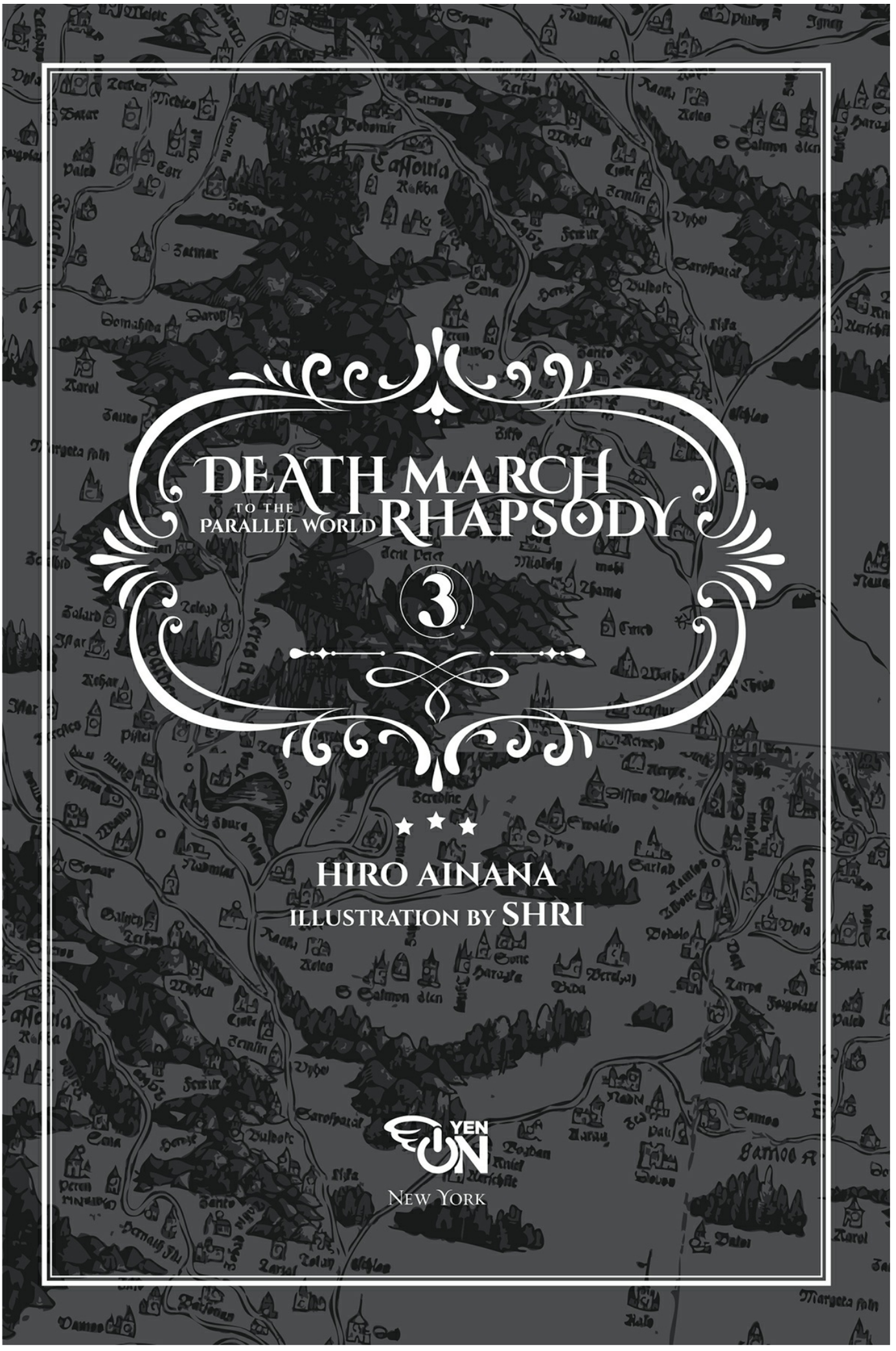

DEATH MARCH 3
TO THE PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY
HIRO AINANA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI


DEATH MARCH 3
TO THE PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY


DM3
Characters of Death March
NANA
A homunculus and former subordinate of Zen.
SATOU
A twenty-nine-year-old programmer who has been transported to a parallel universe.
LIZA
A scalefolk girl.
LULU
Born in the Kuvork Kingdom. She is Arisa's older sister.
TAMA
A cat-eared girl.
POCHI
A dog-eared girl.
ARISA
A former princess of the Kuvork Kingdom. She was Japanese in her previous life.
MIA
A taciturn elf who loves music.


"It's a tiny Tama, sir!"
"Mine's a tiny Pochiii?"
"Bunny."
"So remarkably soft and round... Indeed, it is very cute."



DEATH MARCH TO THE PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY

3

★ ★ ★

HIRO AINANA

ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 3

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by shri

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Journey

Satou here. In old computer RPGs, I always felt gaining the ability to travel via horse-drawn carriage was an important turning point. It's not nearly as comfortable as a car, though.

The carriage rattled and rumbled along the main road.

"Ooh!"

"Meeeow!"

Each time a small animal like a mouse or a rabbit peered out from the bushes on the side of the road, Pochi and Tama nearly leaped out of the carriage. And each time they did so, Liza was there to hold them back by their belts.

The carriage was rolling along no faster than a family bicycle, but it would still be dangerous if they fell and got dragged under the wheels.

"Pochi, Tama, you'll fall out if you lean over the sides, so please keep your backs against the coachman's box."

"Yes, sir."

"'kaaay."

The two responded in the affirmative and situated themselves on the left and right sides against the back of my seat.

I knew they would behave only until something else caught their attention, though.

The breeze was a little chilly, but it felt nice with the warmth of the sunlight.

Since this was a fantasy world, I had expected some random monster encounters, but in reality the journey was actually quite peaceful. This was probably thanks to the efforts of Zena and her comrades on their patrol.

However, when I checked the map, I saw monsters lurking farther away from

the road. Understandable—it was probably impossible to eradicate them completely.

For about an hour after we left the city, our surroundings resembled more of a random smattering of trees than a full-on forest, but we had left that behind and were now journeying through a very hilly area.

In the distance on our left, I could see the mountains leading to the Cradle of Trazayuya, where the Undead King Zen had held Mia captive.

The occasional tree or shrub poked its head out from the sea of weeds between the road and the foothills.

Before we'd reached this uneven area, we'd encountered other travelers in wagons or on foot, but most of them had gone west at a fork in the road.

Down the west highway was Seiryuu County's mining city, and beyond it, the road crossed two more counties into one that was apparently a very prosperous area for trade. Most merchants would be heading that way.

According to my map, there were still a few other carriages on the south highway besides ours, but none that I could actually see.

There were counties and baronies to the south, too, but because of the relaxed laws there, merchants tended to keep their distance.

The trader who'd filled me in on all this had added that things were safe enough in the Ougoch Duchy, which was famous for the night view of its canals, but any farther than that and one would find cheap prices and a market tightly controlled by local sellers.

There were more villages near the west highway, too, so that probably factored into its popularity as well.

"Meeeat?"

"Sheep, sir!"

Following Tama's and Pochi's stares, I saw a distant hill where a shepherd was herding a large flock of sheep.

The two waved frantically toward the hill, but apparently the other person couldn't see us, as they gave no response.

The shadow of what seemed to be a small sheepdog ran about, skillfully keeping any errant sheep from straying too far. It seemed to be an ordinary dog, not a beastfolk person. I hadn't seen any dogs or cats in the city, but I guess people did have them in this world after all.

While I enjoyed the view, the mostly straight road turned into a wide curve along a hill.

The carriage swayed and rattled over a rut. Behind me, I heard small shrieks from Lulu and Mia and curses from Arisa, but I let them pass on the wind, pretending not to hear.

Since the road was obviously just dirt, not paved with stone or asphalt, it was natural that carts would leave ruts and furrows along the way. However, because no two carts followed exactly the same path, some areas were so rough they threatened to damage the wheels.

The horses proceeded along the road at their own discretion, but in order to avoid these ruts, a coachman had to fine-tune their course.

Even with the assistance of my skills, I still didn't have enough experience to avoid all of them.

While I made such excuses to myself, Arisa poked her head in from behind me, propping herself up on Pochi's head.

"Be more careful with your driving!"

"Don't ask so much of me. I'm still a beginner."

I brushed off Arisa's protests noncommittally.

Pochi didn't look too pleased about being used as a step stool. "Arisa, you're heavy, ma'am."

"Sorry, sorry. It's just that you were in the perfect position for me to climb on top of you, so I couldn't help it."

Apologizing, Arisa removed herself from Pochi's head, snuggling into my shoulder instead. This might have made my heart pound if she were a beautiful woman, but since the girl was so young, she just seemed like a spoiled child.

At that moment, I caught wind of a querulous little gurgle. I was probably the

only one who'd heard it, thanks to my "Keen Hearing" skill.

This must have come from Lulu. Even the sound of her stomach grumbling was cute.

I checked the map for a good place to stop for lunch.

"It's almost lunchtime. There's a stone slab on the next hill that seems like it could protect us from the wind—let's stop and eat there."

My proposal was approved with a unanimous cry of joy.

After we'd made our way up the weed-covered path, I stopped the carriage in a sunny area near the megalith.

"All right, here we are. Everyone, it's time to take care of the horses and prepare our lunch."

As I spoke, I climbed down from the carriage and fixed the stoppers in place, similar to the parking brake on a car.

Because I'd already assigned roles before we arrived, everyone set about their work without needing any further instructions.

Pochi and Tama hopped down lightly and pulled out tools from the storage space under the coachman's box to tend to the horses.

The overcoats they normally wore in public must have been inside the carriage, because now they were wearing white shirts and matching poufy shorts. Tama's shorts were pink, while Pochi's were yellow.

"I'll take care of your hooves, sir!"

"Dig, diiig!"

"Be careful not to get stepped on by the horses, you two."

"Yes, sir!"

"Rogerrr!"

I warned the girls to be careful as they dug the dirt and stones out of the horses' hooves. The horses snorted indignantly, as if to protest that they would never have been so careless.

“Nana and I will look for rocks to build a stove.”

“Great, thanks.”

Clad in light-brown leather armor, Liza headed over to gather some of the smaller stones near the large slabs.

“Master, I will be back, I bravely report.”

Nana was the next to speak as she descended from the coachman’s box.

Her long blond hair was tied back in a loose ponytail with a ribbon. She wore a scarlet dress, the likes of which would never be seen in modern Japan, with sleeves that puffed out at the shoulders and a dark-red vest that threatened to burst open from the pressure of the generous bosom underneath.

Naturally, I made sure to mentally record the bouncing that resulted when she hopped down from the carriage.

I didn’t want her nice dress to get dirty while she gathered rocks, so I discreetly pulled out an apron from Storage under the shade of the carriage and handed it to Nana.

I felt eyes boring into my back and turned around to find Lulu. It seemed as though she had been waiting for a chance to speak.

“Master, I brought the bag.”

“Thank you, Lulu.”

I accepted the Garage Bag from Lulu and offered a hand to help her down from the carriage.

I was accustomed now to her moment of hesitation before accepting my hand, but the fact that she still turned red every time really revealed her shyness.

Lulu stepped onto the ground, her fine black hair swishing smoothly. I caught the briefest glimpse of her white legs as her skirt fluttered in the air for a moment. Although the white dress she’d worn in the city had suited her better, Lulu was now wearing a cream-colored shirt and a dark-blue skirt for the journey. Most likely, the white fabric would have gotten dirty too easily.

Arisa was next to approach the coachman's box from the interior of the carriage, striding up with a confident gait.

"Master, help me down, too!"

Arisa's outfit, a dark-red jacket over a fluffy pink top and bottom, seemed unsuited for travel. She reached out her hand and issued a demand in a rather spoiled tone.

Her violet hair swayed in the wind. She normally wore a cloak or a blond wig to avoid attracting attention in public, but she had left those inside the carriage.

It was no big deal, so I reached out to help her down.

…Then, on a sudden hunch, I leaned my head to the side.

An instant later, Arisa's face was where mine had just been, with her lips puckered. *That was close.*

"No more casual sexual harassment, please."

"Aww, I'm only trying to serve my master in accordance with my oath! You're so cruuuel."

"Shush."

Arisa's response was so absurd that I flicked her lightly on the forehead to scold her. Judging from the way she rolled around on the grass dramatically clutching her head, I doubted she felt much remorse.

The wording of our particular agreement did nothing to prevent harassment. I had to be careful not to rely on the contract as a deterrent, much to my frustration.

If Arisa were at least twenty years old… Well, I probably still wouldn't welcome her advances, but I might not mind them so much. But she was the age of a kid in elementary school—I was definitely not interested.

Really, though, Arisa's personality reminded me of something from the middle of last century. I didn't know how old she was before she was reincarnated here, but she didn't seem to want to say.

"Satou."

Finally, Mia the elf appeared, speaking up with a bright smile. Her pointed ears peeked out from underneath her light blue-green pigtails. She wore an outfit that looked like a light-blue version of Arisa's.

With her current healthy complexion, it was hard to imagine how weakened she'd been when I'd rescued her from Zen.

She'll have no trouble enduring the long journey to her hometown in this state.

"Do you want me to help you down, too?"

"Mm."

Standing at the ready with her arms outstretched, Mia nodded happily.

I lifted her by her delicate waist and set her down carefully. Unlike with Arisa, I had no need to worry that she might try anything.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Mia smiled bashfully as she thanked me, then plodded over to the large rocks.

I took a bucket and a small barrel of water from the Garage Bag to give the horses a drink.

Incidentally, I had given the girls an equivocal description of the Garage Bag as "a magic bag that can hold a lot of things" at the beginning of our journey. Just to be safe, I instructed them to keep it a secret so thieves wouldn't try to steal it.

"Mission complete, sir."

"Dooone!"

"Good work, you two."

Pochi and Tama approached to report the completion of their work, and I patted them both on the head.

Just then, Lulu returned from inspecting the undercarriage.

"Master, there are no issues with the wheels or the axle. They had bits of

weeds stuck to them, so I cleaned them off.”

“Great. Thank you, Lulu.”

Since our inspection was over, maybe now would be a good time to feed the horses—no, maybe I should make them a bit more comfortable first.

“Lulu, can you help me unharness them?”

“Certainly, sir.”

With Lulu’s help, I released the horses from the yoke and hooked the reins to the carriage.

I checked their faces where the bits had been attached, but the horses didn’t seem to have any scratches. It was probably fine.

“Master, can I help you with anything?”

Arisa dusted off her clothes as she approached me. There was a faint red mark on her forehead; I’d have to take care to be gentler with my forehead flicking from now on.

“Yeah, give salt and fruit to the horses, if you would.”

After I withdrew a small trough and a sack of feed from the Garage Bag, I handed Arisa two pieces of fruit and a small pouch of salt.

The fruits were a reward to the animals for their hard work. The veteran coachman had warned Lulu and me not to forget to supply cart horses with salt on a long journey.

“Okay. Mia, come help me.”

“Mm.”

Arisa called out to Mia cheerfully. The elf girl, who was gazing at the megaliths, nodded and began tending the horses with Arisa.

“Pochi, Tama, isn’t that dangerous?”

“We’ll be all right, ma’am.”

“Fiiine!”

I followed Lulu’s nervous gaze and saw Tama perched atop Pochi’s shoulders

to wipe down the horses' backs with a dedicated towel. It did look dangerous at first glance, but Pochi's feet were planted firmly on the ground, so they should be safe.

Maybe I should pick out some materials and build a stepladder?

As I contemplated this, I prepared lunch for the horses in the trough: a mixture of grains and straw. It was a simple meal, but for cart horses it would be top class.

The horses finished off the fruit from Mia and Arisa in no time at all, then plunged their heads into the trough to chow down with fervor.

"They're munching, sir!"

"Yummyyy?"

Pochi and Tama plopped down in front of the small trough to stare enviously at the food within. Their eager gazes seemed to make the animals uncomfortable.

For the sake of the horses' mental health, I sent Pochi and Tama to find rocks we could use to hold down the blankets we'd sit on during lunch. The pair readily agreed and zipped away, excited to have received another assignment.

"Excuse me, Master. Is it all right if I use some of this thick fabric?"

"Sure. Are you making an apron?"

"I want to touch up the straw cushions."

After washing the horse drool off her hands in the water bucket, Arisa wiped them clean with a handkerchief as she made her request.

I had hastily crafted some straw cushions to help protect the girls from the vibrations of the horse-drawn carriage. The makeshift pillows were simple bundles of straw with cloth wrapped around them like sushi rolls.

I had tried to buy some premade cushions at a shop, but no one was selling them in Seiryuu City, and since ordering them would take too long, we had concocted a solution ourselves.

"So the straw isn't quite cutting it, huh?"

“That’s not it. The actual cushioning is fine, but the straw is starting to pop out and scratch my bottom from all the shaking.”

Arisa shook her head.

I see… So it was the durability that was lacking.

“Well, why don’t we all work on the cushions while we wait for lunch to be ready, then?”

I reached into the Garage Bag and pulled out a large sack filled with firewood, cooking utensils, and ingredients for Liza, and then I gave the Garage Bag itself to Arisa. The straw cushions were bulky, so I figured the children might need that bag for carrying them.

Then, since Lulu had nothing to do, I brought her with me to deliver the cooking supplies to Liza.

On the bare soil a short distance from the carriage was a stove of rocks, looking much sturdier than I’d been expecting. I spoke to Liza and Nana as they reviewed their work.

“This is more impressive than I expected.”

“Yes. We need something of this caliber to prepare stew for so many people.”

Lulu handed the cooking utensils to Liza.

“Ms. Liza, shall I prepare the firewood?”

“Yes, thank you.”

As Lulu started arranging the firewood in the stove, Liza perused the cooking supplies.

“Master, my work is completed, I report.”

“Yeah. You did great.”

Nana reported to me rather proudly, and I answered her with appreciation.

“Master, is it all right if I start the fire now?”

Lulu had finished loading the stove with firewood and was holding flint in one hand.

“Hold on, Lulu. Use this instead.”

Because lighting a fire with flint was a fairly difficult task, I handed Lulu the Tinder Rod I’d brought along.

“Ah, I’ve never used this Magic Item before. How does it work?”

“Fire comes out of the tip when you press down on that raised area.”

Lulu looked flustered when I handed her the tool, so I explained how to use it.

“Wow, how remarkable! Being able to make fire this easily is like magic.”

“Well, it’s a Magic Item, after all.”

Lulu’s eyes widened with surprise at the convenience of fire at the flick of a switch.

When Lulu stayed with her aunt on her mother’s side in the city, they’d had only flint, and when she was Arisa’s attendant in the castle, she wasn’t allowed into the kitchen. This was her first contact with a Magic Item for creating fire.

“Have either of you ever cooked before?” I asked Lulu and Nana.

“I’ve kept watch over the fire and peeled vegetables and such, but I’ve never done any proper cooking.”

“Number 3 had all the cooking duties, so I lack hands-on experience. I am learned in the basic operational sequences of cooking, but I do not have any recipes registered to my library. I would very much like to install them, I wish.”

Liza seemed to be the only one who could prepare a meal, but these two would at least be able to lend a hand.

Nana’s choice of words was strange as usual, but I understood what she was trying to say. *I wonder if filling a homunculus with knowledge is as easy as installing an app on a smartphone.*

I was sort of curious, but appeasing everyone’s hunger took first priority.

“I’ll task you two with helping Liza, then. I request you do as Liza tells you and make us some delicious food.”

“We’ll do our best.”

“Yes, Master, I confirm.”

Apparently, Nana’s peculiar manner of speaking was rubbing off on me a little.

“Liza, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Understood, sir.”

After a quick discussion of the menu, I left Liza in charge of the kitchen.

Halfway between our makeshift kitchen and the horse-drawn carriage, Arisa and Mia were struggling to spread out the blanket they’d gotten from the Garage Bag, so I went over to help them.

Pochi and Tama arrived right on time with rocks, which we set on each corner to weigh down the cloth, creating our rest area.

Arisa piled the straw cushions on top of the blanket.

“Okay, Pochi and Tama, please remove the cloth from the straw bundles. They should come off if you untie this string.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Aye-aye!”

“Mia, if there are any pieces of straw in the unwrapped bundles jutting out, please remove them.”

“Mm.”

Arisa delegated assignments to the younger girls.

Next to Arisa, I laid out a sewing set, bundles of various cloths, and tanned goatskin leather.

“Hmm? What do we need leather for?”

“If we use this for the part you sit on, straw won’t poke out there, right?”

“Yes, that’s certainly true, but is it all right for us to use something as expensive as goatskin leather?”

Arisa tilted her head uncertainly.

“Sure. I wouldn’t want everyone’s rear ends to get all scratched up just to

save a little money.”

“That makes sense. They wouldn’t be soft to the touch anymore!”

Arisa nodded with a big smile, but that was nowhere near my intention. I had no plans to touch anyone’s behind, least of all theirs.

“If we can use the leather, then we won’t need the thick cloth. Master, can you cut it into pieces about this size? My hands are too small to use such large scissors very well.”

“Sure. I’ll take care of it.”

I cut the leather to the size Arisa had specified and handed it to her.

Struggling with the large leatherworking needle, Arisa sewed the leather piece to the cloth that Pochi and Tama had removed.

This is the perfect chance to show off my reliability as a master with my “Sewing” and “Leather Crafting” skills.

I threaded a needle of my own, then stitched the leather and cloth together effortlessly. The speed and accuracy of my fingers would put a sewing machine to shame.

“I-incredible! How can you be so absurdly fast with that needle…?”

“Amazing, sir!”

“Amazingly amaziiing!”

Heh. All this praise feels pretty good. After I finished, I tugged on the needle to tighten the seams when…

“…Huh?”

“Mm?”

For some reason, the thread slid right out, and the leather and cloth separated.

I voiced my confusion in unison with Mia, who’d been watching at my side.

“Why?”

“…What do you mean, whyyy?!” Arisa howled toward the sky.

When she was more or less done, she regained control of her breathing and pointed out my mistake.

“Honestly! You forgot to knot the end of the thread!”

A knot… Somewhere in the back of my mind, I vaguely remembered reading this in a textbook long ago. I must’ve learned something about it in home ec way back when.

I would have to let Professor Arisa teach me the basics of sewing.

I guess just having the skill wasn’t enough to make up for a lack of basic knowledge after all. Reality is cruel.

On my next try, I was able to finish properly and bask in everyone’s praise. Then we bound the completed leather-backed cloth to the bundles of straw.

I couldn’t help but note that Arisa tested my work each time to make sure it was free of mistakes.

