOVELIST)*.

WEBSITE: [HTTP://WWW.MAMARE.NET](http://www.mamare.net)

SUPERVISION: SHOJI MASUDA AS A GAME DESIGNER, HE'S WORKED ON *RINDA KYUUBU (RINDA CUBE)* AND *ORE NO SHIKABANE WO KOETE YUKE (STEP OVER MY DEAD BODY)*, AMONG OTHERS. ALSO ACTIVE AS A NOVELIST, HE'S RELEASED THE *ONIGIRI NUEKO (ONI KILLER NUEKO)* SERIES, THE *HARUKA* SERIES, *JOHN & MARY: FUTARI HA SHOUKIN KASEGI (JOHN & MARY: BOUNTY HUNTERS)*, *KIZUDARAKE NO BIINA (BEENA, COVERED IN WOUNDS)*, AND MORE. HIS LATEST EFFORT IS HIS FIRST CHILDREN'S BOOK, *TOUMEI NO NEKO TO TOSHI UE NO IMOUTO (THE TRANSPARENT CAT AND THE OLDER LITTLE SISTER)*. HE HAS ALSO WRITTEN *GEEMU DEZAIN NOU MASUDA SHINJI NO*

HASSOU TO WAZA (GAME DESIGN BRAIN: SHINJI MASUDA'S IDEAS AND TECHNIQUES).

TWITTER ACCOUNT: SHOJIMASUDA ILLUSTRATION: KAZUHIRO HARA AN ILLUSTRATOR WHO LIVES IN ZUSHI. ORIGINALLY A HOME GAME DEVELOPER. IN ADDITION TO ILLUSTRATING BOOKS, HE'S ALSO ACTIVE IN MANGA AND DESIGN. LATELY, HE'S BEEN HAVING FUN FLYING A BIKITE WHEN HE GOES ON WALKS. HE'S BEEN WORKING ON THE LOG HORIZON COMICALIZATION PROJECT WITH COMIC CLEAR SINCE 2012.

WEBSITE: [HTTP://WWW.NINEFIVE95.COM/IG/](http://www.ninefive95.com/ig/)

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