There was some yellow cloth amid the fabric we’d bought in Seiryuu City, so I prevailed upon Arisa’s know-how to create a palm-size chick plush toy. I used little balls of felt for the stuffing.

> Skill Acquired: “Doll-Making”

> Title Acquired: Puppeteer

I gained the relevant skill, but my “Sewing” skill alone seemed to be enough to make a stuffed animal, so I didn’t bother allocating any points to it.

“Meeeat?”

“What a plump little bird, sir!”

Tama and Pochi must have been hungry, because they were eyeing my newly made plush toy with relish.

“Mm, cute.”

Mia squeezed the toy a few times with pleasure.

“Master!”

Nana abandoned her work at the pot and rushed over, though her face was

impassive.

What's going on?

"Permission to care for this larval creature, I request."

Without taking her eyes off the toy, Nana grasped it in both hands, pleading with me.

"You like it, do you?"

"Yes." Nana nodded emphatically, her expression still blank as ever. "So remarkably soft and round… Indeed, it is very cute."

She rubbed her cheek against the little stuffed chick. Despite her unchanged expression, she seemed very happy.

I guess she is technically less than a year old.

"I'll give the first one to you, then, Nana."

"Mrrrr…"

"Don't be angry, Mia. I'll make one for you, too," I reassured Mia, who was sulking about the loss of the stuffed animal.

I built a rabbit out of white cloth for her, then a little Pochi doll for Tama and a Tama doll for Pochi.

"It's a tiny Tama, sir!"

"Mine's a tiny Pochiii?"

Pochi and Tama showed each other their dolls with huge grins.

"Bunny."

"Yeah, it's a rabbit."

Mia contentedly embraced the rabbit plush she'd received.

Arisa and the nearby Lulu and Liza, who were preparing the food, were looking our way with interest. I guess I'd probably be stuck making dolls for all of them soon, too.

Meanwhile, signs that lunch was nearly ready were beginning to waft through the air.

I put away my stuffed toy–making tools and worked with the younger kids to lay out tableware on the quilt.

“Is it readyyy?”

“I’m sure it will be soon, sir!”

Tama and Pochi hovered around Liza as she finished up with the food, watching her intently. Their impatience was clearly reaching a fever pitch, since they were rocking back and forth rhythmically. Their tails were busily wagging away, too, of course.

“Mm, smells good.”

“Ohhh, my stomach is about to start sticking to my back!”

The delicious aroma drifting over from the pot had captivated Mia and Arisa as well. Apparently, Pochi and Tama weren’t the only hungry ones.

“The food is ready, everyone.”

“Need heeelp?”

“I’ll carry it, sir.”

At Lulu’s call, Tama and Pochi rushed over, wiping the drool from their faces with their arms.

The two of them clamored around the huge pot as Liza lifted it, but it was far too big for either of them to carry, so Liza simply brought it over herself.

Pochi and Tama trailed eagerly behind her, gazing up at her with excitement.

The younger kids finished setting the table, and with a chorus of “Thanks for the food” (a custom Arisa had spread to the others), the meal began.

Mia knew the phrase, too. She explained that a hero who had lived in her Elvish village before she was born, which in Mia’s case meant at least a hundred years ago, had popularized the custom.

Today’s lunch was a quiche and pickled vegetables courtesy of the Gatefront Inn, along with stew made by Liza and company. The stew contained beans, potatoes, onions, and dried meat.

The somewhat oddly cut potatoes were probably the result of Lulu’s and

Nana’s handiwork.

I ate a mouthful of the thick, creamy stew. Overwhelming saltiness hit my tongue first, followed by the strong flavor of potatoes and dried meat. A moment after that, the sweetness of the onion brought a bit of relief from the harsh salty taste.

The beans resembled large fava beans, but their softness and delicious flavor bore a closer resemblance to edamame. *I’d love to boil these beans and try them chilled as a snack with a beer someday.*

Compared to meals made by more skilled chefs like the ones at the Gatefront Inn, this meal was more like the heartily seasoned cooking of an unrefined bachelor, but it was still appetizing in its own way.

“It’s delicious, Liza. Lulu, Nana, you did great, too.”

“Much obliged.”

Liza responded to my words of praise with a prim expression. But deep down, she was probably pleased or embarrassed, because her tail was beating the quilt. *Those tails sure are a dead giveaway.*

Nana nodded expressionlessly with the stuffed toy in one hand, but Lulu seemed self-conscious.

“Liza’s cooking is always so good, sir!”

“Liza’s the beeest!”

Pochi and Tama praised Liza, too, spoons clutched tightly in hand.

“Mm, good.”

“Maybe a bit salty, but it’s delicious.”

Mia and Arisa also voiced their satisfaction.

“Master, the wheat porridge is pleasing as well, I report.”

Nana, the only person with a different meal, gave her conclusion in her usual deadpan.

We weren’t bullying or excluding her, of course.

Homunculi like Nana had weak stomachs for the first six months or so of their lives, so she had to either receive MP directly or stick to a liquid-only diet.

This information was also documented in the journals of Trazayuya, the person who'd designed the homunculi; I had no doubt it was true.

When she had been Zen's subordinate in the Cradle, they had entered a facility called the "regulation tank" to be supplied with magic and nutrition.

Nana had already passed the six-month period, but given the circumstances, we thought it best to keep her on a liquid diet for a while to see how she would fare. The plan was to introduce solid food gradually to avoid any issues.

If I had skills like "Magic Manipulation" or "Practical Magic," I'd be able to restore her magic myself, but none of our party members could use those skills, and I thought it would be better for her to eat with the rest of us anyway.

"Will that be enough for you, Nana?"

"Master, it is not a problem, I affirm."

Nana seemed perfectly content, but I decided to offer her fruit water later to cleanse her palate.

Everyone seemed to be eating happily, save for one individual.

For some reason, Mia was extricating the pieces of dried meat from her stew and setting them aside in a smaller dish.

"Mia, don't be fussy. Just eat it."

"Elf."

Yeah, you're going to have to say more than that if you want me to understand.

As if she'd heard my thoughts, Mia mumbled the word *meat* and drew a little X in the air with her finger.

"Oh, so elves don't eat meat? Yep, that's how fairy races ought to be!" Arisa commented happily. True enough, it did seem appropriate for elves to be vegetarian, but Mia was tilting her head uncertainly at Arisa's comment.

Right—since there's a real elf right in front of me, I should ask a question

that's been bothering me for years.

"Mia, if elves don't eat meat, what do you have bows for?"

"Monsters."

That made sense. So they were for self-defense and hunting monsters?

Before the beastfolk girls had gotten strong enough for close combat, I'd instructed them to attack from far away by throwing stones. It would make sense for elves to teach their children to fight from a safe distance with archery or magic.

My thoughts had veered a little offtrack, but if not eating meat was part of her race's culture, it would be best to respect that.

"Well, if you're not just being picky, it's all right."

Mia's attention shifted away from me, as if she'd noticed something else. I tried to follow her line of sight, but all I saw was grass swaying in the wind.

At any rate, I'd have to tell whoever served meals from now on not to put meat in Mia's portion. She seemed able to eat vegetable stew in meat stock without a problem, so we probably wouldn't have to prepare an entirely separate dish like you would for someone with allergies.

Pochi and Tama finished off the little bits of meat from Mia's dish as she removed them.

Now then, it was time to sample the food they'd prepared for us back at the Gatefront Inn.

The quiche had stayed faintly warm in my Storage—impossibly so, in fact, considering the temperature of the air outside. Storage provided some solid insulation.

I'd have to try a performance test on the journey. If I could transport stew and the like and keep it warm, preparing meals would be a cinch.

As I contemplated this, I absently broke off a bite-size piece of quiche and popped it into my mouth. The Gatefront Inn's handiwork was superb, as always.

Both Liza's stew and the innkeeper's quiche were delicious, and we all happily

ate our fill.

The conversation as we shared lunch together might have been the best spice of all.

◆

After we all washed the dishes and cleaned up the meal, we took a break for about an hour.

A part of the reason we were in no hurry was so we could let the horses fully recover, but I also wanted to let the kids play for a while, especially the young Tama and Pochi.

“Private Tama! Private Pochi!”

“Aye!”

“Yes, sir!”

Good answers. They were facing me, but their ears twitched whenever they heard something rustling in the nearby bushes. They looked ready to break into a run across the grassy meadow at any moment.

“I have an important mission for you! Go and investigate that giant stone at once!”

“Aye!”

“Sir!”

I watched as they zipped away like a pair of arrows. “I’ll call for you when it’s time to leave, so don’t go too far!” I called after them, just to be safe.

At the sound of a clear little tone, I turned to see Mia playing a reed pipe. The melody was complex enough for an expert.

“You’re very good, Mia.”

“Oh?”

Mia tilted her head as if unsure of her own skills, though she seemed to appreciate the compliment.

“Princess Mia, I would like to learn the reed flute as well, I entreat.”

“Not ‘princess.’”

Nana had called Mia “princess” when she was still Zen’s servant. Mia held no ill will toward Nana herself, but she strongly disliked the title “princess.”

“But Princess Mia—”

“Nana, Mia doesn’t like being called ‘princess,’ so please don’t do it.”

“Yes, Master. I shall henceforth revise her designation to ‘Mia,’ I affirm.”

…That was easy.

Apparently, the name had been only a habit.

Nana’s expression as she practiced the instrument was relatively focused, though still blank. When Mia and Nana huddled together, their similar faces made them look like a pair of especially close siblings.

As I admired the two of them, Arisa’s voice rang out behind me.

“Lulu and I are going to take a stroll around the rocks to walk off our lunch. Won’t you join us, Master?”

“Yeah, good idea. Liza, would you like to come, too?”

“Yes. It would be my pleasure.”

And so, the four of us took a walk around the enormous megalith.

About halfway up the hill, I saw Pochi and Tama scampering after a rabbit. *Maybe we’ll have grilled hare tonight?*

During our stroll, Arisa announced that she wanted to explore the top of the stone slab. Just to make sure it was safe, I decided to climb up first.

I scaled the side by using footholds like an ordinary person would.

“You’re rather nimble, aren’t you?” Arisa’s comment reminded me of Zena.

I had Liza give Arisa a lift so I could pull her up next to me.

“Wow! What a nice view.”

Arisa cheered and began investigating the megalith, and I warned her to be careful not to fall before pulling Lulu up.

Just as I was helping Liza, Arisa called out to me excitedly.

“Master! Come here! You have to see this!”

“What’s all the fuss about?”

“Just get over here!” I shrugged and joined Arisa. Lulu and Liza seemed just as perplexed by the sudden outburst.

She beckoned emphatically as I approached.

“What did you want to show me?”

“Look at that!”

I followed Arisa’s finger, but all I could see were fallen megaliths. What did she want to show me that for?

“What should I be seeing, exactly?”

“Come on, look closer!”

Aha. Now I understood what Arisa was getting at.

“A stone *torii*?”

“It’s hard to tell because they’ve crumbled now, but I think there used to be three of them here. I wonder if there was a shrine or something?”

Why, I wonder? There was something familiar about the stone Shinto gateway.

—What?

As I gazed at the shrine gate, my vision blurred.

—Don’t forget, Ichirou. We’ll always be together.

An image filled my mind like a flashback.

What is this memory?

—No matter the world, no matter the era, you’ll always be Ichirou.

Though the memory was mostly in black and white, the little girl’s hair and eyes were highlighted in rich color.

Hidden in shadow, her face was impossible to see.

—I wonder if reincarnation is real?

When did I ask that question?

And what was her answer?

—Of course it is. But it's no good if you stop at reincarnation.

…Now I remember. Behind her, I could see the Shinto shrine near my grandfather's place in the countryside.

Then was this girl with the strangely colored hair that childhood friend of mine?

—Humans and gods have very different life spans. They would need divine intervention to be together.

The girl wearing a shrine maiden outfit was performing a traditional Shinto dance.

No, the Kagura dance. A dance dedicated to a deity who fell in love with a human.

—If it's you…… I'm sure you can……

The girl, whose face I couldn't see, reached her small hand toward my cheek —

"Snap out of it, Master!"

When I came to, Arisa's face was right in front of my eyes.

"Huh? Arisa?"

"Honestly! How can you doze off in a place like this? You could've fallen!"

I apologized to Arisa and slowly looked around.

What happened just now?

I checked the log, but I found no record of a psychic attack or anything similar.

I tried to compose myself and search my memories, but I was positive the Shinto shrine entrance near where I'd played during my childhood visits to the countryside had just been the normal red.

And the childhood friend in the flashback had looked totally different from

what I remembered. She'd had colorful hair and eyes like an anime character. At the end, she even had rainbow-colored hair.

Come to think of it, I had made a little *doujin* game set at that shrine back when I was a student. I didn't remember having such a strange conversation in real life; those must have been lines from the game.

Maybe the fatigue from so many days without sleep was starting to catch up with me.

"You're spacing out again."

"Sorry, sorry. I was just remembering a shrine I played at when I was little."

That seemed like an easier explanation than "I was having a flashback to a fan game I made."

I shook off the daydream, staring at the remnants of the stone shrine gates.

Information began popping up around the ruins. I had assumed it was just the remains of some megalithic civilization, but its real identity was much more surprising.

I decided to explain it to Arisa.

"It's a broken Travel Gate."

That was a gimmick often found in games to give the players a shortcut through a long journey, but this one had been destroyed a very long time ago.

"Can you fix it?!"

"Definitely not."

Arisa had asked me that question with enthusiasm, but I shook my head and responded briefly but firmly.

There was nothing about it in the data I had on hand, and there was no way I could reconstruct something I didn't understand.

The idea of shortening our journey video-game-style was definitely appealing, but I wasn't about to throw myself into some unknown destination.

◆

Liza's eyes lit up when she spotted some edible wild plants in the shadows of the megalith, and our stroll turned into collecting them.

A number of small white flowers were growing near the other plants. According to the AR display, they were known as **winterblooms**.

"Lulu, come here for a second."

"Yes, what is it?"

After I picked one of the white flowers, I placed it in Lulu's hair.

"Yep, it really goes well with your black hair. It's cute."

"…I-I'm sure that's not true… It's an insult to the flower to put it in hair like mine."

Lulu didn't seem to take compliments very well. Her gaze wandered anxiously as she deflected my comment.

That's right… I'd forgotten she was considered ugly according to the beauty standards of this world.

What a waste… From my perspective, she was an unrivaled beauty.

"Oh, I know! I'm sure it would suit Arisa much better!"

Lulu tried to remove the blossom from her own hair, but I stopped her and decorated Arisa's and Liza's hair the same way.

Matching the others must have made Lulu feel better; she didn't try to take out the flower after that. Overall, she seemed happy enough, so she probably hadn't truly minded my putting it there.

We had our pick of as many herbs as we wanted. Most likely, not many people knew about this place.

That said, since we didn't want to strip the place bare and leave nothing for the next person, I made sure we stopped before we took too much. I did wish I'd brought along my Garage Bag, but I used my overcoat instead to carry the plants back.

I could use my AR display and "Analyze" skill for details about our haul, so I didn't have a chance to break out the books I bought in Seiryuu City, *Edible*

Plants on Your Journey and *Encyclopedia of Medicinal Herbs*.

In addition to the diverse edible flora, we found small amounts of various medicinal herbs to help stop bleeding and prevent headaches.

Following the whistle of the reed pipe, we made our way back to the carriage where Nana and Mia were waiting.

Judging by the positions of the dots on the map, Pochi and Tama would be back soon, so I asked Lulu to ready some tea.

Liza and I stored the wild plants in the Garage Bag.

Under Mia's guidance, Nana had gained some proficiency at the reed flute herself. This seemed to have awakened Arisa's competitive spirit, as she was shouting and ripping up one of the weeds underfoot.

"I'm not about to lose! I'll show you the powers I learned from playing with neighborhood kids until middle school!"

Arisa tooted determinedly on her reed pipe.

She was skilled enough for a child playing around, but she couldn't even begin to compare to Mia. I plucked a similar piece of grass for myself and gave it a shot.

> Skill Acquired: "Musicianship"

> Skill Acquired: "Instrument Crafting"

> Title Acquired: Instrumentalist of Nature

It was too late now, but I doubted picking a reed and playing music with it really merited the "Instrument Crafting" skill.

I played a single bar on the makeshift instrument and stopped.

A snort of laughter escaped Arisa despite her best efforts. Lulu wore a complex expression but refrained from making a sound. Liza judiciously resisted displaying any visible reaction, and Nana was expressionless as always.

"…Satou?"

Mia regarded me incredulously, as if she couldn't believe her ears.

…Don’t look at me like that, okay?

I hadn’t planned on allotting any points into the new skills I’d gotten, but at Mia’s shocked reaction, I decided to put a few into “Musicianship.”

I just thought it might be useful for chanting spells, since that seemed to require a sense of rhythm. Definitely not because I was mortified at being tone-deaf. Not in the least!

Bwa-ha-ha, behold the power of a level-10 “Musicianship” skill!

“Yikes. You sound like a really talented player doing an impression of a really bad one!”



“Master, I have detected abnormalities in your acoustic effector. Adjustment is required, I advise.”

Arisa and Nana could be so cruel.

“Banned.”

Mia confiscated the reed pipe I’d been using.

I was only a little off-key, wasn’t I…? Not even the “Musicianship” skill was enough for my ineptitude.

“M-Master, I…I’m sure you’ll get better with practice! I believe in you, Master!”

“Thank you, Lulu. You’re very kind.” Lulu was nice enough to comfort me as I sank into despair. *What a hero.* So as not to worry her, I responded with my best smile.

“Substitute.”

Mia prodded my shoulder as she spoke, but I had no idea what she was trying to tell me.

Arisa interpreted.

“You’re in luck, Master. Mia is saying that if you want to hear music, she’ll play it in your place.”

“Mm.”

Mia confirmed Arisa’s translation with a satisfied look.

I wish she would use a few more words.

“Thank you, Mia.”

While I was at it, I thanked Arisa for her interpreting services, too.

“Got iiit, sir!”

While we were playing around with plant-based music, Pochi returned from the other side of the hill.

She was proudly holding up a rabbit in both hands. For a rabbit, its ears were pretty short. In fact, according to the AR display, it was known as a **short-eared**

rabbit, the same species we'd eaten as a whole roast at the Gatefront Inn.

Pochi was covered from head to toe with grass and dirt, but she sported a huge grin.

I accepted her prey and handed it directly to Liza.

"It's small, so I'm sure we can bleed it out before we go."

Liza pulled out a dagger and expertly slit the rabbit's throat, then held it up by its hind legs to let the blood drain.

"Master, since we've acquired this precious meat, I should very much like to butcher it before we depart. Is that permissible?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

This was Pochi's prize, after all, and we weren't in any particular rush on this journey.

"Ms. Liza, could you show me how?"

"You're very eager to learn, aren't you, Lulu? Very well. I will explain, so you may take care of it under my watch, if you please."

"Yes, Ms. Liza."

Thus, Lulu took charge of butchering the rabbit.

Arisa wobbled over to me unsteadily, probably upset by the stench of blood. I didn't blame her.

I caught Pochi as she made to go watch the disassembly of the corpse, and I brushed some of the grass and dirt off her head. The inside of the coach would be covered in earthy debris if she entered it in this state; I instructed her to wash up with water and change her clothes.

"Your hair's gotten all dirty, too."

"Should I wash it, sir?"

"Sure. We have hot water, so we might as well."

I asked whether Mia could use Water Magic for a spell like Soft Wash from the Everyday Magic set, but I got a curt "no" in response. *Too bad.*

Since there was no use griping about what we didn't have, we just had to wash up using ordinary means. I put what hot water we had into a tub and filled it the rest of the way with cool water. I added too much, though, and the end result was rather tepid.

I figured Tama would probably come back filthy, too. I refilled the kettle and put it back on the fire.

Around the time Pochi was done washing up, Liza had finished bleeding out the rabbit and was beginning her rigorous instructions in taking it apart.

At some point, Nana had also joined the lesson. Mia wasn't interested, since she didn't eat meat.

Arisa didn't seem to want anything to do with it, either. She'd turned her back to the scene and thoroughly immersed herself in a spell book.

Pochi looked ready to shake herself off like a real dog, so I stopped her and carefully dried her with a towel instead.

"Meeeat! I got meeeat!"

"Tama's so skilled, sir!"

Behind me, Tama dashed back with a happy report.

What did she catch, I wonder? A bird, maybe?

"Meat?"

Mia tilted her head.

"Whoa! What is that?! It's adorable!"

At Arisa's gleeful cry, I turned around curiously.

Tama's catch certainly was cute. With its soft-looking fur, it was the endearing sort of animal you might find in a pet store. The unconscious puppylike creature had a dark-blue coat with a tuft of orange hair sticking up on its head.

"L-let me hold it for a second."

"'kay!"

Arisa took the fainted puppy into her arms.

According to the AR display, it was a monster called a **Rocket Wolf**. It was only level 1.

I searched for other members of its species on the map but didn't get any hits. Maybe the duke's army had exterminated its parents or something.

Arisa's "Status Check" skill should have told her as much, but I decided to warn her to be careful just in case.

"I know it's cute, but it's still a baby monster, so be careful with it."

"Okeydokey."

The wolf cub had started waking up as Tama handed it over to Arisa.

"Ouch!"

The little wolf violently twisted its body, breaking free of Arisa's grasp and fleeing.

Tama rushed around frantically trying to catch it, but the rocket wolf released a shot of gas from its bottom, launching itself right over Tama's head and about fifteen feet away.

It could've come straight out of a comedy manga.

"My preeey!"

Tama dashed after it, but she couldn't keep up with the wolf cub's desperate bid for freedom and soon plodded back dejectedly.

"It got away."

"Tama, I'm sorry. It's my fault for not holding on to it."

"It's okay."

Arisa apologized, but Tama shook her head weakly.

"Master, I'm sorry. I couldn't catch the meat…"

Tama approached me and offered a despondent apology.

I reached out toward her head to comfort her, but she must have thought I was angry. Her ears flattened fearfully.

"I wouldn't get mad at you for losing a single catch," I reassured her, petting

her head gently. “As long as you’re all right, there’s always next time. I just don’t want you to overdo it and hurt yourself. Okay?”

“’kay.”

Tama opened her eyes gingerly and peered up at me.

“Tama’ll get something even bigger next time,” she declared, wiping away the tears welling in the corners of her eyes.

“I’m sure you will,” I murmured gently, ruffling her hair.

◆

It was Lulu’s turn to drive the coach in the afternoon, but Liza had mentioned she’d like to learn how, too, so I appointed Lulu as her teacher.

The others were all singing along to Mia’s reed pipe music. The tune in question was an anime theme song that Arisa had hummed to Mia to teach her. The show must have been obscure, because the lyrics didn’t sound familiar to me.

I was too old at heart to join in on the innocent chorus of the kids. I leaned back against the rear-loading panel of the coach and watched the sky.

I thought maybe I’d take a nap, but then I decided I’d better use this chance to peruse Zen’s Shadow Magic spell book.

Unlike the ones for beginners, this volume jumped right into spell incantations and handwritten notes, probably Zen’s, and it seemed pretty advanced. Still, I’d already read a few introductory manuals and beginners’ spell books cover to cover several times over in my spare time, so I was able to more or less understand the syntax of the magic.

Besides, the ability to follow a complicated flow of ideas was a key skill for a programmer. I had no problem.

In fact, this read like a children’s book compared to the incompetent spaghetti code of a self-proclaimed veteran who had joined my company a while back. Putting out his fires had been a Herculean task.

The author seemed to have deliberately made the text especially difficult to follow, too, but that wasn’t devious enough to stop me.

The way the variables and codes changed meanings depending on what section I was reading was an unpleasant reminder of my days as an assembler, but all I really had to do was divide it up by section. Decoding it became a breeze.

It might have taken me a little longer before, but since I had such a high INT stat now, I could flip through the book and absorb information with unnatural ease.

I hadn't thought about it when I'd first read a low-level manual, but the more I learned about the magic in this world, the more I realized how startlingly similar it was to a programming language.

As if the person who'd invented magic here had been a programmer, too.

…I felt something warm on the palm of my hand. Maybe Pochi or Tama was messing around with it?

I swept the idle thought to the back of my mind and returned to my spell analysis.

Soon enough, I'd completed my study of elementary Shadow Magic and was ready to move on to Everyday Magic next.

My main goal was to figure out how to use Water Magic to reproduce the Everyday Magic spell Soft Wash, which I'd wanted back when I was helping Pochi wash up.

As soon as I started researching Everyday Magic, though, I realized how different it was.

It was fundamentally unlike any other magic. The former allowed users to transform or create things freely as long as they abided by the laws of magic, but the latter could call on only existing functionalities that behaved like a black box system. At most, one could only do things like expand a spell's range of effect.

In that case, re-creating Everyday Magic with Water Magic might be impossible.

Just as Mia had copied Arisa's humming by ear, I'd have to consider the

techniques necessary to Everyday Magic and copy and paste existing parts of Water Magic into the formula to manufacture a new spell.

I couldn't help but enjoy this kind of research and analysis. Slowly but surely, I lost myself completely in the depths of contemplation.

I could have stayed like that for hours…

…Hmm? I felt something soft and supple under my hand.

Closing the full-screen menu obscuring my vision, I looked over to find that Arisa had pressed my hand onto Nana's ample chest.

…Oh.

My fingers were sinking in. Instinctively, I gave a few light squeezes.

Mia and Arisa quickly yanked my hand out of paradise.

"Lewd."

"H-hey, how long are you planning on doing that?! Let her go!"

Mia was one thing, but Arisa was being awfully rude, considering she'd put my hand there in the first place.

Nana lowered her head, putting a hand over her right breast where I'd squeezed it. Although she looked like an adult, she was actually less than a year old.

I opened my mouth to apologize.

She looked up without the slightest flush on her face and tilted her head inquisitively.

"Master, would you like to touch the left one as well?"

"Can I?"

At Nana's saintly suggestion, I instinctively reached out my other hand, but Arisa quickly interposed herself between us.

As a result, her flat chest stopped my hand short. Very disappointing.

"What do you mean, 'Can I?'?!"

Arisa bellowed, her lilac hair thoroughly disheveled.

“Satou, you mustn’t be indecent. It’s unseemly! You shouldn’t touch the body of an unmarried woman, you know. So no touching.”

Kneeling, Mia scolded me with uncharacteristically long sentences.

It’s a man’s basic instinct to want to touch large breasts, okay? Although that sounds pretty bad now that I think about it, so I’d better keep it to myself.

Nana’s head tilted farther to the side as the two girls in front of me exploded with anger. Her face suggested she didn’t understand what had upset them. I’d have to ask Lulu or Liza to explain it to her soon.

“Good morning, sir?”

“Myaaa…”

Pochi and Tama stretched and yawned, woken up by the commotion.

I’d thought they were being quiet on purpose, but I guess they’d worn themselves out from the singing and had fallen asleep.

The sight of Pochi and Tama rubbing their eyes sleepily had drained some of the fire from Mia’s and Arisa’s fury, and they lapsed into silence. Their cheeks were still puffed up with a hint of pouty rage, though.

Time to deal with this like a proper adult.

“I’ll do my best to avoid any thoughtless contact from now on.”

“You sound like a greasy politician, but fine. I’ll forgive you. An adult should use more discretion! Next time you feel like touching something, just talk to your darling Arisa. We’ll have a private session just for you, okay?”

“Mrrrr. Arisa.”

Arisa’s flippant words made her the new target of Mia’s wrath.

Mercifully, I was able to leave the matter for the two of them to work out and return to the coachman’s box with Liza and Lulu.

“Master, it sounded like Arisa was making a fuss. Did something happen?”

Thanks to the clattering of the horse-drawn carriage, Lulu hadn’t heard the incident in the back.

“Oh, we just got a little sidetracked by one of Arisa’s pranks.”

“Really?”

Once I’d successfully dodged Lulu’s question, I shifted to Liza to change the subject.

“So, have you gotten the hang of driving the carriage?”

“Yes. Thanks to Lulu’s guidance, I am able to lead us along the road without any trouble, though I still get nervous when we pass other people and the horses don’t go straight.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

Liza was still holding the reins of the carriage and seemed to be doing all right on her own. Now we could have a three-person rotation among Lulu, Liza, and me.

“Master, I would like to steer the carriage as well, I entreat.”

“Sure. You can take Liza’s place after the next break and have her teach you, all right?”

“Yes, Master.”

Now that Nana was interested, too, we might very well have four drivers by the next day.

Since I couldn’t hear Mia lecturing in the back anymore, I poked my head in.

Arisa had a few choice words for how quickly I’d abandoned her.

Normally I would have ignored her, but since this time her rash nature had created a good memory for me, I decided to hear her out.

Her complaints ended surprisingly quickly—I decided to cut to the chase with my questions.

“So, what were you trying to do?”

“Nothing, really. I mean, you didn’t respond to anything at all, even though your eyes were open. You were acting strangely on top of the rock, too, so I got impatient.”

So that was why Arisa was so outraged. I certainly had no excuse.

I'll have to remember to close my eyes when I use the menu full-screen.

"I'm sorry. I was so focused on designing a new spell that I lost all—"

"A new spell?!"

Arisa shrieked in surprise, cutting off my apology.

"What about it?"

"Master, you're a spell researcher?"

"No, I was just trying to make one based on an idea I had a little while ago."

Arisa looked very intrigued.

"What spell were you using, though?"

"Like I said, I was creating a new one."

"…You can't just make a spell like that. It would take a research institution decades of work and inordinate funds and human resources to do a thing like that!"

That seemed like an exaggeration.

"Maybe for a large-scale tactical magic spell or something. Right? I'm just trying to make a Water Magic spell that resembles the Everyday Magic Soft Wash, that's all."

"…'That's all,' huh?"

I shrugged as I corrected Arisa's misunderstanding. But she didn't act convinced.

Since we were on the subject anyway, I figured I'd consult Mia about it, as I'd been planning to request her help with the experiment.

She was studying a spell book right next to me when I said, "It's almost ready, so I was hoping you could try it out for me next time we take a break, Mia. Do you mind?"

"Mm, sure."

With Mia readily in agreement, I'd have to perfect the spell before our next

break.

I checked my log and noticed I'd gained the Researcher title, but no useful skills like "Magicology" or "Spell Creation."

Oh, I'd forgotten about what Arisa wanted to say.

I apologized for getting off subject and asked her why she'd wanted my attention in the first place.

"I was hoping there was a board or something so we could play cards in the carriage. Do you have anything?"

"Mm, instruments."

I had some wood, but it would be hard to make much of anything right now.

I technically had the skills to fashion a musical instrument like Mia wanted, but I didn't have any guidelines or recipes, so I couldn't. There was nothing useful in the documents I had on hand, at any rate.

"I don't have anything on me, no. Shall we stop at a town tomorrow to buy some cards and instruments and such?"

The nearest place was a small town called Kainona. It had a population of only about three thousand, but it would probably be easy enough to find the requested items. I wanted to buy a wooden table set anyway. Some kind of worktop might be nice, too.

◆

As our journey continued in the afternoon, my Water Magic version of a cleaning spell slowly took form.

This time, I made sure to close my eyes while I worked so as not to worry anyone.

When I reached a good stopping point and opened my eyes, I was under a pile of little girls, but in the chilly weather, their body warmth was welcome.

Each time we took a two-hour break, I asked Mia to test out my new spell as an experiment.

On the first break, I found I'd made a careless error that prevented the magic

from activating, but by the second try, the experiment worked successfully on some laundry.

It consumed a little too much magic, so I'd have to improve it by the next break.

About an hour after our second break, I was more or less finished with my revisions. I had a few other spells to use as reference for reducing the magic cost, and thus I figured it out easily enough.

Because I didn't want to spend too much time developing the new spell, I switched over to the map to check our current position and find a campsite for the night.

The site I'd initially settled on was the bank of a pond around twenty-five miles away from Seiryuu City as the crow flies, but our progress had been slower than I expected.

…*Hmm?* The clock in my menu surprised me, so I woke Arisa from her nap on my knee.

"Arisa…"

"Nn… Wha…? I didn't do anything…"

Half-asleep, Arisa rubbed her eyes and sat up.

"Arisa, I have a question. How many hours are in a day here?"

"Huh? Twenty-four, right? Since the clock tower in the castle was off-limits, all I ever had to go by was the sound of chimes signaling the hour."

Come to think of it, I hadn't seen any clocks in Seiryuu City, either. And I didn't remember encountering any when we stayed in the castle.

"I see. Then you don't know how long an hour is here, right?"

"Mm, well, it feels like it's about the same to me… Why, do you think it isn't?"

I nodded slowly.

"Yeah, one of my Unique Skills lets me determine what the time is here. When I compared it with the clock on the cell phone I brought with me from the other side, the length of a minute was the same, but…"

I paused for a moment, then explained my recent discovery to Arisa.

“I think an hour is seventy minutes.”

I hadn’t noticed until I happened to catch with my own eyes as the clock’s minute display turned to **:60**. As I watched, it continued to **:69**, then turned back over to **:00**, so there was no other explanation as far as I could tell.

And if each hour was seventy minutes, then each day would be twenty-eight hours.

“Really? I thought that since a year is three hundred days here, things would be different from the other world, but maybe it’s about the same?”

One year is three hundred days? That’s news to me.

Since a month was thirty days, each year would have ten months. Converted to twenty-four-hour time, that’d be three hundred and fifty days, a difference of about 4 percent. So over the course of a century, there’d be a deviation of about four years.

I shared the results of my mental arithmetic with Arisa.

Still, I would’ve expected a four-hour change in the length of a day to affect me physically, but I hadn’t felt off-color in the least since I’d arrived.

Really, compared to the restoration to my fifteen-year-old self, a little change in health would be hardly a blip on the radar.

All right. My discovery had distracted me, but it was time to get back to the map and figure out how far we had to go before my planned campsite.

Our breaks must have been too long, or maybe my initial estimation had been naive. At this rate, the sun would set well before we reached our destination.

It would be difficult to set up camp for the first time in total darkness. I decided to hunt for a different site.

According to the *Camping Advice* book I’d bought in Seiryuu City, lighting a fire in a highly visible area would risk attracting insect-type monsters, so I opted to camp in the shadows of a small forest along the way instead.

The spot would be completely visible from the nearby hills, but the only

monsters lurking in that direction were extremely far away. I determined they shouldn't pose any problems.

I had bought something called "monster repellent powder," but I wanted to respect the wisdom of my predecessors just in case.

I informed Liza of the change of plan. Since we didn't have a map or an address, the best I could tell her was, "We'll make camp by the forest over that hill."

I did have the map Nadi from the general store had drawn for us, but it was a sketch and wouldn't be of much use in this case.

It certainly would have been easier if I explained my Unique Skills to her, but I was trying to keep the Menu, especially the Map and Storage systems, a secret.

Between that, the enormous amount of treasure I had in Storage, and the fact that I was level 310 with a ton of skills, I was keeping a lot of things hidden. In fact, I'd probably withheld more information than I'd shared.

It wasn't that I didn't trust everyone—it was a matter of safety. If they didn't know, there was little risk of them letting something slip or making comments that might allow others to guess.

No, it was my policy to sow as few seeds of trouble as possible for the sake of my safe and carefree sightseeing tour.

So, in order to reduce the risk of sowing any dangerous seeds, I kept my level and skills a secret. At most, I would give only vague explanations like, "I'm actually a really high level," "I'm good at sensing enemies," or "I'm a bit of a jack-of-all-trades."

Eventually, once everyone was strong enough to protect themselves or we gained some powerful supporters, I figured I would let them in on some of it.

Since we'd changed to a different campsite, we arrived well before the sun set.

"So we really aren't getting to a village today."

"I told you that before, didn't I?"

Arisa sighed, and I shrugged.

Back when they traveled with the slave trader Nidoren, they had always made sure to set up camp in a village square somewhere, even if the villagers shunned them. Camping without the protection of barrier posts was the rash behavior of homeless people and thieves.

“Don’t worry, I bought monster repellent powder to use for camping.”

“You’ll go bankrupt in no time if you use such an expensive chemical every day.”

Arisa shook her head in utter disbelief.

Apparently, repellent powder was meant for emergencies when one had no choice but to camp with no human habitation around for miles.

Still, it cost only one silver coin for a night’s worth. If a single silver coin was all it took to ensure my party wouldn’t have to fear for their own safety, it was well worth the price.

But since I hadn’t told them about the large fortune sleeping in my Storage, I’d caused them some worry. Next time I had a chance, I’d have to let Arisa and the older girls know I could spend a few hundred gold coins without issue.

“All right, since it’s still a little early, let’s go hunting.”

Once we’d finished setting up camp, I made a proposal to everyone.

The reason, of course, was so that Tama could get her revenge. I wanted to overwrite her regret with a happy memory as soon as possible.

“I’ll do my best, sir!”

“Me too. This time I’ll catch something huge.”

“Master, I shall come along as well.”

“Mrrrr. Bow.”

Mia wanted to participate, too, but she couldn’t join in without a bow. Her usual magic took some time to activate, so it wasn’t well suited to chasing prey.

“Well, why don’t you and I practice magic, then?”

“Mm.”

Mia had been sulking, but Arisa swooped in to the rescue.

I handed a piece of paper to Mia with the final version of the new spell, now with an added explanation in Elvish.

“I will peel vegetables for tonight’s dinner with Ms. Nana.”

“I shall do what I can, I declare.”

“Great, thank you.”

Once Liza had given instructions for preparing dinner to Lulu and Nana, the beastfolk girls and I left the campsite.

Naturally, I could hardly go hiking in a long robe. I’d changed into a long-sleeve shirt and trousers. Pochi and Tama had slipped into shirts and trousers, too. In place of armor, I gave them heavy coats for extra protection.

The four of us marched into the foothills. On my map, I saw a herd of red deer up ahead.

“Ah! A rabbit, sir!”

“Wait a moment, Pochi,” Liza called.

Pochi spotted a short-eared rabbit and took off after it.

I’d asked Liza ahead of time to protect Pochi, so she sprinted away behind her after a brief glance in my direction.

“You’re not going to chase the rabbit?”

“Tama wants bigger prey than that,” Tama said stiffly. I hoped she’d be able to take the deer down quickly and return to her usual languid self.

Pretending to search for prey, I gently guided Tama in the direction of the herd.

“I found something.”

“Oh, some deer.”

From the name “red deer,” I’d been expecting vivid colors, but only the fur on their chests was red. The rest was the same color as a normal deer.

Tama and I edged closer to the group from downwind.

Unfortunately, they sensed our presence anyway and fled.

The beastfolk girl gave chase immediately, but she couldn't keep up with the escaping deer. I caught her before she could go too far after them.

"They got away…"

"It's all right, there's still plenty of prey."

The herd would probably be on the alert now, but we could just wait awhile and try again.

We found a spot where we could watch the red deer close by and concocted a strategy together. It would have been easier if Tama had a skill that would allow her to creep up on them, but we'd have to find another way.

We decided I would take the role of a beater and drive them toward Tama, who would hurl rocks to bring one down.

Since raising our voices carelessly would alert the deer, Tama and I devised hand signals. We settled on only three—*attack*, *wait*, and *run away*—so that she could remember them more easily.

Leaving Tama where she was, I circled around them at a larger distance than before. Along the way, I picked up a few stones for throwing.

Motioning *wait* to Tama, I jumped out in front of the herd and drove them toward her.

Once they were within her range, I gave the *attack* signal to the eager girl. The red deer noticed her and started to scatter, so I hurled the stones I'd collected earlier to scare them back on course.

My projectiles shot through the air with the speed of bullets, gouging large holes in the ground in front of the herd. As the deer panicked, Tama began throwing rocks of her own.

The first stone only grazed the back of one animal, but the second hit a different deer square in the head. Because of the distance, she was having a hard time making a clean shot.

The rest of the herd bounded away as fast as they could, leaving their fallen fellow behind.

The injured deer struggled to get up and run, but Tama was already on the scene and quickly delivered the finishing blow with her short sword.

“Big preeey!”

“Congratulations, Tama.”

Tama beamed and lifted up the slain red deer in triumph.

Tearing my gaze away from the reproachful gaze of the dead deer, I stroked Tama’s head heartily and praised her.

We hung the carcass in a nearby tree to begin bleeding it out. (I’d pulled a rope from Storage for this purpose while Tama wasn’t looking.)

Since we’d left the Garage Bag back at the campsite, Tama and I searched for a sturdy stick to help us bring back the deer. Since none of the fallen branches lying around were the right size, we ended up bending a somewhat thin tree toward the ground and hacking off a branch with a dagger to make a pole.

Next, we would tie the feet to our pole and carry it back to camp together. I could’ve carried it over my shoulders alone, but I decided against it, since I didn’t want to get fleas.

Once the game had mostly bled out, Tama and I lifted it and carried it back toward the campsite.

“Preeey!”

“Wow, amazing, sir! Liza! It’s meat, sir! Tama and Master brought back some huge meat, sir!”

Pochi seemed happiest to see Tama and me returning with the red deer, racing around in circles with such excitement that I thought she might pass out.

Everyone had assembled at the campsite except for Arisa and Mia. Liza and Pochi had returned early.

“Welcome back, Master. What wonderful game you’ve brought. You must have worked hard, too, Tama.”

“Yeah!”

Tama’s ears and tail perked up at Liza’s words, and she responded with pride.

“Master, welcome back. Ms. Tama, you did a great job.”

“Master and Tama, I applaud your spoils.”

“I did my beeest?”

When Lulu and Nana complimented her, too, Tama reacted with uncharacteristic shyness.

Since Liza had come to greet us, I gave her the pole with the red deer. Liza accepted it easily and began butchering it with Lulu.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but underneath that dignified demeanor of hers, I sensed an urge to dance for joy—probably because of the rhythmic movement of her tail.

“Meat, meat! It’s meat, sir!”

“Meaty meat!”

Pochi and Tama sang a song of meat as they skipped along to cheer Liza on as she took apart the deer. The song alone wasn’t enough to express their support, it seemed, and they even created their own odd choreography.

“Oh my, that’s an impressive catch you’ve got there.”

“Back.”

At this point, Arisa and Mia returned. Their magic experiment had apparently been a success.

Mia promptly came over and latched onto me childishly.

“E-excuse me! Mia, that’s not fair!”

“Is too.”

Watching Mia rub her face against my chest, Arisa grumbled crossly.

If she’s that upset, she could just come hug me, too, really. As long as she doesn’t try to harass me sexually, I don’t mind giving out as many hugs as necessary.

Once Mia was satisfied with the physical contact, I asked her to demonstrate the spell for me.

“…■■ ***Bubble Wash*** *Awa Senjou!”*

Frothing foam rose from the water pail nearby and sucked the dirt right off me. Even though some of the bubbles stuck to my body, I didn’t get wet. Just as I’d designed it.

“It’s a success. Thank you, Mia.”

“Mm.”

Mia embraced me again, looking pleased, and I petted her head.

I called over the beastfolk girls, since they’d been out in the mountains, and asked Mia to clean them with magic as well. Liza had already changed clothes and washed her hands, but I figured she might want to experience the new spell with the others anyway.

“How remarkable. I’m next, I imagine?”

“Can’t.”

“Why not?! …Oh, you’re out of magic, aren’t you?”

“Mm.”

It was a handy spell, but the excessive resources it required were a definite flaw. This was after I’d reduced the MP cost by preparing a water source separately, too.

Producing water with magic wasn’t a process of collecting nearby moisture. Instead, it involved giving MP to spirits and having them give it to the water attribute.

I wasn’t clear on the details of that final step, but other spells suggested it was an expensive step, so I simply cut it out.

Still, Mia didn’t have enough MP to use it on all our members at present. I wanted to improve it a little more, but for now, I’d just have to ask her to distribute her magic use among morning, afternoon, and evening.

That night’s dinner featured fried deer entrails with wild herbs, along with a stew of vegetables and steak from the rabbit Pochi had caught earlier. In addition to her porridge, Nana also had some kind of potato potage soup.

Everyone was excited about the lavish meal, but Mia seemed to feel left out, since she couldn't enjoy any of the meaty dishes. And since Nana was silent as she ate, I couldn't tell how she was feeling.

I'd have to come up with some vegetarian and liquid-based variations on our meals. *I should ask Arisa if she has any ideas, too.*

"The tea is ready, Master."

"Thanks. It smells great."

Sipping on a cup of the after-dinner tea Lulu had put on for us, I enjoyed a little relaxation. Liza had sprinkled salt over some nuts that Pochi had gathered, and she fried them up as a snack to go with the tea. The crunch was pretty addictive.

Liza returned from cleanup duty.

Nana and the younger girls were doing the dishes, so Liza's job had been to dig a hole for the food waste. We buried the inedible parts of the deer and rabbit in their own separate holes.

"Liza, aren't you going to report about the thorny thing, sir?" Pochi latched onto Liza's leg and gazed up at her quizzically.

"Report? …Ah, I forgot about that while I was distracted with butchering the deer."

At first, Liza had been confused by Pochi's question, but then she seemed to remember something and smacked her forehead.

That's an unusual gesture for Liza. I wonder if she picked it up from Arisa?

"I collected this item along with the plants."

Liza disappeared into the shadow of the horse-drawn carriage and returned with a thorny succulent wrapped in a thick coat. The AR display gave its name simply as **thorny wild plant**.

"What is that?"

"Well…"

Liza faltered at my question. She didn't know, either.

Pochi had insisted on bringing it back to me because of its sweet scent, and they'd picked only one.

"Is it edible?"

"It smells sweet, sir! It's definitely edible, sir!"

Pochi answered my question very confidently, but the smell appeared to be the sole basis for her belief.

It wasn't fragrant to me at all, by the way. I sniffed and sniffed for all I was worth, but I didn't get a "Scent Distinguishing" skill or anything like that.

"Sweeeet?"

Tama looked puzzled. It seemed she couldn't smell it, either.

"U-um…Master… About this plant…"

"You know it, Lulu?"

"It's a bit different from what I'm familiar with, but I think it's similar to winter licorice. Though winter licorice isn't so large and has fewer thorns…"

I tried using my "Analyze" skill, but it was a different species from winter licorice.

Out of curiosity, I asked Lulu to describe the plant she knew. She said it was a prickly succulent that grew in wintry mountains, and it had thick leaves that could be broken open to find sweet sap. It was popular with mountain children collecting wild plants and nuts.

However, the sugar should be enjoyed only by chewing the flesh, never swallowing. A small amount would be fine, but too much and you'd be glued to the toilet for days on end.

I decided to try pulling off one of the aloe-like leaves to investigate.

I reached out toward the plant, but Liza stopped me.

"Master, these thorns are sharp, so it would be dangerous to touch with your bare hands."

"I see. Thank you."

Considering that not even the poison claws of a greater hell demon could harm me, I doubted a normal plant's thorns would have any effect. Still, because I appreciated Liza's concern, I stopped anyway.

Reaching into my pocket, I removed from Storage the remainder of the leather we'd used to remodel the cushions earlier that day. Then I wrapped it over the thorns so I could pick up a leaf without directly touching it.

The thorns were sharper than I'd expected, though, and poked right through the leather to reach my palm. Regardless, they couldn't pierce my skin, so all I felt was a light prickling.

I used the leather to break off the leaf.

At that moment, a wave of sweetness overtook my senses. Something smelled like water saturated with sugar.

Transparent sap dripped from the broken leaf.

"It's spilliiing?"

"It'll go to waste, sir!"

Tama and Pochi caught the sap in both hands.

So the rest of the sap wouldn't spill out, I adjusted the angle of the plant. I wanted to give it a taste test, so I tried to tilt a few drops of the sap into the palm of my hand. But I tilted too far, and the transparent liquid overflowed all over my hand.

Why was it so watery? This wasn't like any plant I knew. It made sense for parallel world vegetation, I guess.

Once Lulu passed me a container from the Garage Bag, I dumped the leaf and the liquid from my hand into it. I licked my wet palm experimentally.

…It was sweet. A little grassy, maybe, but still as sweet as sugar.

It reminded me of the sugarcane I'd had on a trip to Okinawa, but sugarcane sap didn't flow freely like this.

Pochi and Tama watched me with great interest, so I told them to go ahead and try it.

“Yes, sir!”

“’kay!”

They slurped up the sap noisily.

It tickled—yes, for some reason, they’d chosen to lick my hand with such force I thought one of them might bite off my fingers.

Of course, I meant they should try licking it off their own hands, but all right…

The eyes of the others started boring into me, so I stopped them before too long.

“Goodness, Master. Here, wipe your hand with this.”

“Thank you, Arisa.”

Arisa held out a towel to me in an uncharacteristically chivalrous gesture. I accepted it, handing her the vessel in return. Suspicious, I wet the towel with some water and used it to wipe my sticky hand clean.

“Now then, if I may—”

“Stop right there.”

I halted Arisa as she moved to pour more sap from the vessel into my hand.

“What are you doing?”

“What? How am I supposed to lick your hand clean if there’s not any sap in it, youn— I mean, Master?”

Arisa’s tone implied I’d asked a foolish question, but I definitely hadn’t requested any such service.

And another thing, Arisa. Don’t think I didn’t hear you start to call me “young master.” I’m onto you and your weird little proclivities.

As punishment, I bopped her lightly on the head with my fist.

“If you want to eat it, just put the sap in a dish and dip your finger.”

“…All riiight.”

Lulu procured a small dish from Storage and tipped a bit of sap into it so everyone could try it.

Arisa attempted to lick my finger instead of her own, but I shut her down, of course. The girl never learned.

Once everyone had sampled the treat, they announced their verdicts.

“Mm, it certainly is sweet. Since the kind Lulu had eaten was winter licorice, perhaps we should call this pin frog licorice?” Arisa suggested.

“Hee-hee, you’re right. Although winter licorice isn’t as strong as this. It has a similar flavor when it’s cooked, though, so I’m certain they’re a similar variety.”

“Why ‘frog’? It’s covered in thorns…”

“Right, I suppose you wouldn’t know about frogs for flower arranging, Liza. How about thorn licorice, then?”

During the course of this conversation, the plant’s label in the AR display changed from **thorny wild plant** to **pin frog licorice** and finally to **thorn licorice**.

I see. The names my “Analyze” skill provides are based on a consensus.

Anyway, enough of that discussion. The licorice was a hit with everyone so far, and Lulu had mentioned earlier that people chewed on the flesh of the leaf, so I asked her how to go about it.

“Yes, you simply peel away the skin and cut the flesh into bite-size pieces.”

Ah. I should be able to handle that.

Because I didn’t want to ask Lulu or Liza to do it in case they hurt their hands on the thorns, I used the decorative dagger on my waist to cut away the skin. With help from my “Dagger” skill, I easily bared the emerald-green flesh without cutting myself.

> Skill Acquired: “Meal Preparation”

The skill I’d earned looked useful. I chose to max it out.

The girls watched me with anticipation, so I cut the flesh into small pieces about the size of my pinkie and distributed them one by one.

Everyone chewed in silence.

Then, as if on cue, they all broke into joyous grins at the same moment. Even the reticent Mia and ever-expressionless Nana wore faint smiles. *Sugar’s the*

best.

"Be careful not to swallow it."

After giving a quick warning, I popped the last piece into my own mouth.

Because everyone seemed to be craving sweets now, I asked Liza to make dessert by coating a mixture of fruits in honey. For Nana's portion, I had her make fresh-squeezed juice.

I'd acquired the honey in the Cradle after disposing of a crimson needle beehive in a passageway. It was thicker and sweeter than ordinary honey.

As soon as I tasted it, I noticed a rich flavor unlike the thorn licorice's.

I decided the honey was best suited to desserts, while the thorn licorice was ideal for a snack during the journey.

I cut the thorns off two more leaves and stowed them in containers to save as treats for everyone. I attempted to store the rest of the plant in the Garage Bag, but it was too big.

Everyone's attention was focused on Liza's dessert-in-progress, so I unwrapped the thorn licorice from the overcoat and put it into Storage.

…Ugh, now my coat's covered in ants and little aphid-looking bugs. Come to think of it, I haven't tried, since it's impossible in most games, but can I put living things in Storage?

I gently plucked one of the ants off the fabric and tried to stow it away, but it didn't work. The line **Living creatures cannot be put into Storage** appeared in my log, too.

The Item Box functioned similarly to Storage, so it didn't work there either.

Now, I'd never questioned it before when playing games, but why could you store fruits and vegetables but not living creatures? Did the system treat them like corpses?

In an effort to solve this puzzle, I experimented with some nearby weeds.

Cut weeds could go in Storage but not weeds that I'd pulled up from the ground, even once I'd brushed the soil off them. Shortening the roots had no

effect. However, if I removed the roots entirely, Storage would accept the plant. The cut-off roots could be stored, too.

Why is plant grafting possible but not this?

I'd just have to accept that this was how it was.

The Item Box didn't accept living organisms, either.

Still, this investigation did net me the "Experimenting" and "Verification" skills. Now that I had those, I'd have to do a more thorough series of experiments with Storage and the Item Box later.

With so many things to do on the journey, boredom wouldn't be an issue.

As the night wore on, biting insects started flitting near the bonfire, so I threw in some bug repellent.

The monster repellent powder probably wasn't necessary while I was awake. If anything came near us, I'd notice it on my radar and snipe it with my Magic Gun.

"Ooh, I've had enough of these damn bugs!"

The insect repellent wasn't taking effect fast enough for Arisa, and she snapped and destroyed them with low-level Psychic Magic. Now we could sleep without buzzing insects disturbing us.

That said, it was still too early to go to bed.

Before I could start wondering what to do, Pochi made an adorable request.

"Master, please read us a picture book, sir."

"Sure, let me see it."

Pochi took a picture book from the Garage Bag for me to read, and Tama and Mia were quick to plop down next to her. Even Liza seemed interested, as she sat down primly nearby to listen in.

Nana, who'd been admiring her stuffed animal, and Arisa and Lulu, who'd been chatting, turned their attention my way as well.

The book Pochi had brought told of a legend from the mythology of this world.

“All right, I’m going to read it now. Everyone sit quietly, okay?”

“’kay!”

“Yes, sir.”

Once upon a time, seven Gods descended from the heavens, along with the World Trees. The Gods planted the World Trees in the earth and granted wisdom and language to many people.

The people lived peacefully from then on, prospering greatly beneath the eight Trees. However, somewhere along the way, nine Gods came to be in the world.

The eighth God was the Dragon God, living there since before the seven Gods and the World Trees arrived.

The slumberous Dragon God had been asleep for a very long time and awoke to find a very different world indeed.

The Dragon God, though terribly surprised upon waking, was peaceful by nature and not the sort to fuss over such small matters. And so, the Dragon God and the seven Gods accepted one another and carried on in peace.

But the ninth God was different.

“Master, why does the letter at the beginning of *God* look so different, sir?”

“It’s capitalized. *God* is an important word, like a name or a city, right? The first letter of the word changes to make sure you know that.”

Pochi piped up with a question, and I paused to answer. The Shigan language had a system of capitalization similar to that of English.

“You’re so smart, Master, sir. I don’t quite get it, but I still feel like I do, sir.”

Pochi seemed satisfied, so I continued.

The Ninth God was a Demon God who had journeyed from another world.

The selfish Demon God could not bear to be second to anyone else, so he often fought with the other Gods.

Now, the Demon God was terribly jealous that the other Gods each had their own race.

One day, the lonesome Demon God created hell demons to worship him. Together, the Demon God and his hell demons tormented the other races.

Troubled, the other Gods went to him to request that he stop his rampaging hell demons, but the Demon God wouldn't listen.

The weakest race of all, constantly bullied by the hell demons, was the humanfolk. They beseeched the Young Goddess to give them power to fight back against the hell demons.

The Young Goddess was very troubled indeed.

After all, the Goddess herself had no such power to fight. Worried, she sought advice from the other Gods and kings, but all of them simply shook their heads and grunted, offering no help at all.

Thus, the Young Goddess consulted the Dragon God, the strongest of them all. Of course, he could not lend her the power of dragons, as this would cause even greater damage than the hell demons themselves.

The Dragon God hesitated at first, but he took a liking to the human playthings and liquor the Young Goddess had brought him, and so he taught her a single, special magic.

This was the spell to summon heroes.

The magic of hope.

After this, the book depicted the summoned hero defeating demon lords and hell demons, and they all lived happily ever after.

Each time the Young Goddess Parion asked other Gods and kings for help, Pochi and Tama cheered her on enthusiastically.

Since the pair would block everyone else's view if they leaned forward too much, I kept pausing to gently push their heads back before continuing to read.

The picture book was the first in a series. In the second volume, Parion and the hero collaborated to defeat seven demon lords. In the end, the Dragon God transformed one of his fangs into a black blade and gave it to the hero, who used it to chase the Demon God to some far-off moon in the grand finale.

The old woman narrating the picture books concluded with a warning never

to go out walking on the night of the new moon, as that was when the Demon God's power was strongest.

This was probably a moral to make sure kids didn't go out on the moonless nights and hurt themselves.

Because none of the books had a credits page or anything, I didn't know who the author was. Considering that Parion, not the hero, was the clear protagonist of the story, I figured it was someone connected to her temple.

The third volume depicted the hero taking on challenges and adventures to become a demigod so he could wed Parion and join her family.

The angel-like "disciples" who had helped Parion and the hero in the second book were reduced to minor characters in the third, so I felt bad for them.

Even in stories from a parallel world, you couldn't escape the dreaded power creep.

Once we'd finished all three books, it was just about time for bed.

I added the monster repellent powder onto the fire. At first, white smoke billowed up with a scent like a mosquito coil, but after a moment it became odorless.

On the radar, I saw the red dots of monsters downwind of us, drawn in by the light of the fire, immediately move far away. Even the ones upwind wouldn't get too close. The powder was quite effective.

We would take care of the night watch in shifts of two, with one of the beastfolk girls on each shift, so even if a wild animal or monster did approach by some small chance, we would be fine. At the very least, everything nearby was a low enough level for the girls to handle solo.

Pochi and Mia took the first night watch shift.

Both of them seemed sleepy, but once Liza instructed them to wash their faces, they were more alert.

Clearly, being a child in this world was no reason to be spoiled. Liza took a strict attitude with Pochi and Mia to make sure they were wide-awake.

My turn didn't begin until midnight, but I decided to stay up with them for

today.

To keep themselves from falling asleep as they kept watch by the fireside, the two girls used a stick to quietly play tic-tac-toe in the dirt.

I had expected Pochi to mostly concentrate on playing, but when a large rat crept toward the campsite under cover of darkness, she was surprisingly quick to react and zero in on the bush where it was hiding.

Tama's ears were twitching in her sleep, too. I was confident they'd be ready for any attacks.

Eventually, it was time for Lulu and me to take over the watch, but Lulu started nodding off almost as soon as our shift started.

Considering she'd spent the day driving the carriage, cooking, and even helping prepare the deer, she was probably worn out.

Careful not to wake her, I gently carried her over to where Arisa lay and let her sleep.

Well, I guess I have some time to myself now.

Working on a new spell would probably distract me too much to stay properly on guard, so I figured it was best not to do so.

Instead, I decided to try the Storage experiments I'd been thinking about during the day.

In order to do a handful of heat-related tests, I put some kindling in the stove and placed the kettle on the fire. I figured I would try a few different ways of storing it once it boiled and check the ensuing differences in temperature.

While I waited for the water, I tried some other things. First, I took two pieces of paper out of Storage and lit them on fire. Then I put one away in Storage and waited for the other to burn out before removing the first one again.

When I did, the first piece of paper was still on fire, exactly the same as the moment I had put it in. Maybe time didn't pass in Storage.

Well, I might as well compare it with the Item Box.

This time, I took three pieces of paper, marked them with ink in the middle,

and set them aflame.

When they'd burned down to the mark in the middle, I put one into Storage and one into the Item Box.

Again, I waited for the control to burn up completely, then took out the one from Storage. The flame was still at the mark I'd made. Once I'd checked, I returned it to Storage.

Once again, items in Storage didn't seem to change at all. Was time itself stopped inside, or were they simply being stored in a different state entirely? Perhaps, as the name "Storage" implied, they were saved as information like in a game or a computer's external storage device.

Next, I checked the paper I'd put in the Item Box. The fire on this one had gone out just before the paper could burn away. *So the state of objects can change in the Item Box.* After another try, I determined that the fire had likely gone out when the oxygen deposited along with the paper had been consumed.

While I was sharpening my theory, steam began rising from the kettle I'd put on the fire.

Since I'd figured out how time worked, though, experimenting with heat insulation would no longer be necessary.

Still, I'd already boiled the water, and I went ahead and brewed some herbal tea. It was easy enough, since all it took was a handful of herbs and some hot water.

After a sip, a thought occurred to me, and I tried depositing only the liquid inside the cup in Storage. It disappeared without a problem.

Next, I set the cup on the ground and tried to store it, which worked fine. After adding distance between the object and myself, I determined that the maximum distance from which I could store something without touching it was about ten feet. This worked only if I had a visual lock on the item, but marking the target on the map's 3-D display accomplished the same purpose.

I also discovered that if I took a steel spear out of Storage and stretched it away from myself, I could store items up to ten feet away from the tip of the spear.

Maybe a wire setup or a whip like a certain explorer has might come in handy for this…

With that silly thought in mind, I tried storing the flame from the bonfire, but it didn't work.

However, when I reached out toward the vapor rising from my hot tea, I could put away steam without a problem.

Is it determined by the size of the particles? What is fire made from, anyway?

It was possible I couldn't store things I didn't fully understand.

Next, I experimented with mixtures.

When I stored the soil from the ground, it was simply labeled as **Soil**, but if I selected the option for more detailed information, the display gave me a tree breaking down the varieties of rocks and dirt inside. I could easily separate it, in that case.

However, if I dissolved salt into hot water, it wasn't possible to separate the **Salt Water** item into **Water** and **Salt**. *I won't be able to make seawater drinkable, then.*

I also checked whether I could dismantle an insect corpse that I'd gotten in the Cradle without taking it out of Storage, but this was impossible. Too bad. I'd been hoping I could take care of corpses without having to touch them.

In the midst of these experiments, I discovered I could access the Item Box from my menu.

There was now a folder labeled **Item Box** in the same root folder as **Storage**. Just as I could move things between folders in Storage, I could also freely transfer them between Storage and the Item Box.

However, since the capacity of the Item Box was dependent on the skill, it was difficult to verify this.

Since I still had more than enough skill points lying around, I decided to max out the "Item Box" skill.

Despite needing to use MP to take things out of the Item Box, none was needed to move things from the Item Box to Storage.

And while items could be stacked and sorted freely in Storage, this didn't seem to be the case in the Item Box. I couldn't see detailed information or 3-D views, either.

I tried other experiments with the Item Box, but…

It's clearly just an inferior version of Storage. If I take things out, it exposes the contents to outside air, too, so it won't be any good for heat insulation.

Well, this is useless.

Reviewing the unsatisfactory results, I couldn't help but silently grumble to myself.

Still, it wasn't a total loss. In other circumstances, it could be handy for something other than inventory. I was sure I'd find some use for it.

At the very least, it was helpful for disguising the existence of my Storage system.

> Title Acquired: Seeker

The Battlefield

Satou here. I once read in a book, "A journey is made up of meetings and partings." The people you meet and the unexpected reunions are all part of the real thrill of a journey.

The tweeting birds heralded the arrival of morning.

For some reason, my body felt heavy. Opening my eyes and looking blearily at my chest, I saw a willowy little hand hanging on loosely to my shirt. Shifting my gaze to the side, I found Lulu fast asleep, latched onto my left arm.

We hadn't been this close when I went to sleep; she must have snuggled up to me, mistaking me for Arisa.

Next, I checked my opposite side.

There I saw Mia, her frowning uncomfortably in her sleep as two large mounds pressed down on top of her head. Above, the owner of the pair in question slept peacefully, one arm around Mia and the other flung across my chest. Fast asleep, the two really did act like sisters.

I would've felt bad waking everyone up, so instead, I let the girls' soft warmth and pleasant scent lull me back into a light doze.

The fact that my gaze locked onto the heaving of Nana's chest for a moment before I did so could be attributed to my male nature.

I put a lot of effort into shutting down the physiological phenomenon that might normally have occurred in the morning—I'd appreciate a little forgiveness for enjoying my position here.

"Master, breakfast will be ready shortly, so please get up."

Liza, who'd taken the dawn shift of the night watch, came over to wake me up. The slight chill in her voice was likely just my imagination.

I felt a bit guilty now, to the point where I almost wanted to apologize, but I

bit it back and simply wished her good morning instead.

Our voices had woken up Lulu and Mia. Coldly pushing aside Nana's embrace, the elf gave a short, simple, "Morning."

"M-Master, I-I'm sorry! I was so tired, I just—"

Realizing that she was clutching my arm, Lulu hurriedly scuttled away from me. Her pale skin flushed red all the way to her ears.

"A-and to think you had to wake up to an ugly face like mine first thing in the morning—"

Lulu started to apologize with increasing self-loathing, but I cut her off.

"I don't mind lending you an arm anytime you might need it. Besides, I think you have a lovely face, Lulu. I just wish I knew how to phrase it so you'd believe me."

"L-lovely……?"

As if she couldn't believe her ears, Lulu gaped like a fish.

I didn't want to sound like a pickup artist, but I hoped that maybe it would at least alleviate Lulu's complex a little bit…

It's pretty amusing to watch her pretty face warp between expressions, but I should probably get up now.

I smiled at Lulu gently as I started sitting up.

Meeting some strange resistance, I pulled off the blanket to find Pochi and Tama fast asleep, clinging to my shirt.

So these two were the culprits of that weight and warmth I'd felt earlier.

I pinched their noses lightly to wake them up before I told them to change out of their pajamas into clothes for the day.

After Mia pushed them off, Nana's breasts remained upright in a way that valiantly defied gravity. The sight was so bewitching that my hand threatened to move on its own, but since there were children watching, I forced myself to control those urges.

Noticing my line of sight, Mia rather irritably squeezed Nana's chest to wake

her.

“—Start-up sequence initiated. Execution completed. Mia, utilization of chest buffer unit as means of awakening resulted in excessive pain levels, I report.”

“Mm, sorry.”

Nana sat up stiffly with a robotic stream of muttering. I believe the short version was something like, “Don’t wake me up by grabbing my boob. It hurts.”

Mia apologized briefly to Nana, patting her own slim chest rather glumly.

After that, Pochi and Tama, Lulu and Nana began changing clothes, so I moved to the other side of the horse-drawn carriage and did the same.

“Satou.”

“What is it, Mia?”

Thanks to my “Quick Change” skill, I was already decked out in new clothing.

“Dry.”

Mia handed me a towel, took off her pajamas on the spot, and turned her back toward me.

“Night sweat.”

Oh, so she wants me to wipe it off for her?

Mia had been emotionally attached to me from the beginning, but after I saved her from Zen, she’d started playing the excessively vulnerable spoiled child like this.

I didn’t mind giving out hugs or whatever, but it was probably best to take care with things like this, so I gave her some advice.

“Mia, you shouldn’t randomly undress in front of a member of the opposite sex like this.”

“Mm.”

She replied with a short response and a nod, but I wasn’t sure she understood.

Guess I’d better ask Liza or Lulu to talk to her about it again later.

“Okay, all clean.”

“Thanks.”

I finished wiping down her back and held the towel out to her. Instead, Mia spun around and stood there with her arms open, waiting expectantly for me to wipe her front as well.

Obviously, she wore underwear on her lower half, but only her long hair covered her upper body.

“Here, too.”

“Mia, you can wipe the front by yourself.”

“…Satou.”

“No, you’re not changing my mind on this.”

Mia entreated me with her best pleading puppy-dog eyes, but I wasn’t falling for it. I had zero interest in her innocent little body, but something still felt increasingly immoral about the situation.



I had no desire to walk the precipitous path of a lolicon, so I firmly denied her request.

Finally relenting, Mia reluctantly accepted the towel and dried herself off.

Judging by the movement of the points on my radar, Lulu and Nana seemed to have finished getting dressed. I left Mia behind the carriage and returned to the rest of the group.

Breakfast on our second day out of Seiryuu City consisted of deer meat and a soup with cooked beans, onions, and a wild plant that resembled garlic. Honestly, I could've done without the meat first thing in the morning.

Nana ate her usual wheat porridge, but this time it was topped with some shredded cheese. Liza was so considerate.

"Arisa, if you're going back to sleep, at least eat breakfast first."

"Mm'kay."

Arisa, who'd been on the dawn shift with Liza, was dangerously close to dozing off.

I made sure she didn't face-plant into her soup before finishing breakfast.

As soon as she was done, Arisa passed out on the spot.

I decided that, since she didn't appear to be a morning person, Arisa should stick to the first shift of the night watch from now on.

As I reflected, I spent the rest of the time before our departure practicing spell chants.

Mia occasionally offered advice, but it was hard to understand what she was getting at with her short words and gestures, so her consideration went mostly to waste.

I'd have to figure out a way to improve communication so we could understand each other without so much effort.

◆

After we'd left camp and traveled for a while, I caught glimpses of a black shadow in the sea of grass covering the hills.

My AR display labeled it a **Large Fanged Ant Corpse**.

That was the type of monster Lilio and the others had encountered before.

“Satou.”

“Hmm? What is it, Mia?”

Mia, who’d been playing in the younger group’s reed pipe orchestra, approached the coachman seat.

“Stop.”

She probably had to go to the bathroom or something. There was a well-trodden meadow on the side of the highway, so I asked Nana, who was practicing driving the carriage, to pull over and stop.

“Piggyback.”

“Right here?”

“Mm.”

I didn’t really understand, but Mia’s odd request seemed more solemn than normal, so I let her climb onto my back.

Pochi and Tama gazed at Mia somewhat enviously. I didn’t mind giving them rides later, but they’d have to wait their turn.

“There.”

I looked where Mia was pointing.

There was a path beaten into the hill. From the size of it, it looked like an army had passed through, not just animals.

There were several more large fanged ant corpses peppering the path. Clearly, a battle had taken place here.

“Take me.”

“All right.”

With Mia still on my back, I stepped onto the trail.

I asked Nana and Liza to watch the carriage.

“Like Mize said.” Mia muttered a little as we followed the path.

Mize was the ratman warrior who’d protected Mia from Zen’s monsters and brought her to Seiryuu City. Since he wore distinctive red headgear, I tended to think of him as “Red Helmet.”

“To protect me…”

I see. There must have been a fight between the monsters and the ratman warriors here.

“Zeze, Poro, Jene, Mitoro, Hoze, Rada, Kyuze…”

Mia murmured the names of the warriors. After twelve, her voice broke off.

Clear droplets fell from her eyes and scattered on the wind.

“Mia, let’s go back.”

“Wait…a little longer…”

I took her down from my shoulders to carry her in my arms, wiping away her tears with a handkerchief.

I checked the map, guessing we could bury them if any bodies were left in the field. I couldn’t find any in this area, so I broadened the scope of my search.

Huh? Of the twelve warriors Mia had named, five of them were alive in the town nearest here, Kainona. They seemed to be in captivity at a slave market.

The remaining seven were nowhere to be seen. After a few tweaks to the search settings, I found six of them buried at the base of a grove near the town. The last one hadn’t even left a body behind…

“Mia, there might be survivors in the town nearby. Let’s look for them when we get there, okay?”

“Mm, okay.”

I knew for a fact that the survivors were there, but I couldn’t explain that without revealing the secret of my Unique Skill, so it was the best I could do.

◆

“That will be ten gold coins each.”

“Wow, that’s a hefty price.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, good sir. We are simple, honest folk, and we would never dream of overcharging.”

The way the balding slave merchant was eyeing my wallet was uncomfortable.

Once we arrived in the town of Kainona in the early afternoon, I visited the slave market by myself. Since it was a pretty small town, the shop had only about ten slaves.

“A truly honest person would be shocked to hear that. Isn’t the market price less than three gold coins?”

Ratman slaves were normally inexpensive, since they were small and not good at heavy lifting. Since they weren’t kept as pets, either, the market price could be as low as three silvers. In this case, the price would be a bit higher, since they had combat skills, but even then, three gold coins was the most I could expect. In fact, my “Estimation” skill put the price at twelve silvers—less than two and a half gold coins.

“Since slave traders from a mining city will be coming to buy them in a few days, the price has unfortunately increased fractionally.”

He probably figured I’d be easy to get rid of, since I looked so young. I used my “Negotiation” skill to the fullest, but I could drive the price down only from ten to six.

Normally, I would have just paid and left it at that, but I was irritated that he’d thought I was a sucker, so I took a more underhanded route.

I put some skill points into “Coercion,” which I hadn’t used since I’d gotten it in Seiryuu City, and activated it. *That should make this a little easier.*

“I’ll give you fifteen gold coins for the five of them.”

Smiling pleasantly, I gave the slave merchant my final offer. Naturally, my eyes were deathly cold.

Perhaps thanks to the “Coercion” skill, the slave merchant’s status changed to **Panic**. His stamina seemed to be gradually waning, too.

I took a single step toward the pale merchant, whose mouth flapped open and closed soundlessly.

“Y-yes, I believe we can make a deal at that price, indeed.”

With this level of effectiveness, this was turning into intimidation or blackmail rather than negotiation. I even received the title of Intimidator. I’d have to avoid using this skill again unless an emergency arose.

Well, the price was still much higher than the market value, so it wasn’t as though he was incurring a loss.

Finishing the slave contract, I had a bored-looking clerk buy some used hooded overcoats while I was waiting for the paperwork to be done, then had the ratmen put them on.

Since the coats were intended for humanfolk, they dragged on the ground on the much shorter ratmen. They might have looked suspicious, but it was probably still safer than revealing them as demi-humans.

I took the ratmen with me back to the inn where the others were waiting.

Arisa had said that she would take care of negotiations, but I was still surprised to see that she’d actually gotten permission for the beastfolk girls to stay in the room. I’d have to ask her about her tricks later.

“Ah, Master! Did you really find them?”

“I told you I was good at looking for people, didn’t I? Now, could you please call Mia?”

Arisa was surprised, but I brushed her off and sent her to get Mia.

At Mia’s name, there was a stir among the ratmen. They must have been speaking in their language, because I acquired the skill “Gray-Ratman Language.”

“Okeydokey. I can’t imagine they’ll be allowed inside looking like that, so please wait in the stable or the carriage.”

“All right. I’ll have them wait in the carriage.”

I took the ratmen to our horse-drawn carriage in the courtyard of the inn.

Just after they were all inside, Mia arrived.

“Zeze, Jene, Mitoro, Hoze, Rada!”

Mia called their names, hugging all of them. The ratmen, too, celebrated the reunion with cries of “Brinsiss!” in hard-to-understand Shigan language. They were likely trying to say *princess*.

However…

“Master, the inn’s landlord says that dinner will be…”

The peaceful atmosphere immediately crackled with hostility when Nana arrived.

“““Devil doll!!”””

“““Protect the princess!”””

Three of the ratmen seized the straw cushions, and the other two evacuated Mia into the back of the carriage.

Nana drew her short sword for self-defense and started buffing herself with magic. I guess Nana was always ready for battle.

“Enemies detected. Master, permission to eliminate them?”

The ratmen’s moniker “devil doll” probably referred to Nana and her homunculus sisters.

During the incident in the Cradle of Trazayuya, they had served the Undead King Zen, who’d captured Mia, so it was possible they’d battled with the ratmen in the past.

At any rate, if I did nothing, a brawl would break out on the spot. I had to quickly intervene.

“Nana, I forbid you from taking combative actions. You guys, too—put down the cushions. That’s an order. And the two of you who are trying to protect Mia, please let go. She’s clearly upset.”

Nana immediately lowered her sword but didn’t deactivate her magic buff.

The ratmen didn’t hear my order and started wheezing heavily as their status changed to **Breach of Contract**. *So this is what happens when a slave breaches*

an agreement? They weren't wearing enslavement collars, so nothing was physically compressing their necks, but they were clearly in pain.

The two in the back released Mia, and the status effect deactivated. Mia quickly pattered over to the other three ratmen, standing in front of them and holding her arms out wide.

"Drop the cushions," she pleaded.

Despite their visible suffering, the ratmen were still holding the straw cushions at the ready.

"Satou is an ally."

"B-but the devil doll's a servant of the evil lord, isn't she?"

"Nana is an ally, too."

So they called Zen the "evil lord," huh? Now that I could understand their native language, their words sounded much more fluent.

I was concerned that the ratmen wouldn't know who Nana and I were from only our names, but hearing the word *ally* and Mia's tone, they lowered the cushions and were no longer in breach of contract.

"Ah'm Satou, 'n' dat's, uh, Nana."

I tried to give introductions in the ratmen's language, but it was harder to pronounce than I'd expected. I guess since the language was made to match the structure of their mouths, it was hard to speak it as a human. I gave up and switched to Shigan language.

"I'm on my way to bring Mia to her hometown. Nana was under the control of the evil lord before, but now she's our friend. She isn't going to harm Mia. Don't worry."

"Did you buy us to serve as escorts for Princess Mia?"

I shook my head. Instead, I explained that Zen, who'd captured Mia, was dead; that Red Helmet was safe; and that I'd heard a rumor that the ratmen were being held as slaves, so I bought them in order to return them to their home. The lie about the rumor came courtesy of my "Fabrication" skill.

After our discussion, I told the ratmen to eat their fill and rest for the night, and that I'd take them to the foothills on the border of their country the next morning.

I'd actually planned to let them rest for a few days, but they seemed to be in better health than I'd expected, so I sped things along.

They had probably been able to endure slavery because they were hardened warriors.

Leaving the beastfolk girls and Mia to watch over the ratmen, the rest of us went to gather supplies.

With Nana as an escort, I sent Arisa and Lulu to buy the food and goods we'd forgotten to procure in Seiryuu City. Enough for the ratmen, too, of course.

I went to pick up hiking equipment for the ratmen, musical instruments and a bow and arrows for Mia to hunt, a thin board for the cards, and miscellaneous crafting and woodworking tools.

Unfortunately, since it was such a small town, I could find only about half the things I wanted.

Transport for merchandise wasn't very well developed here, and demand was probably low for some of these items, so I guess that was inevitable.

Still, I successfully snagged at least a few things, like what Mia had asked for and the wooden board. For the instrument, I found a secondhand lute with a broken string. While I happened to discover two short bows, they came with only twenty bronze-tipped arrows total.

I found common items, like a stepladder, table, work surface, and chairs, without any problems. Most of them were used, but that was probably just because this world was so different from contemporary Japan or any consumer-driven society.

Because most of the tools I wanted were made-to-order, I decided to hold off until the next time we stayed in a big city. Still, since I'd bought a few secondhand tools, like a file, a chisel, and a wooden mallet, I figured I'd be able to do some crafting.

For the board to hold the study cards, I had the carpenter cut it down to a proper size and round the corners. At first I was told it would take three days, but he let slip that he'd do it overnight for three times the pay, so it would be ready in the morning.

For the ratmen's transportation, I purchased a cart and two donkeys to pull it. There weren't any horses for sale, but I figured they would be fine if the donkeys carried their things once they got to the foothills.

The next day—the third morning since our departure from Seiryuu City—we ate a mediocre, overpriced breakfast and left the town of Kainona.

Before heading to the border of the Gray Rat Emirate, we stopped by the place where the ratmen's comrades were buried.

"I, Misanaria of Bolenan Forest, implore all the trees of the Shiga Kingdom. Grant a restful sleep to the brave ratman heroes who gave their lives in battle to protect me."

Mia whispered in Elvish to the trees that marked the ratmen's graves. As if in response, the branches fluttered gently, though there was no wind. As if the spirits dwelling within were answering her plea.

Accompanied by the lute, Mia sang an Elvish funeral song.

The rest of us placed offerings of the cheese and dried meat the ratmen had loved beneath the trees and poured out alcohol as a burial rite.

One of the ratmen dug up a saddlebag buried near the grave site, took out a piece of paper, and handed it to me.

"This's our treasure. For you, Satou. As thanks."

"Hoze, don't trouble Sir Satou with such a worthless scrap of paper."

The small sheet was covered in tiny, cramped writing.

It contained strangely detailed information related to pottery. But it was the written characters themselves that caught my eye most, not the contents.

I called Arisa over and questioned Hoze while I waited for her to arrive.

"No, I really do appreciate it. By the way, where did you get this?"

“One of the humanfolk lost in the mountains gave it to me. He was strange.”

I thanked Hoze and dropped my gaze back to the paper.

“You called for me?”

“Yeah, look at this.”

“Huh? What is it? A note about pottery and how to make ceramic glaze? … Wait, it’s in Japanese! Did you write this, Master?”

Yes, the memo was written in Japanese characters. The paper itself looked like it had been torn from a high-quality lined notepad from a stationery or convenience store.

The scant information I gleaned from questioning Hoze suggested the notepad’s owner was most likely Lilio’s former boyfriend, whom I’d suspected was Japanese. He had met Hoze before visiting Seiryuu City. I could almost feel the wheels of fate in motion. I was willing to bet I’d meet him in person sooner or later.

I slipped the note through my pocket and into Storage in a folder labeled **Japanese**.

After spending a little more time there, we journeyed toward the foothills near the border.

“Sparklyyy?!”

At Tama’s exclamation, I looked up at the mountain and saw there was indeed something reflecting light about halfway up. With the help of my “Telescopic Sight” skill, I detected what looked like the tip of a spear. Quickly, I checked my map.

“Someone’s coming to greet us.”

“Mm?”

“That’s Red H— I mean, Mize and his friends.”

The map showed Red Helmet and no fewer than thirty other ratmen. I guessed it was a unit searching for survivors.

I spoke to Zeze, who was serving as the ratmen’s representative, then used a

smoke signal to make contact with the group.

“Brinsiss and Zatew. Thank yew.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

I delivered the ratmen to Red Helmet, who’d come to greet us.

As usual, his expression was uncannily aloof in a distinctly human way, despite his rat features.

Red Helmet’s comrades were riding a monster that resembled a six-legged boar. They all held the title Beastmaster, so they probably trained monsters.

They also had a number of short, stocky deer called “dulldeer” to serve as beasts of burden. These were apparently bred specifically for transporting things in the mountains. Since the donkeys I’d bought would be unnecessary, I decided to sell them in town.

“Kyuze! You’re alive!”

“Vice Captain Poro protected me.”

There was another surviving ratman warrior in Red Helmet’s group—likely the one I’d assumed had left no remains.

I wonder why he didn’t show up when I searched the map that afternoon.

Maybe the map’s search was limited to the territory I was currently in.

But, no, I’d seen Red Helmet’s dot on my radar when he was outside this area, so maybe that was just the default search range.

As these considerations distracted me from the ratmen’s happy reunion, Red Helmet came to talk to me.

“Zatew, zir.”

“Oh, I can understand gray-ratman language. You don’t need to speak Shigan.”

“You are certainly knowledgeable. I’d like to offer this bell to you. It was entrusted to me, but the great elves made it. It doesn’t have any special effect, but it’s proof that its owner has earned the trust of elves or fairies or the like. Since you have gained Misanaria’s trust, it seems fitting that you should have it,

Sir Satou.”

It seemed like such an important object that I refused to take it at first, but he would hear nothing of it, insisting that it was also thanks for rescuing his comrades from the humanfolk peacefully.

Red Helmet had planned to track them down even if he had to fight the Shiga Kingdom, so we’d unintentionally prevented a regional conflict.

After a lengthy back and forth, I ended up being forced to accept the Elvish bell. Its official name was the “Silent Bell of Bolenan,” and according to Red Helmet, it was made from the branches of a World Tree.

Mia accepted the bell from Red Helmet and attached it to my girdle. With no ball inside the bell, it didn’t ring. Maybe it was like identification papers for elves.

> Title Acquired: Friend of the Ratmen

◆

We decided to drop by the town of Kainona again to sell the donkeys and wagon.

The trip to and from the border had taken a while, so by the time we arrived back in Kainona, it was already nearly evening.

Other than the completion of the study cards and the resultant praise from everyone, there were no events of note on the journey.

I asked Arisa and the others to get us a room at the inn we’d stayed in the day before and headed alone to the shop where I’d bought the wagon and donkeys.

Luckily, I made it to the store before closing and convinced them to buy everything back at about 80 percent of the original price.

Like the food we’d had there that morning, our dinner at the inn wasn’t very good, but the fried mutton wasn’t so bad. A bit heavy on the salt, perhaps, but it didn’t reek or anything, so I gave it passing marks.

In the middle of the night, I secretly slipped out of the inn by myself and visited the red-light district.

Unfortunately, since the town’s population was fairly low, the red-light

district was quite small. There were about ten stalls serving food or drink and just two bars.

But no shops where I could enjoy myself with a pretty lady, by the look of things.

The ladies of the night roaming around the stalls in search of customers were all either too young or too far past their prime, so I ignored them.

Of the two bars, I entered the one with the relatively classy-looking clientele. The other bar was full of shady characters making a racket inside.

Luckily, there was a healthy distance between the two establishments.

I sat down at an empty table, and a woman with nice features and a shapely chest came to take my order. The way she carried herself was somewhat unnatural, but it emphasized her cleavage perfectly.

“What would you like to drink, young merchant?”

“Do you have mead? If not, I’m open to suggestions.”

“We unfortunately don’t have mead, but perhaps I can interest you in some Kainona sheep’s milk liquor?”

Evidently, this was the town’s specialty. They say these things only ever taste good to the locals, but I think taking in the local cuisine is part of the fun of traveling.

I ordered a glass of the sheep’s milk liquor and a dish of mutton and bean stew. The waitress’s face was way too close to mine. *Don’t tickle other people’s cheeks with your blond hair, please.*

My order arrived before long, so I tried a sip of the sheep’s milk liquor, and —*gross*. The raw, sour taste was even worse than I’d expected. The moment it entered my mouth, the animal stench pierced my sinuses, and I choked immediately.

Not even the koumiss I tried a while back was this sour…

Maybe that drink had been made with a Japanese person’s taste in mind, though. In the end, I wound up ordering an easy-to-drink Shigan beer instead.

The stew, on the other hand, had a mild, lightly salted taste. The fat from the mutton mixed deliciously with the generous portion of beans. I would've preferred more meat, but it was perfect for an accompaniment to my drink.

"Hey! There's not enough salt in this! Don't be stingy with the seasonings, man!"

"Keep it down, drunkard! You think I'm gonna dole out the salt at a price like that?!"

"What an old cheapskate. I hope that witch boils you in a cauldron and eats you!"

"Why, you—"

…I overheard a quarrel between a patron and the shopkeeper.

So it wasn't an intentionally sophisticated flavor, huh? Well, it was tasty either way.

Drinking by myself was lonely, anyway. I bought a round of drinks for the locals and joined in on their rumors and gossip.

> Title Acquired: Moneybags

Each time I made another order, the waitress would "accidentally" press her chest up against my back as she brought it over. What a great place. Maybe I'd splurge on coppers for the tip instead of pennies.

Most of the gossip revolved around the goings-on in Kainona, but other topics included the starfall, a new colony of ant monsters near town, and the increase in damage from wolves in the neighboring Kuhanou County.

Also, though it seemed more fable than rumor, I heard tell of a witch who supposedly lived in a forest in Kuhanou County. According to the others, she gave medicine to good people but snatched up whoever recklessly harmed the forest and boiled them in a cauldron.

They might as well have rounded out the fantasy with details like "lives in a house made of candy" for good measure.

Now, then. I'd enjoyed myself thoroughly, so I stood up to leave. The waitress, who at some point had started drinking next to me, took me by the

arm and led me to the second floor of the tavern.

The other customers whistled and jeered at us, and I finally realized the tavern doubled as a love hotel. I supposed waitresses doubling as prostitutes was a time-honored tradition in any world.

…I tipped the waitress generously and received service that was very devoted indeed.

The next morning, I placed a few silvers on her bedside table and left her sleeping contentedly. It was my thanks for an eventful night.

I changed clothes and asked a charmer who'd come to the tavern for business to wash me thoroughly. Hopefully this would erase the scents of perfume, woman, and various other traces.

In spite of my precautions, I still got the adulterous-husband treatment when I returned to the inn.

Mia and Arisa were the only ones who were angry; Tama and Pochi had no idea what was going on, and Liza and Nana didn't seem to see any problem with it. Lulu's expression was inscrutable, but she showed no signs of sadness or anger.

"Impure."

"Honestly! You have so many girls here! Why must you go out and have affairs?!"

As a guardian, I would think laying a hand on any of my wards would be a much worse offense than any so-called affairs. I'd appreciate it if they'd overlook me getting my kicks elsewhere every once in a while.

And thus, the morning of our fourth day since leaving Seiryuu City began with a cute little domestic uproar.

For a change of pace, we wandered around the morning market awhile before leaving.

I didn't see much in the way of new goods, but at least we were able to buy an assortment of ingredients. We bought half a sheep at a butcher's shop, too, so a meal of mutton and vegetables seemed like a good dinner for that night.

We passed through the gates of Kainona just behind the villagers who'd closed up early at the morning market.

The slope down to the main road from the gate was flanked by steep hills on both sides, making visibility poor until we reached the road. Since there were no traffic signals, either, I imagined there were a lot of accidents.

The farmer and his wife in front of us had some trouble slowing their cart on the slope and zipped right into the intersection with the main road. They almost collided with a horse, which reared back and came to a sudden stop.

"You're blocking the road, fools! Clear the way!"

The man on horseback hurled abuse at the couple when they blocked his path. The husband, who'd been pulling the cart, dropped to the ground as if the horse had kicked him, and his wife kneeled next to him, apologizing to the mounted man.

Behind us, a few gatekeepers came up to investigate.

Seeing this, the man hastened to steer his horse around the cart. At that moment, our eyes met unexpectedly, and for that instant, his gaze filled with hatred.

Hey now, I don't think I was glaring at you, so what's that all about? I don't even know you.

But the moment quickly passed, and the man took off down the main road before the gatekeepers arrived.

"Master, was that not the man from before?"

"Who?"

Apparently, Liza remembered this person.

"He was the official who tried to take our flying ant cores back in Seiryuu City."

"Oh, that small-time crook?"

So that was the accountant from the duke's army who had tried to rob us of the girls' hard-earned spoils.

I didn’t remember his name, but I guess some part of my mind registered him as a “small-time crook” because the small scale of his crime was impressive.

Checking his status on the map, I discovered his affiliation had changed to **None**.

Maybe the duke’s army found out about his embezzlement or something and fired him?

I didn’t care that much, so I shook off the memory of the man and drove our carriage forward.

The farmer had been injured when the horse kicked him—his status had changed to **Bone Fracture**. When I examined the details, I saw the injury was to his clavicle. His HP gauge was holding steady, so there probably wasn’t any long-term damage.

The gatekeepers finished their interrogation and went back to their posts. Because the situation was being treated as an accident, they wouldn’t chase down the man responsible.

The farmer’s wife lifted him into the cart and then tried to pull it with her slender arms, but I stopped her and offered one of the lower-grade recovery potions I’d bought in Seiryuu City.

Both the husband and wife refused to accept it, but I insisted that he drink it anyway, and he recovered. I guess even low-grade stamina recovery potions could heal a simple bone fracture. I placidly accepted the couple’s overzealous thanks, and we moved on.

After we’d been on the move for a while, Arisa voiced a complaint.

“If you give away magic potions to strangers, there’ll be no end to it!”

“Don’t worry. I just wanted to know whether a low-grade stamina potion could fix a bone fracture.”

That’s right. Helping them was just incidental. It definitely wasn’t because the desperate struggle of the farmer’s wife had gotten to me.

“I suppose I’ll go along with that explanation.”

Arisa shrugged with a “You can’t fool me” expression on her face.

I'm telling you, it was secondary!

I wanted to try something, so I had Liza take over as coachman.

Behind the driver's seat, I waded through the group as they sang anime theme songs with Mia's lute and sat in the back to watch the sky. This had become my go-to spot for contemplating things like spell development.

Opening the map, I began my investigation.

First, I checked and saw **Hit-and-Run** hadn't been added to the crimes for the crook's bounty.

Searching through the map, I investigated the categories of bounties. There seemed to be only six: **Theft**, **Assault**, **Murder**, **Sexual Assault**, **Arson**, and **Treason**.

Huh? The earlier incident aside, why didn't I get the bounty **Assault** *when I punched and incapacitated some thugs back in Seiryuu City?*

"What's the matter? You look perplexed."

Arisa, who'd snuck up close to me, peered at me with concern.

"Oh, I was just thinking about Yamato stones' bounty column."

"In that case, you should just ask me! Your precious Arisa knows everything!"

Arisa puffed out her flat chest in a strange pose of pride. *Please stop before Pochi and Tama start copying you.*

"First of all, there are seven types of bounties."

"Not six?"

"Nope! Theft, Assault, Murder, Sexual Assault, Arson, and Treason are the most common, but there's also one called Infidelity."

Infidelity? In the back of my mind, I remembered the corrupt priest shouting, "You infidels!" and spraying spit everywhere.

"You only get that one by doing things like going against the teachings of the deity you were baptized under, betraying or showing contempt for that god, stuff like that. I've never actually seen it myself."

So if you haven't been baptized, you can't get the Infidelity bounty?

Curious, I posed the question to Arisa.

"Most likely. You can't violate the conditions of an agreement if you never made one in the first place. Once you're baptized, you receive the blessings of a god, so most people get baptized sometime between the age of seven, when they start an apprenticeship, and adulthood."

Right, since gods in this world existed close by, religion had practical benefits.

"And when there are epidemics, people who've been baptized are given priority. The only people who don't get baptized are usually either too poor to give offerings or nobles and direct descendants of royalty."

"I understand the first example, but why not royals?"

I would think in a world with real divine rights and blessings, statesmen would be the first to take the initiative and get baptized.

"When kings and dukes take their positions, they have to make a contract with the City Core. They can't do that if they've been baptized. People like viceroys who are in official positions only look after the City Core as agents of the king, so they can still be baptized."

"Wait, Arisa. I can't process all this information at once."

I stopped Arisa's verbal torrent for a moment.

"What is a 'City Core'? Is it like a Labyrinth Core?"

"Oh, yes, sorry. And this conversation is off the record, by the way. City Cores are located underneath the castle, but only royalty and their direct descendants know about them. I only heard about this when I snuck into my big brother's lessons as the crown prince… Our heads would roll if anyone found out what we know. Be careful."

Arisa winked and stuck out her tongue. She seemed to be maintaining that expression to get me to rebuke her, but I ignored it and asked for more information.

"All right, I won't tell anyone. So can you give me more details about these City Cores?"

“Okeydokey. I told you that dukes and kings make contracts with them, right? Well, once they do that, they gain the ability to manipulate the power source beneath the city.”

So there were sources beneath cities, too? Come to think of it, when I was talking to Nadi about Mia’s treatment, she’d mentioned a mana source inside Seiryuu City’s castle.

“They can use it for Ritual Magic like defending the city from monsters or enriching the surrounding soil. Since the range of the magic is so wide, people tend to think it’s pretty ineffective, but Ritual Magic can adjust the climate of the whole territory, relieve water shortages, and increase productivity. If the range is more focused, they say it can even defend against attacks from intermediate and greater hell demons.”

Pretty impressive.

“Arisa, if the City Core is that important, doesn’t that mean that cities and towns can only exist near mana sources?”

“That’s right. Sources big enough for a whole town or city are quite rare. Most of them are small sources like spirit reservoirs and monster reservoirs.”

According to Arisa, a spirit reservoir was a place with such abundant magical power that rare plants and animals lived there and flowers bloomed out of season, among other things.

Monster reservoirs, as the name implied, were places where monsters settled. When I scanned Trazayuya’s documents for more information, I learned that normal animals transformed into monsters when they breathed in the miasma of a monster reservoir.

My thoughts were wandering off track, so I had Arisa continue her explanation.

“Nobody’s heard of new City Cores being made since the age of the Flue Kingdom, and they’re kept very firmly under wraps.”

“Wouldn’t wars break out all the time in that case?”

“They do sometimes, but since large battles tend to attract the attention of

hell demons or curious dragons, most of them are limited to small skirmishes."

I see. So the existence of hell demons and dragons served as a deterrent for wars between humans.

I apologized for veering off topic again and asked Arisa to go back to explaining City Cores.

"Let me see. I believe they have other functions like Conferring, Reward, Verdict, Acquittal, and so on. Conferring is used for appointing knights, promoting nobility, and so on. Reward is used to bestow honors. I heard it can give the recipient a buff effect. Conversely, if someone has crimes in their bounty column, they get de-buffed."

I asked how effective these were but didn't get a clear answer. Arisa didn't know, either.

"Does Verdict punish criminals?"

"Certainly not. Criminals get their heads chopped off, and that's that as punishment goes. When Verdict is used on someone who's been accused of a crime, it determines whether they're guilty and adds the crime to their bounty accordingly."

Oh, what a great system. No room for false accusations there.

"But Acquittal can blot out crimes from the record, so rulers and royalty can make it like the most inconvenient ones never happened."

Which was why it was so important for statesmen to be rigorous and fair.

Apparently, the original purpose of Acquittal had been to erase the crime of murder from knights and soldiers in war.

"Say, Arisa. Do you have any idea why I didn't get the Assault crime when I hit someone in Seiryuu City?"

"That only happens when there are serious injuries, like lacerations or bone fractures. People get into fistfights at bars all the time, after all. In cases like that accident earlier, I believe the use of Assault is determined mutually by both parties."

Maybe that man didn't get the Assault bounty because the farmer and his

wife thought they were at fault themselves, then?

Right, when I essentially helped Zen commit suicide, I suppose it didn't count as murder because Zen himself didn't think of it that way.

Upon close consideration, it did seem like I'd killed a person, but I didn't truly feel that way. Perhaps his unearthly appearance had made me feel more like I'd sent a spirit to heaven.

Either that, or my high mind stat was just reassuring me that it was only a game. I wasn't the kind of person who liked to hem and haw about things, so I just left it at that.

Ah, I killed those lizardmen and dragons, too, didn't I…? Why didn't I get the Murder bounty then, either? Maybe because it was self-defense?

"Arisa, are there situations where someone commits murder but it doesn't show up in their bounty?"

"Of course. Poisoning or assassinating someone without being found out, for example. I think there are exceptions like self-defense and duels and things like that, too."

Hmm, maybe that applied to using Meteor Shower and fighting off that lizardman, then.

Though the lizardman had attacked me first, I had definitely wronged the dragons that I killed with my godlike power. Opening the Graveyard folder in my Storage, I once again prayed for the souls of the fallen. After I'd finished my loop of the Shiga Kingdom and come back to visit Seiryuu City, I decided I would construct a proper grave site in the Valley of Dragons.

While my thoughts were elsewhere, Arisa supplied an additional tidbit.

"Oh, and if a king or duke kills someone in his own territory, it isn't considered a crime."

That was pretty awful. With that level of privilege, it'd be no surprise if corrupt rulers threw their weight around like gods of their regions, like the marquis Zen had defeated.

At the time, I was so overwhelmed by the deluge of information that I forgot

to ask why someone who'd been baptized couldn't make a contract with a City Core. And it would be a long time yet before I found out.

◆

Perhaps because of the incident earlier, I had the urge to practice the alchemy I'd been putting off for a while when we took our afternoon break. If I learned how to make potions myself, I could give them out more freely.

With a sidelong glance at the rest of the group, who were playing a game with the study cards, I set up the beginner's alchemy set.

"Now he's doing alchemy? How can one person be so multitalented?" With my "Keen Hearing" skill, I heard Arisa muttering about me somewhere.

Paying her no mind, I set up camp on a corner of the waterproof sheet and continued my preparations with the help of one of the books I'd bought from the old gnome. A lot of the instruments looked like tools for science experiments.

I browsed the textbook by using the menu without taking it out of Storage. This would come in handy for experimenting, since I would have my hands free.

The book was titled *Rudimentary Alchemy*. The old gnome had insisted I read this first. Actually, it was more of a pamphlet than a book. The thin volume had only twenty or so pages.

The book began with descriptions of the tools. It also included illustrations, to ensure that even a complete beginner wouldn't get confused about which was which. Now I understood why that old fellow wanted me to read this first.

To begin, I took out a mortar and pestle. Instead of familiar white porcelain, this mortar was pale pink. With my "Analyze" skill, I discovered that it was made of agate. *I thought agate was a gemstone…*

Following the book's instructions, I took out some dried herbs from the bag labeled **Reagent One** and ground them down with the mortar and pestle. Then I added water to a small bowl and whisked the mashed herbs into it with a small metal tool.

The whole process took about five minutes from start to finish. Well, since it was the first recipe in the introductory manual, it was bound to be simple.

> Skill Acquired: “Formulation”

I immediately invested the max amount of points into the new skill and activated it.

The aqueous solution I’d made was called an “antipyretic medicine.” When I analyzed it, its name read **Antipyretic Medicine [Quality: Lowest]**, described as **a liquid medicine that reduces fever. It has an extremely weak soothing effect**. This was my first time making medicine, so I guess a low-quality product was only to be expected.

I also noticed that the name of the person who produced the item was listed in the item’s description.

When I appraised Liza’s spear, it contained the information **Creator: Satou**. This field didn’t show up in the AR display, but I was able to toggle it on by fiddling around with the settings in the menu. It was hidden by default.

I was glad I noticed this before I made any items or medicines that could get me in trouble. I decided to start blanking out my name when I made items in the future.

The next page of the pamphlet read, *If you have a Transmutation Tablet, proceed to Chapter 2. Otherwise, turn to Chapter 4.* This was beginning to feel like I was playing through a branching story rather than reading an introductory guide to business software or what have you.

Chapter 2 concerned the basics of the Transmutation Tablet, used for making potions.

According to the explanation, medicines created normally and potions made with the Transmutation Tablet were considered different even if their effects were similar.

Potions required MP and a magic catalyst called an “elixir,” but in return they had the advantage of taking effect immediately.

I proceeded to follow the instructions for creating a potion with the Transmutation Tablet.

The first step was preparing the tablet. It was a black board with a highly

textured surface, possibly made of bituminous coal. The surface was engraved with shallow grooves in a black magic–esque pattern. On top of the tablet were six metal rods, finely engraved with designs like those on the tablet.

After I finished setting it up, I placed my hands on the corresponding marks and spoke the key word to activate it. All I had to do was say, “Transmutation Tablet activate” in normal Shigan, and magic was sucked from my hands as the grooves shone with red light. It was beautiful.

I could operate the Transmutation Tablet by moving my fingers along the indentation. In a way, it reminded me of the touch screen of a tablet computer.

I set up the Transmutation Tablet as the book instructed and placed a metal beaker in the center of the six metal rods. Then I poured the medicine I’d made earlier into the container. This would serve as the base of the potion.

Next, I gradually added the ready-made elixir, Reagent Two, while stirring the mixture. Then magic had to be added before the reagent settled on the bottom.

Placing a hand on the tablet, I transmuted the potion.

The metal rods radiated a bright red, and the reagent powder in the beaker lit up. It wasn’t reflecting the light of the rods—the powder itself was glowing. When the light faded, the process was complete.

> Skill Acquired: “Transmutation”

Of course, I maxed out the “Transmutation” skill as well.

The completed potion was the lowest-quality antipyretic. It would be a waste to just toss it, so I put the liquid into Storage without the beaker.

Now it was time for the real deal.

Since I had three elixirs for stamina recovery potions, I began transmuting them according to the steps in the textbook. The practice helped, of course, but my new “Formulation” and “Transmutation” skills had enabled me to make high-quality recovery potions.

Once I put my techniques into action, I gained the titles Doctor and Alchemist.

According to the pamphlet, potions had to be kept in dedicated vials or the magic would seep out along with the potion’s efficacy.

The vials had simple magic circles drawn on them with special ink to prevent any leaks.

Since I had the “Analyze” skill and my AR display, this part didn’t really apply to me, but the book said that ordinary people used the magic circles to determine what type of potion was inside.

Though this wasn’t in the textbook, I discovered in Trazayuya’s documents that it was possible to create up to five potions at a time by adding ingredients in bulk.

There was an added note that producing multiple potions at once required twice the MP and led to a slight decrease in quality, which was probably why it wasn’t in the textbook.

I made another stamina potion, followed by a pain-relief potion.

As I put away the Transmutation Tablet, I thought about what I’d like to concoct next. Maybe antidotes and anti-paralysis potions and others like those.

Each kind of poison required a different antidote, so the beginner set didn’t include any premade elixirs for them. Dragon stone could make a handy all-purpose remedy, but since I was missing a few ingredients, I couldn’t make it right away.

Paralysis potions, like antidotes, came in all varieties for different kinds of ailments.

The main components of the elixir were monster cores and a stabilizer. Because I had plenty of cores and a little bit of the stabilizer, I could theoretically keep mixing up potions, but I wanted to wait and try creating a wider variety.

I decided to buy a bunch of ingredients when we reached the next town.

Quite pleased with the unexpected success of my alchemy experiments, I returned to the horse-drawn carriage to resume our journey.

I felt bad about ignoring everyone all day, so instead of researching spells, I spent the rest of the trip to the campsite playing with them.

Since I was far too musically disinclined to join in on the anime song chorus, I

proposed a classic game of word chains instead.

Arisa loved the sound of her own voice, so I let her explain the rules, and then the game began.

Despite being the one who'd proposed it, I had some trouble. I kept forgetting that the pronunciations of words translated into Japanese and words in the actual Shigan language were different.

I suffered defeat after crushing defeat, but along the way I started to get the hang of it and barely managed to preserve my dignity.

It was an unexpected failure on my part, but both the younger and older girls had a blast. I expected it'd probably become a staple on our travels.

As we all enjoyed the fun, the carriage brought us out of the hilly area and arrived at the campsite right in front of the mountains that bordered the county.

◆

"This is tough," I grumbled as I watched my arrow fly past the target.

Now that we'd finished setting up camp, Mia was teaching us how to use the short bows we'd procured in the town of Kainona.

After watching me shoot, the beastfolk girls, Arisa, and Nana all wanted to try it, too, so Lulu got roped into it, and we all ended up practicing together.

However, archery was harder than I'd thought.

On my first shot, far from flying straight and true, my arrow simply dropped to the ground.

"Watch."

Mia showed me a test shot. Unlike in Japanese archery, here you were supposed to hold the bow parallel to the ground.

Everyone else took a turn, too, but they fared no better.

Surprisingly, Arisa was the only one who did well. She bragged inanely that she'd once joined an archery club for a single week in her previous life.

Nana managed to avoid snapping her chest with the bowstring, but Pochi

nicked her hand with it, and Mia had to use Water Magic to heal the red welt.

In the end, Mia was the only one who could use the weapon at a practical level, and only Arisa and Tama succeeded in firing their arrows forward. Their accuracy was low, but they could probably bluff with it, at least.

Tama had more accuracy and power with throwing stones, and Arisa could use Psychic Magic without a chant anyway, so Mia would be the only one to use a bow.

I figured I probably wouldn't touch it, either, at least until I found suitable prey and acquired the "Bow" skill.

After our practice session, I took Pochi and Tama with me to retrieve the arrows from the thicket behind the tree we'd been using as a target.

The arrows were marked on my map, so we could take a carefree stroll as we collected them.

Along the way, I found some medicinal plants that could serve for potion making.

"Herrrbs?"

"Yeah, they're called russet wort. They're used to make magic recovery potions," I explained as Tama peered into my hand with great interest.

"Tama'll pick 'em, too!"

"So will I, sir!"

"All right, let's gather them on our way back, then."

Once we'd recovered the arrows, the three of us picked herbs on our way back to camp. I wasn't sure whether it was because of her "Collecting" skill or simply her sharp eyes, but Tama found the most.

After we returned to the camp, Liza asked me what the evening's main dish should be.

There wasn't much left of the venison Tama and I had caught, so we decided to use the mutton we'd bought in Kainona.

I took it out of Storage via the Garage Bag and passed it to Liza.

Since it had been in Storage, where the objects remained in stasis, it was just as fresh as when it had been butchered.

Liza was a little taken aback at how fresh it was, but she must have assumed it was a feature of the Garage Bag or something, because she accepted it without comment, cut out the parts we'd be using on the worktable I'd bought, and gave the rest to me.

Thanks to the eager help of the younger kids, preparation for dinner ended earlier than expected. The girls' hungry gazes were boring into Liza, and out of consideration for her, I told them to play with the study cards until dinner.

Because we were waiting, I decided to challenge myself with an attempt to make a magic tool.

I'd already read through the *Foundations of Magic Tools* book that I'd purchased in Seiryuu City.

Generally speaking, a magic tool was a device that allowed the user to produce a certain magical effect without a spell. The patterns called "magic circuits" within allowed them to do this.

Simple circuits could be made without any special equipment, but complex ones required a dedicated workshop. The simplest way to understand it was the difference between electrical circuits built from bulbs, batteries, and wire, and electronic circuits with semiconducting components.

In order to configure a magic circuit, one simply had to create a specific pattern with "circuit solution." The book also called the solution "magic liquid."

Circuit solution came in different degrees of magic resistance depending on the purpose, but I figured the orthodox approach would be fine for now.

First, I drew an ink circle on a thick wooden board I'd bought in Kainona. Then I carved the circle lightly into the surface of the wood with a dagger. Finally, I poured circuit solution into the groove I'd made.

I made the simplest circuit solution first, which required melted copper, monster core powder, and a stabilizing agent.

The stabilizer was the same one used in transmutation, so I'd purchased it

along with the monster repellent powder before we left. It was surprisingly inexpensive; I'd have to buy it in bulk in the next town for making potions.

I used a melting pot and a magic tool resembling an alcohol lamp to melt down the copper. When I pressed the button on the lamp, it absorbed some of my MP and produced a high-temperature flame like a burner.

Only a magic tool could burn without fuel like that.

Incidentally, I'd found the burner and melting pot in my spoils from the Cradle. It had probably belonged to Trazayuya or Zen.

> Skill Acquired: "Metalworking"

Was melting metal the only necessary condition for obtaining that skill?

Next, I added the core powder and the stabilizer to the liquid copper inside the pot. There was a light *pop* and a small puff of red smoke—but no smell.

I poured the completed circuit solution into the grooves of the wooden board. This time, I smelled something scorching as smoke rose from the hot liquid burning the wood.

Maybe I should've let it cool a bit before I poured it.

> Skill Acquired: "Magic-Tool Crafting"

I gained another skill as soon as I completed the process, so I maxed out both and activated them.

Now, the next step was to verify that the circuit worked, but I had no idea how to do that. All *Foundations of Magic Tools* said was *When you have completed the process, try letting magic flow into it.*

The authors had probably neglected to describe this detail because it was so obvious to them.

"What are you making?"

Noticing that I'd reached a good stopping point, Arisa, who'd been ignoring the study cards to peek at me curiously for a while now, joined me to talk.

"Magic tool number one."

"Really? You can make those yourself?"

“I guess so. Want to test it out?”

“May I?”

Arisa looked so excited that I felt guilty.

“Try letting magic flow into it.”

“No problem! To use a magic tool, you just have to send the power from your right hand to your left, right?”

Thanks for the explanation. Now I could sneakily pull off some trial and error.

“All righty, here goes!”

Arisa poured her magic into the tool, and the dull copper glowed a reddish gold.

“All right, that should be enough.”

“So what happens now?”

“Once you put it in, the magic will flow through the circuit.”

“Nice, nice. Then what?”

“That’s it. It goes around the circuit till it runs out.”

“What? Really?”

“This is my first time making something like this, so it’s not gonna be complicated.”

“Aw, man, you got my hopes up there…,” Arisa complained, extremely unsatisfied.

Really, I’m not sure why you would expect a simple circle to do something complicated.

Losing interest, Arisa went back to the spell book she’d been reading.

I waited until her magic ran out of the circuit and the copper returned to its original color.

Now it was my turn to try. Judging by Arisa’s MP gauge, I needed to use only a tiny bit.

Cautiously, I put my hands over the magic circuit and imagined magic flowing from my right hand into my left.

The next moment, my creation burst into pieces in a flash of red light.

I reacted instantly, grabbing the overcoat I'd put nearby just in case and catching the fragments of copper and wood before they flew everywhere.

"Enemiiies?"

"Watch out, sir!"

Tama and Pochi rushed over at the sudden explosion. Liza and the others peered in my direction, too.

"Don't worry, it's nothing. Sorry for startling you."

I apologized to the group and returned to my experiment.

Reviewing my log, I saw that I'd gained all sorts of skills and titles from that little mishap.

> Skill Acquired: "Magic Manipulation"

> Skill Acquired: "Overload"

> Title Acquired: Magic-Tool Designer

> Title Acquired: Magic-Tool Engineer

> Title Acquired: Agent of Destruction

The skills seemed helpful, so I put some points into each.

Since "Overload" seemed intended for sabotage, I changed it to "inactive" afterward. It could come in handy if I ever needed to destroy dangerous magic equipment.

I re-created the same circuit and tried infusing it again. Since I had the "Magic Manipulation" skill now, I figured it should be okay, but I moved a few paces away from Arisa before starting the experiment in case any debris went flying.

This time, I supplied the magic without any problems. Perhaps because I had crafted it with my newly acquired high-level skills, the circuit circulated the energy more than ten times longer than the first one.

Once I had mastered this, I had the feeling I could potentially use it to make a condenser or an MP battery or something.

I continued experimenting until it was time for bed, working through the practice circuits in *Foundations of Magic Tools*.

As a result, I realized that magic circuits shared many similarities with electrical circuits in both structure and function. Some sections would have been identical if you replaced *magic* with *electricity*.

However, there were also circuits with features that seemed physically impossible—they weren't totally interchangeable.

There were many that I would've liked to try prototyping, but I didn't have the gear or materials. I had some tools in my spoils from the Cradle and the Valley of Dragons, but it was so difficult to find the right ingredients that I just gave up.

I'd have to buy them in the next town. My shopping list was so long I was afraid I'd forget things, so I used the Memo function in the social networking tab to prioritize.

After a satisfying dinner with plenty of mutton, we enjoyed some after-dinner tea.

Liza, who looked like she'd been mulling something over for a while, made up her mind and approached me.

"Master, I would like to carry out some training with Pochi and Tama to ensure our skills remain intact. Is that all right?"

I'd been a bit nervous about what she might say to me, but since it was nothing major, I readily agreed.

Of course, real swords would be dangerous, so I cut down a nearby tree and fashioned wooden swords and a wooden staff roughly the same shape as a spear.

"Master, I would like to participate as well, I entreat," Nana said.

"Sure, that's fine," I said, watching the beastfolk girls enjoying their practice. I fashioned a wooden rapier for her.

“Just don’t use Magic Arrows during training.”

“Restriction registered. Master, your command has been accepted, I report.”

Nana nodded expressionlessly.

The beastfolk girls were level 13, so since Nana was only about half their level at level 7, I gave her permission to use her Foundation Magic’s Body Strengthening spell. It would make for an appropriate handicap.

I let them engage in one-on-one and two-on-two practice battles. Since I was serving as the referee and on-call medic, I didn’t take part in the training.

As expected, Liza came in first by a long shot, followed by Tama, Pochi, and Nana.

Tama’s skill lay in evasion, thus she had a knack for earning a draw by dodging her opponent’s attacks until time ran out. Pochi’s attacks were about as good as Liza’s, but she was too focused on offense, at the expense of defense and evasion, so Liza used those openings to defeat her.

Poor Nana didn’t win a single match. She might have been able to win by a narrow margin if she could have used her Magic Arrows, but for now it seemed that the beastfolk girls’ higher levels and energy were too much for her. However, she was the best defender of the four. She’d probably be a good tank once her level was higher.

After the four of them cleaned off the sweat from training, they ate some soup that Lulu had reheated for them, and I put them to bed.

While I was on first watch with Arisa, a vampire bat attacked us. Though the name made it sound like a monster, it was just a normal bloodsucking bat.

I reached into my coat to pull my Magic Gun out of Storage and shot it down through one of its wings.

Then, nocking an arrow to the short bow, I acquired the “Bow” skill by pressing it into the bat as it flopped around on the ground.

I didn’t want to torture the animal, so I used a knife to kill it instantly once I’d acquired the skill.

The next day, the fifth morning since our departure from the city, I awoke to

see a mountain of prepped and stripped vampire bats.

When I'd checked my map the night before, I hadn't seen any nests nearby, so they must have attacked a bunch of times until morning.

As a result, we had grilled bat for breakfast. They smelled pretty good, but I couldn't bring myself to eat any. I just pretended to taste one and left the rest to everyone else.

Arisa and Lulu felt the same way I did, so the grilled bats disappeared into the stomachs of the beastfolk girls. The three of them gleefully ate their fill, bones and all. I guess maybe they were tastier than they looked.

I'm on a journey through another world—maybe I should work up the courage to try it next time.

As I made this resolution, the carriage brought us out of Seiryuu County and into Kuhanou County.

Monster Attack

Satou here. When I visited my parents back home, I saw signs that said BEWARE OF BEARS, but luckily, I never encountered any. Seeing one from a car is one thing, but I would never want to meet one face-to-face.

“Master, the sky looks a bit ominous. It might start raining while we’re crossing the mountains.”

We’d just passed over the county border in the mountains when Lulu gave a report from the driver’s seat.

She was right. Without my noticing, dark clouds had gathered above us. It was nearly lunchtime, but we’d likely have to eat in the carriage.

I took a waterproof cloak out of the Garage Bag and put it on. The girls would probably be fine inside the carriage, but I gave everyone their rain gear anyway and told them to wear it.

“Lulu, I’ll take over.”

“Yes, sir. The road is narrow here, so please stay close to the side of the mountain if possible.”

“All right.”

I took the reins from Lulu.

The road certainly had narrowed since we’d entered the mountains, and now there was barely enough room for two carriages to pass each other. Perhaps out of consideration, the slope of the road was very gentle. Still, due to the path’s numerous twist and turns, visibility far ahead was poor.

Farther into the mountains, I could see four horses and a carriage rushing around. Of course, “rushing” for a horse-drawn carriage was still slower than the average motorbike, but I wondered if something had happened.

I selected Search Entire Map from my magic menu and gathered information

about Kuhanou County.

There were three people on horseback following the carriage—I'd guessed they were robbers at first, but they were escorts. The carriage was indeed under attack, though, by nearly thirty red points on the radar. I couldn't see them from here, but once I selected one dot, I discovered that it was a pack of wolves.

I caught a glimpse of one of the mounted guards fighting off the wolves with a short bow.

The escort captain was around Liza's level. The other two were level 6 or 7—about the same strength as an average soldier, I'd say. The wolves were only levels 3 to 5, so as long as they didn't overtake and surround the carriage, the riders would probably be fine.

Nevertheless, we were well on our way to a head-on collision with the fleeing carriage, which prompted me to check the map for a place to escape.

Over the next ridge was an apparent rest area with a hut where we could get out of the way, so I spurred the coach toward it.

"Dooogs?"

"Lots of them, sir!"

Clad in their rain gear, Pochi and Tama clambered up to the front to report that they'd spotted the pack through the trees.

"Those are wolves. They're chasing a carriage."

I corrected the two of them, then conveyed the situation to the rest of the group inside once they'd finished changing clothes.

"Wolves after a carriage? Why, that sounds to me like a flag for saving a princess or a noble!"

Arisa sounded thrilled about what she believed was a scripted encounter, but I told her not to be ridiculous. Besides, I'd already cleared both a princess rescue mission and a noble rescue mission.

As if some god of fate had heard this joke and taken offense, a giant wolf the size of a cart itself attacked the mounted escorts. I must have blinked or

glanced away for a second, because I could have sworn it teleported in front of the horseman.

The cavalry captain defended himself against the giant beast's attack, but three more wolves of the same size leaped at him. Unable to defend against the pack, he quickly fell. The other two horsemen saw this, dropped their bows, and tried to flee. A sensible decision.

I wanted to help them, but a short bow wouldn't reach from this distance. The Magic Gun was out, too, since it had about the same range.

But a spear or a throwing stone might reach.

I stopped our carriage and threw a rock at one of the huge wolves. Ignoring air resistance and gravitational acceleration, the missile rocketed at subsonic speed and smashed through the giant wolf's head.

I got ready for a second shot, but just as suddenly as they'd appeared, the other giant wolves vanished on the spot. The dots on my radar suggested they were going after the horse-drawn carriage.

I investigated the details of the giant wolves on the map. They were rocket wolves, monsters with levels in the late teens, with the Unique Skills "Jet Propulsion" and "Kin Control."

…So they were the same species as the pup that Tama had caught before.

"We'll ambush the wolves in the open area coming up. Get ready for battle, everyone."

A chorus of confirmations sounded in reply. Even the horses answered with snorts full of fighting spirit.

"Do your best, Rye, sir!"

"You toooo, Effie!"

Pochi and Tama encouraged the horses before readying their bucklers and short swords. Rye was the horse on the right, and Effie was the horse on the left. Needless to say, the inspiration for their names came from their respective sides of the carriage.

"Lulu, drive for me, please. I'm going to go on ahead to the plaza."

Lulu hurried into the coachman's stand to take the reins from me, and I broke into a run down the road alone. Of course, I couldn't sprint at full force or I'd wreck the road, so I limited myself to the speed of an average car.

As I ran, I checked on the map.

In that short period of time, the remaining two escorts had become the rocket wolves' prey, men and horses alike.

But the escorts had bought time, and the carriage was still safe. The archers riding in the back were hard at work keeping the pursuing wolves at bay.

The smaller ones were just ordinary brown wolves. The rocket wolves' Kin Control ability was probably controlling them.

I arrived at the plaza. It was bigger than I'd thought. There were trees along the side of the valley to shield from the wind and enough space for three or so horse-drawn carriages to park. A bit higher up on the mountainside was a little log cabin.

The first drops of rain finally fell from the heavy clouds.

I looked farther up the mountainside, past the flat area with the hut. *I should be able to snipe the wolves on the mountain pass from there.*

Moving quickly, I took a short bow and some arrows out of Storage.

…Crap, I only have ten arrows.

Clicking my tongue, I kept my eyes on the brown wolves and the carriage as they slid in and out of sight, sniping one and then another. I aimed for their vitals, so most of my shots were one-hit kills.

> Title Acquired: Bow Expert

The rapid-fire rate of the bow was even faster than that of the Magic Gun.

I caught sight of one of the rocket wolves and disposed of it. My last arrow wasn't enough to take it out, so I pulled out my Magic Gun from Storage for the finishing shot.

Since the power of the short bow depended on how strongly the bowstring was pulled, the level of the user had little effect.

After this, I defeated a few more brown wolves with the Magic Gun, but the road took a wide curve along the side of another mountain, making me lose sight of them.

Below me, the carriage with the rest of my group arrived, and I went down to join them.

“I got rid of about half the wolves. There are two more of the giant ones—those are called rocket wolves. They’re really strong, so we’ll take them out one at a time together.”

Even the beastfolk girls would have difficulty beating those monsters one-on-one without injury.

I had Lulu hide inside the hut and tied the horses to a tree obscured in the shadows behind it.

Arisa was rolling up her sleeves and pinwheeling her arms in the air, but I had to have a quiet word with her and burst her bubble.

“Arisa. Don’t use your Unique Skills.”

“What? Master, could it be that you’ve finally fallen for the amazing Arisa and all of her—”

“That’s an order.”

“Fiiine.”

Arisa dropped to her hands and knees in a dramatic display of disappointment. I felt bad, but I wanted to heed the advice Zen had given me on the verge of his death. I had to make sure we didn’t carelessly use Unique Skills like Arisa’s One-Shot Cannon move.

Under the shadow of the mountain, the carriage came into view on the hill, about a hundred feet away.

White steam rose from the horse’s rain-soaked body.

“The carriaaage!”

“All right, time to attack.”

At Tama’s report, I gave the go-ahead to start the battle.

Mia's bow and arrow, Pochi's and Tama's stones, and Nana's Magic Arrows all descended upon the wolves pursuing the carriage. Since Arisa's Psychic Magic could potentially affect the carriage, we didn't use it here.

I fired at the wolves, too, with one Magic Gun in each hand.

"Whoa, dual-wielded guns? Now, that's hot! Ahh, I wish digital cameras existed in this world!"

I paid no attention to Arisa's comments and took out one brown wolf after another.

As the workhorse reached the top of the hill and started down, I caught a good look at the carriage. Below the torn-up canopy, I saw a rocket wolf just seconds away from eating the coachman. There was no sign of the guards who had been in the back.

"Monsters! You have to run!"

The coachman spotted us and screamed out. He must not have heard the rocket wolf breathing down his neck because he didn't look back at all.

The rocket wolf triumphantly opened its mouth above the coachman's head.

That's as far as you go.

I turned the Magic Gun to its highest setting and blew off its head. With a fountain of blood, the giant wolf tumbled off the vehicle.

Now the carriage was passing through the plaza.

"Arisa!"

In response to my call, Arisa sent her Shock Wave spell into the crowd of wolves chasing the carriage, catching all of them head-on.

The regular wolves stumbled and fell, bleeding from the eyes and ears. At least half of them were dead.

I wanted the beastfolk girls to take out the rest of the weaker animals, but there were two more rocket wolves to take care of first.

At that moment, a point of light appeared on my radar, coming straight toward us from the summit of the mountain.

I tried to find it but didn't see anything.

It seemed to be after the other carriage, not us. I went out into the road, peering after the fleeing cart.

A giant creature descended from the sky and landed on top of the carriage, demolishing the damaged top carrier.

It was a dragon-like beast with three snakelike heads and two wings: a hydra.

It was level 39, which seemed appropriate for a monster roughly the size of a single-family house. *That's on par with the Undead King Zen.*

Trying to save the coachman, I aimed my gun at the hydra.

"Master, behind you!"

I heard Arisa cry out behind me. My "Sense Danger" skill reacted at the same time.

A red point was hurtling toward me on the radar—a rocket wolf.

"***Shield*** *Tate!"*

Before I could turn my head, Nana's magic shield halted the rocket wolf's charge.

It didn't fully stop the momentum, though, as the wolf pushed the transparent shield toward me. I stored the Magic Gun away and stopped the shield with my newly freed hand.

Alas, the coachman's dot had already disappeared from the radar.

In a burst of rage, I kicked the shield and the wolf into the air.

My attack shattered the spell into shards of light and smashed the jaw of the rocket wolf behind it. The blow took almost 90 percent of its health, and its HP gauge was rapidly decreasing.

Pochi and Tama rushed up and slashed the tendons of its hind legs, and Liza's spear pierced through its flank right into its heart.

Finally, Nana's Foundation Magic created three Magic Arrows that ran through the wolf's head, finishing it off.

Leaving the last remnants of the wolf pack to Liza and the others, I turned back toward the hydra. It was carrying the horse in its mouth in a leisurely escape to the other side of the mountain.

I knew attacking the hydra now wouldn't change anyone's fate, but I could at least take revenge for them. The thing was already out of range of the Magic Gun, so I took a short spear out of Storage, aimed at the hydra, and hurled it with all my might.

The spear broke the speed of sound as it flew and skewered all three of the hydra's heads.

My weapon had pierced right through the first two heads and put a decent dent in the third, but that wasn't enough to defeat it. Losing height rapidly, the hydra disappeared behind the mountain.

My Fire Shot spell probably would have finished it off, but considering the forest fires that might result, it was too dangerous. I really needed some user-friendly long-range magic, like Freeze Bullet or Magic Arrow.

Just to be safe, I marked the hydra on my map.

I considered indicating all the strong monsters in the county, but a search quickly revealed that there were too many.

The dots for monsters and hell demons on the radar were white unless they were hostile, the same color as people and animals, so I changed the default color for them to yellow.

While I did, I noticed that unlike Seiryuu County, this territory contained several blank areas. Most likely, Count Kuhanou didn't control these areas.

The majority was near the southern border of the Muno Barony, but the blank space south of the nearby town of Noukee sat right near our location.

Hopefully it was just an undeveloped or autonomous region, but if it was a den of dangerous beasts like the hydra, I'd rather find that out as soon as possible.

Once we locate an inn in the town tonight and everyone's safely settled in, I'll have to sneak out and investigate. They'll think I've been out in the red-light

district again, but ensuring our safety is the most important thing.

By the time the battle was over, the sky had opened into a torrential downpour.

I felt guilty about leaving the bodies to get soaked in the rain, but landslides were a risk now, so we all evacuated into the mountain hut.

Because everyone was cold and soaked from the rain, I asked Liza to prepare lunch to warm us up.



Arisa and Nana had gained one level each in the battle. Nana hadn't acquired any skills, and Arisa seemed to be saving up her points.

Nana had used too much Practical Magic in combat and was low on MP. I gave her a magic recovery potion I'd bought in Seiryuu City.

Once we'd boiled some water, Lulu brewed tea, and the refreshing herbal flavor helped to clear my head.

I hadn't thought of it before, but it had just occurred to me that if anyone crashed because of the wrecked carriage and the rocket-wolf corpses, it'd be on my conscience.

I opened the map and searched for other possible carriages on the road. Even the closest vehicle wouldn't pass through here for at least another three hours.

…Oh? There was a survivor in the middle of the mountain pass. Two of them, in fact. They still had about half their stamina left, but their status read **Unconscious**.

I told Arisa and the others that I was going to check on the carriage for a moment and stepped out into the rain alone.

After I'd collected the bodies of the fallen guards and wolves strewn over the road, I headed toward the two survivors.

They must have fallen off the carriage when it took a sharp turn on the pass and survived by landing on a ledge jutting out from the cliff.

I tied a rope to a sturdy-looking tree protruding from the mountainside and used it to climb down. I certainly could have hopped to the ledge as usual, but I thought it was best to take care, since I had to bring two people back up with me.

It was hard to tell what they looked like, since they were covered in mud, but according to the AR display, they were a boy and girl in their mid-teens. Surprisingly enough, despite being only high-school-age kids, they were husband and wife. *Well, I guess that's not too strange, since they're adults by the standards of this world.*

Because the boy had a broken leg, I did some emergency first aid and applied

a splint. Then I secured both of them to the lifeline and jumped back up a hundred feet or so to the road above with one person under each arm.

…I guess the rope wasn't really necessary after all.

At any rate, their lives didn't seem to be in danger, so I laid them under a tree to rest out of the rain for a moment, collected and stored the bodies of the escort captain and his horse, and carried the two survivors back to the log cabin.

I placed the corpses under a large tree and covered them with a cloth. Since the horse was too large to enshrine under the tree, I laid it nearby under a waterproof cloth instead.

"I found survivors. Mia, please use recovery magic on them."

"Mm."

Mia nodded, and I left the two in her care and headed back outside. I wanted to recover the body of the coachman.

"Master, I've left Lulu and Nana in charge of the cooking. Please, allow me to accompany you."

Liza had followed behind me in her rain gear, so I decided to bring her along. Pochi and Tama wanted to come, too, but since the body would likely be a gruesome sight, I ordered them to stay behind.

Liza and I stepped into the road.

"I suppose this is to be expected, since that enormous demi-dragon landed here…," Liza murmured in a trembling voice.

Following her line of sight, I saw the wreckage of the horse-drawn carriage. Where the coachman's stand had once been now lay the corpse of a man, crushed from the waist up. He must have already been dead by the time I tried to save them.

I collected the articles of the deceased and checked the man's ID papers. He had been a merchant from Kuhanou City. Most of the cargo had been demolished, so I pushed it and the wreck of the carriage into a thicket on the side of the road so it wouldn't block traffic.

After the rain let up, Arisa used her Psychic Magic spell Wake Up to rouse the two survivors. I broke the news that they were the only ones left and led them to the tree where I had laid the bodies to rest. They exclaimed: “Big bro…”

“Brother!”

The beastfolk girls, who had been retrieving the cores from the corpses of the rocket wolves in the plaza, approached the pair with sympathy.

Lulu, who was draining the blood from the brown wolves nearby, looked worried as well. I couldn’t read Nana’s expression as she worked next to Lulu, but since she was watching the survivors as well, she probably felt the same way.

The boy settled down first, so I spoke with him a little.

The coachman had been the girl’s brother, and the three of them were doing business together. They’d hired a group of competent escorts when they heard the border was infested with wolves, but none of them had known monsters like rocket wolves would attack, too.

He bitterly kicked the head of the rocket wolf in the square, and I took him with me to retrieve the cargo that had been scattered on the road. It would probably help take his thoughts off it for a while.

I called Arisa and Mia over to tend to the girl.

The boy and I inspected the cargo they’d discarded to lighten the carriage. Pochi and Tama tagged along, too.

Most of their cargo had been woodworking products and pottery. The pottery was cushioned with something like sawdust, so at least half of it was intact. There were all sorts of wooden goods, like spear handles, arrow shafts, and a variety of furniture.

“We’ll heeelp!”

“Sir!”

Tama and Pochi insisted that they’d carry the load, and by the time we reached the escort captain’s body, most of the goods had been recovered.

“What should we do with the bodies?”

“I think it’d be best to bury them behind the mountain hut. I’m terribly sorry to have you help us so much, but do you think you could lend me a hand?”

I’d expected him to ask us to take them to the nearest town, but according to the boy, most people just left bodies on the side of the road as is, and even devoutly religious people made only a prayer or offering.

Even if there were surviving relatives, like in this case, they could rarely afford a burial.

I readily agreed to his request, and we dug some graves behind the hut.

It would normally be difficult to dig holes to bury four people, but between my absurdly high STR stat and the help of the beastfolk girls, we were done in no time.

While the two survivors said their last good-byes, I buried the horses in a corner of the plaza. Liza asked whether we should butcher them down for food, but that didn’t seem right to me.

I gave the Garage Bag to Pochi and Tama to collect the corpses of the brown wolves, then went to help Liza take apart the rocket wolves.

They were too big to fit into the bag, which was probably why she’d asked.

Since Lulu and Nana had finished bleeding out the brown wolves and joined us, the only role left to me was tying the rope onto the branches of a large tree to string up the rocket-wolf corpses.

After placing a small cask full of water near Liza and the others, I watched over their work quietly. I had expected them to take only the fur, but they collected the meat as well.

“U-um, Ms. Liza? Can you really eat monster meat?”

“We’ll discard the organs, as they could be dangerous, but from the color of the meat, I believe it should be safe to eat.”

Liza answered Lulu’s question confidently.

It certainly did look like beef in color, but I wasn’t sure if one should really base one’s decision on that alone.

I analyzed one of the pieces of meat and discovered they were indeed edible and free of poison.

Arisa and Mia, who had been accompanying the boy and girl, called me over from behind the log cabin.

“Have you finished your good-byes?”

“Yes… My elder brother would surely scold me if I kept crying forever.”

Wiping the last tears from her reddened eyes, the girl gave me a resolute smile. After speaking with her for a moment, the boy and I shoveled soil over the bodies.

I carved the names on the identification papers of the deceased into a suitably sized stone to serve as a grave marker.

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After we left the mountain hut, we reached the nearest town in Kuhanou County, Noukee, in the evening.

The boy reported the incident to the gatekeeper at the mountain pass. I came along to fill in the details.

“So a wolf pack led by rocket wolves appeared on the road in our county? They usually stay farther west…”

…Maybe the hydra chased the pack into the area?

With that thought in mind, I told the gatekeeper about the hydra.

“A hydra, you say? Not just rocket wolves?”

“I saw the smashed carriage, too. The only other way it could’ve been crushed like that is if a giant rock fell on it or something.”

The guard seemed unconvinced, so the boy supplemented the testimony. Still, the guard clearly found it hard to believe that a hydra had appeared on a populated road.

“Are you sure it wasn’t crushed by falling rocks, then?”

“If you have any doubts, I would invite you to inspect the remains for yourself. I’m certain there were other witnesses, so perhaps you could ask some

neighboring farmers or hunters?”

It wasn’t a big deal if he didn’t believe us about the hydra. I chose not to push the story too much.

However, the comment ended up making it more believable, so he took us to a government office to meet with someone called the “assistant secretary.”

“Allow me to summarize. You saw a pack of brown wolves and rocket wolves chasing some merchants, the wolves killed the merchants’ escorts in battle, and while you were fighting the wolves, a hydra suddenly appeared, killed the coachman, and flew away with the horse. Is that correct?”

I nodded, confirming the assistant secretary’s description. The only other people present were the boy and a few official-looking men. Everyone else was waiting beside our carriage outside the government office.

“Then I will now question you about the details of your story in chronological order. Regardless of whether it is true or not, I expect you to simply answer yes.”

With that, he began a careful review.

“Assistant Secretary Hatess inquires: The merchants’ escorts were killed during the battle with the wolves, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Assistant Secretary Hatess inquires: A hydra killed the merchant, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Assistant Secretary Hatess inquires: You yourselves caused no harm to the merchants, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Assistant Secretary Hatess inquires: The hydra fled into the mountains, correct?”

“Yes.”

He seemed to be casually interrogating me, too, but I paid it no mind and answered.

Since the first guard had the Eye of Judgment gift, he should already have known we didn't kill the merchant.

"This person is telling the truth."

"Sir!" Flustered, one of the officials hurried into another room. He was going to the constable, the person to which the lord had entrusted the governance of the town.

"The constable will use a magic tool to get in touch with the count right away. I'm sure he will dispatch the army to take care of the hydra in no time."

The secretary gave a confident smile.

The boy and I were called into the constable's office, and once again we had to explain the situation with the hydra and the rocket wolves.

Apparently, the rocket wolves had been controlling the brown wolves as decoys for hunting in the mountains, and the duke's army had been struggling to deal with them. The baron who was serving as the constable praised us, albeit condescendingly.

After that, we moved to the office of the constable's aide to discuss our reward for the information about the hydra and the defeat of the rocket wolves.

The town seemed to have a small budget, and I sensed they were reluctant to give up cash, so I tried asking for a letter of introduction to an inn for the night in place of goods or money. The instant I told them that a pecuniary reward wouldn't be necessary, the slender aide gleefully set about writing with a brush and ink.

I guess that despite being a titled lesser noble, he had a pretty tough life.

After that, the boy went to report the deaths of the peddler and the guards.

In the meantime, I sold two of the cores from the rocket wolves at the teller window in the government office. The value was much higher here—almost three times the amount in Seiryuu City.

Once our errands in the office were over, I took the kids to a company where one of their acquaintances worked.

As a reward from the boy, he told me to take whatever I wanted from the goods they had in stock.

I had no shortage of money, but it would be rude not to accept his thanks, so I chose some arrow shafts and spear handles.

I'd have been a bit worried about the boy's future if I left it at that, though. I subtly convinced him to mention which of their products were hardest to unload in this town and bought some at a slightly higher price.

Arisa chided me for being soft, but since we didn't have to pay for shipping, I figured we'd be able to break even by selling them somewhere else.

The boy and girl thanked us repeatedly as we said our farewells, and we headed for the inn that the people in the government office had told us was the best in town.

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Since this was a pretty small town, we reached the inn quickly. I tried to get a room or two so everyone could rest, but we were informed that demi-humans weren't allowed inside.

I probably could've gotten Arisa to use the ability she'd demonstrated in Kainona again, but that wouldn't be necessary here; I handed the owner our letter of introduction from the government office.

The letter's effect was immediate, and we got two four-person rooms, as requested.

After the owner politely folded it and handed it back to me, I tucked it into my breast pocket. It served no further purpose now, but I wasn't about to throw away a letter from nobility.

We determined our room assignments by rock-paper-scissors, and I ended up sharing a room with Nana, Lulu, and Liza.

At first, I was worried that this would be a trial, but then I realized it was a moot point. *That's right, I was planning on investigating the blank area tonight.*

It was nearly evening, but since we planned to leave early the next morning, I gave everyone shopping assignments.

Arisa and Nana would find the pepper and other spices. The others would restock the feed and the casket of water.

With Liza as my escort, I went to visit the only alchemy and magic shop in town. To avoid any trouble, I had Liza wear a hooded overcoat.

When we arrived at the shop, a man with a hood over his eyes burst out and nearly slammed the door right into me, but Liza quickly reached out and stopped it.

The door collided with the man's face instead, and he protested in an imperious tone.

"Watch it! Who do you think you're dealing with?! I am—"

"Sorry. Are you injured at all?"

Personally, I thought the situation was his fault to begin with, but I decided to be the bigger man and apologize. You'll have to forgive me if my heart wasn't really in it.

The man, his face obscured under his hood, noticed something and snapped his mouth shut before climbing into the carriage that was waiting nearby.

When his servant slowly emerged from the shop laden with a good deal of baggage, the man in the hood shouted at him.

"We're going to the next shop! Come quickly, you stupid slave!"

The carriage took off before the slave could board it. Without a word of complaint, the slave shouldered the jingling bag and trailed after the carriage.

"Let's go, Liza."

I beckoned my companion, who was watching the departing carriage, and we entered the shop.

"Welcome. If you're looking for male enhancement tonics, we have pills but not potions."

The saleswoman, wearing what looked like strange magic eyeglasses, leaped to conclusions before I said a word. *Do I look like that much of a lech to you?*

I relied on my "Poker Face" skill to keep my displeasure from showing.

“Hello. I would like to buy some elixir for potion making. Do you have any in stock?”

“For stamina recovery potions, we can sell you three packages’ worth. They’re one silver coin each. There’s a bit of a core shortage right now, so don’t expect a discount. If you don’t like it, feel free to go.”

With three packages between her fingers, the saleswoman went about her supercilious sales pitch. They were small paper packets, like the kind for powdered medicine in a hospital.

They cost almost three times as much as the ones in the Seiryuu City alchemy shop, but my “Estimation” skill told me this was close to the actual market value, so she wasn’t overcharging me.

I don’t know why, but if they’re short on cores, I bet the stabilizer is cheaper.

I’d sold the rocket-wolf cores at the public office earlier, but I still had plenty of cores from the Cradle. All I needed was the stabilizer to make as much elixir as I’d like.

“Do you have stabilizer, then?”

“Yes, we have plenty of that. If you have cores of your own, in fact, I wonder if you could help us out a bit.”

What an abrupt move. Suddenly asking me to sell cores?

Actually, I suppose, since I had asked for the stabilizer to make elixir, it naturally followed that I would have the other main ingredient.

Still, wasn’t there a rule that cores acquired in a territory must be sold to a gatekeeper or public official of that region?

“I’m afraid I’ve just sold my cores at the public office.”

“Oh, come, now. If you’re an alchemist, surely you kept one or two on the sly?”

“I’m sorry to disappoint, but no.”

I sympathized with the plight of being short on ingredients, but this would still be breaking the law. Since my own safety was the top priority, I declined the

transaction.

“Well, if you know anyone who’s got cores, send them our way, would you? We’ll buy them no matter how sketchy the seller.”

“I’ll talk to my acquaintances.”

Hmm. This seems like taking advantage of her weakness, but I wonder if she’d sell me Magic Scrolls in exchange for cores?

“I do have a friend who wants to get some Magic Scrolls…”

“If they can bring me at least this weight in red cores, grade three or above, I could certainly think about it.”

So cores had different grades? Out of curiosity, I had the saleswoman explain them to me. She showed me a color chart; I compared it to the cores that I had in Storage through the menu. I found cores that matched each color in the chart and used them as samples to make folders for each grade.

While I checked the samples, the saleswoman disappeared into the back of the store and returned with a twenty-pound bag.

The bag floated along lightly behind her, so typically magical that it almost looked like a trick instead.

“Is that magic?”

“It’s just Floating Board. You’ve really never seen something so common?”

Despite her claim, she seemed proud of herself. I did remember seeing a spell like that in a beginner’s guide to Practical Magic.

I checked the stabilizer she’d brought over. The AR display called it **Stabilizer/Ugi Leaf Powder**. The market price was five gold coins.

“This is ugi leaf powder, correct?”

“Indeed. You have a sharp eye. It’s a rare product around these parts, but we received a large quantity from a merchant in exchange for some potions a while ago. Luckily, it hasn’t gone bad yet.”

“How much might you be willing to sell?”

“We just stocked up on Yarma grass for stabilizer, so I’d even be willing to

part with all of it. If you buy the whole lot, it'll be two gold coins."

I was tempted to ask her for the newer stock instead, but since she was offering it at less than half the market price, I didn't mind taking her up on the clearance sale. In fact, since the quality shouldn't deteriorate while it was in Storage, this was a great bargain for me.

I purchased the whole bag, plus some other potion-making materials and things that could be troublesome to get ahold of myself.

Once I'd paid and was ready to leave the store, I realized I'd forgotten something.

"How much would it be to purchase some vials for potions?"

"Sorry. Someone just bought up our whole stock right before you came. He had a requisition warrant with the seal of the viceroy of Sedum City, so I couldn't refuse."

Why would someone forcibly collect a bunch of vials? Was the viceroy mass-producing potions or something?

Incidentally, a viceroy was in a position similar to a constable, in charge of governing the city.

Grumbling about it here wouldn't do me any good. I decided to visit a pottery workshop to stock up instead. But thanks to the same man, they were sold out.

They made vials for alchemy only once a month there and asked me to wait until the next month. Since they had to mix the stabilizer into the base, they couldn't make them at the same time as other products.

I did just buy a large supply of stabilizer, so if the next town or city didn't have any, either, I could try making the vials myself. Luckily enough, the scrap of paper I got from Hoze contained detailed instructions on the pottery process. I'd be able to figure it out.

Returning to the inn, I received a proud report from Arisa that she'd acquired the pepper.

Not only that, but they'd also obtained mustard and cayenne powder, garlic and leek oil, a few varieties of pickled cabbage, and what looked like pickled

daikon radish.

They'd also stocked up on raw daikons and various cooking and pickling ingredients for them, so we'd be able to expand the range of our vegetarian dishes.

We had dinner brought to our rooms. It was better than the food in the Kainona inn, but I thought we could have gotten something tastier from a food cart.

I put the kids to bed early that night and stepped out into the town. All I told Liza and the others was that I was going out.

She and Nana wanted to come as my escorts, but since it would be faster to move on my own in this case, I told them to stay behind.

Right, wasn't there something else I had to do before my investigation?

"I heard you're in need of cores."

I entered the alchemy shop and approached the saleswoman.

I'd wound cloth around my face and put on a tattered cloak with a hood over my eyes. I looked like such a suspicious character that even I would've reported me.

"Certainly, as long as they're grade three and up."

However, the saleswoman might have seen through my disguise, as she responded quite casually.

I took the cores out of my pocket and laid them on the counter. Since I'd gotten them from crimson needle bees, most of them were on the small side. The ones from the labyrinth were all at least grade 7, and the ones from the Cradle were only grades 1 or 2, so I didn't have a lot of options.

"Listen, I know cores are pretty stable before they're turned into powder, but I still wouldn't carry them around in my pocket like that if I were you. What if they sucked up some magic and exploded while you were using a spell?"

Whoa, they explode? I guess the first magic tool I'd made exploded when I overloaded it, too.

I thanked her for her advice and laid out a total of twenty cores.

She placed the cores on something that looked like a small Transmutation Tablet and inspected them, taking some notes, probably estimating the price of the cores.

“Don’t you have anything a little higher quality? Ideally, I’d like some red grade fives or higher for use in middle-grade potions. Even a few would be fine.”

“How about this?”

I put on the table the cores from the shadow stalkers I’d defeated while rescuing Red Helmet. Though they were also rather small, they were grade 6.

“N-now, this is a quality stone.”

While the saleswoman appraised them, I asked her about the Magic Scrolls.

“Shopkeeper, I was told you would be able to provide me with Magic Scrolls in exchange for these cores…”

“Choose from any of these.”

She showed me three Scrolls: Shield, Sonar, and Signal. There were Scrolls like Magic Arrow and Short Stun in the back.

“Don’t you have any others?”

“We do, but I’d prefer not to sell Scrolls to a total stranger that have the potential to cause serious injury. What about this? A traveling explorer sold it to us.”

The salesperson produced a Scroll called Gust. It was stronger than the Everyday Magic spell Breeze but not enough to knock someone over. The Wind Magic spell’s original purpose was to aid in the sailing of ships.

I was curious what kind of eccentric person had made it, so I inquired. According to the seller, it had been unearthed in a labyrinth.

Honestly, they all seemed a bit underwhelming, but since I didn’t want to pass up a rare opportunity, I asked if I could buy all of them. They ranged in price from four to six silver coins, so it was a total value of nineteen silver coins for

the four.

The average value of the crimson needle bee cores was one silver coin, while the shadow stalkers' were worth six—both almost three times the market price, inflated like the elixirs'.

I received the rest of my reimbursement in cash. I'd really hoped to buy some intermediate spell books or magic tools, but they didn't have anything I wanted, and I gave up.

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After leaving the alchemy shop, I leaped over the outer wall of the town and zipped alone along the main road at the speed of a car.

Of course, it would've been a pain if anyone discovered my identity, so I blanked out my name field and wore a hooded black cloak over my eyes.

Within a half hour, I reached the point in the road closest to my destination and walked into the forest. Between my "Night Vision" and "Off-Road Running" skills, it was no different from an afternoon stroll.

Occasionally dodging the small nocturnal animals darting out from within the bushes and hopping over a small mountain stream from time to time, I made my way deeper into the woods.

About halfway to my destination, I stopped for a moment.

I had no idea what might be waiting for me in the blank area. It would probably be best to be as prepared as possible.

I picked a random spot to use my Scrolls and learned the spells Shield, Sonar, Signal, and Gust. I also gained the skills "Practical Magic" and "Wind Magic."

This "Practical Magic" skill was different from the "Practical Magic: Other World" skill I'd gotten when I first used Meteor Shower. I wondered if it was actually an all-inclusive skill like "Analyze."

Even when I selected Shield from the magic menu and used it, it was no different from the one Nana made with Foundation Magic. I'd have to compare and contrast them some other time.

Next, I selected Sonar from the magic menu. Information regarding the

distribution of every living creature in a four-hundred-foot radius zapped into my mind. That would take some getting used to.

On top of that, its effect range was smaller than my radar, and the wild animals in range scattered as if they'd sensed that I'd detected them. I guess it was like active sonar, then. Probably best to just stow it away.

Next, I tried using Signal, but unfortunately, it didn't seem usable on its own. Its original purpose was for communication between sorcerers, so it might be fun to see if I could combine it with a magic tool to make a simple communication device.

Finally, I tried out Gust. A gale at the level of a wind tunnel swept through and knocked over a few slim trees, but it was still nothing compared to Fire Shot. Clearly, its destructive capacity wasn't meant to be as high as spells intended for combat. With the destruction of my magic field test complete, I returned to my original purpose.

I'd gained several more skills on my way to the blank area: "Zoology," "Tracking," "Presence Perception," "Tiptoe," "Concealment," and "Invisibility."

It had probably happened when I snuck up on one of the small animals along my way so I could try touching its fluffy fur.

I also received the titles Forest Seeker and Unseen Pursuer. I wasn't so fond of the latter, since it made me sound like a stalker.

The moment I entered the empty area of the map, a feeling like vertigo washed over me.

The discomfort vanished almost immediately, but when I checked the log, I saw the line **Disorienting Charm magic resisted**. I didn't acquire any new resistance skills.

There weren't any magic users nearby. I quickly selected Search Entire Map from the menu to fill in the blanks.

This place was called the "Forest of Illusions." It appeared to be a pretty normal forest to me, so I wasn't sure how it lived up to that name.

The only people in the area were two female humanfolk in a far-off tower.

One was a witch, and the other was her apprentice. Other than that, there were some magical creatures called “constructors” and other cryptids. Of course, there were plenty of ordinary animals as well.

As I stared absentmindedly at the place where I’d gotten dizzy a moment ago, an AR display appeared that read **Disorienting Charm Barrier**. It was probably there to peacefully turn away intruders.

Apparently, news of my passage through the structure had reached the witch’s tower, because her apprentice was now heading my way.

I had already finished my business here, but I figured I’d better apologize for trespassing.

If they didn’t know who had intruded on their territory or why, it’d cause them undue concern, right?

Now, the welcoming party should be here any moment.

“…■■ ***Toss Stone*** *Sekijun!”*

The witch’s apprentice, a little girl in a robe, hid behind some nearby trees and used a magic spell.

Three stone spears sprouted from the ground at my feet like stalagmites. The attack surrounded me from all sides, but the intention seemed to be to trap me, not to stab me with them.

I didn’t move from the spot, letting the stones encircle me—until one of them misfired and shot right toward my heart, so I kicked it lightly in the center and broke it.

> Skill Acquired: “Earth Magic”

> Skill Acquired: “Earth Resistance”

Maybe they weren’t as sturdy as they looked.

Even if one had hit my body, chances were good it would’ve hurt only slightly, without even wounding me.

“Feh, to think someone would break one of my stones with a kick…how absurd.”

The witch’s apprentice muttered tearfully. She was a timid-looking kid around Arisa’s age. Curly red hair poked out from under her hood.

She was riding a steel panther about three feet tall and was protected by four servants called “living armors.” The panther, a constructor, appeared to be the same kind of synthetic creature.

“Nnngh… Get ’im, guys!”

Half crying, the witch’s apprentice shouted ambiguous directions at the living armor.

Two of them stayed back to protect the girl with round shields and two-handed hatchets, while the other two came after me.

Okay, what do I do now?

I hadn’t expected such a hostile reception with no questions asked.

Well, it was my own fault for trespassing on grounds that were so off-limits that they’d put up a barrier to protect it. I wasn’t sure if they’d forgive me, but the least I could do was graciously apologize.

“I sincerely regret the clumsy misstep that led me to trespass on your territory. I’m sorry.”



Taking care not to break the living armors attacking me with hatchets, I tossed them into the darkness of the forest.

As I did so, more of the Toss Stone stalagmite spears attacked me, but I shattered them easily with my hand. They weren't particularly dangerous.

"Awaaa, my magic isn't workiiing. Mistreeess!"

Panicked, the little girl began casting a long spell.

Judging by the first phrase, it was probably Earth Magic. Probably because I'd been reading spell books so frequently, I'd gained an understanding of most spells lately.

The fact that I still couldn't use magic freely unless I mastered the chanting, despite all my hard work, was downright unfair.

All right, enough complaining. I have to get this girl to calm down already.

"Now, could you please stop attacking me for a moment? It's dangerous. If you really have to punish me, I'll let you hit me once, all right?"

I stooped down to her eye level to speak to her, but she wouldn't listen to me at all.

Since the spell she was casting was called Mud Wave, I was probably about to get covered in muck.

I would have accepted it as punishment for trespassing, but the person who appeared above the girl stopped her for me.

With a loud *thud*, a single shadow dropped from overhead.

A giant bird called an "elder sparrow" landed on the girl as if to crush her.

"Geh!" The witch's apprentice shrieked from underneath the bird's soft belly, but as far as I could tell from the AR display, she was unharmed for now.

On top of the elder sparrow sat an old woman in a robe with the same design as the little girl's. She reminded me of the sort of kindly old lady you'd see sitting on a porch in the countryside, but she was still the witch of this forest.

The woman slid down one of the sparrow's wings and landed on the ground, then walked over to me—and dropped to her hands and knees before me.

…Huh? Can someone explain this situation to me, please?

"I am most honored to meet you. I am but a humble witch who watches over the mana source of this Forest of Illusions. I offer my deepest apologies for my foolish apprentice and her terribly rude behavior toward an emissary of Bolenan. I beg of you, please look kindly upon these old bones and forgive our grave transgression."

…So this is a source, too? Wait, more importantly, what was that about an "emissary of Bolenan"? I wonder if it has to do with Mia's clan— Ahh, maybe it's the bell I got from Red Helmet. The "Silent Bell of Bolenan" was a status symbol made by the elves, I think. Well, maybe it'll help me resolve this misunderstanding.

"Madam Witch, please stand up. I'm the one who entered your territory without a word of greeting. If anyone should apologize, it's me."

The witch still didn't move from her prostrate position, so I put my hand on her shoulder, causing her to look up.

Although, since there were no phones there, I wasn't sure how one would contact somebody before visiting them anyway.

"What generous words, Emissary—"

"I think there's been a misunderstanding. I am protecting an elf of the Bolenan clan, but I'm by no means an official emissary."

"Still, to attack a personage who holds the Silent Bell is akin to waging war on the village of Bolenan itself!"

Sort of like shooting a diplomat, I guess?

"At any rate, would you please stand up? It pains me to see a woman groveling on the ground. Please, for my sake if nothing else."

I finally got the old witch off the ground, and I repeated my apology as we reached an understanding at last.

As for my reason for entering the Forest of Illusions, I told her that I'd wanted to greet the keeper of the mana source. My "Fabrication" skill might have been a factor, but she believed me without any problems.

If anything, I wasn't sure if she believed that I wasn't an emissary…

I climbed aboard the elder sparrow with the witch, and we flew to her tower.

The bird's soft back was so comfortable that I almost wished I could ride longer. It landed on the roof with the quiet finesse of an expert, too.

I glanced at my log once we got off the elder sparrow, but I hadn't obtained a "Riding" skill.

Eventually, I'd love to train a bunch of flying mounts and go on a journey through the sky with everyone.

"Lord Satou, over here, if you please."

I followed the old witch and the light on the tip of her staff down the stairs from the tower's roof. The spiral staircase descended along the wall without a railing. It had a distinctly handmade feeling, so much so that I worried the steps would collapse beneath my feet.

The top floor seemed to be a warehouse. Plants hanging to dry lined the shelves, while the room itself contained well-organized boxes, baskets, and various unfamiliar tools. Either the witch or her disciple was very tidy.

We passed the floor where the witch and her apprentice slept, and she invited me into a room that was like a cross between a parlor and a laboratory.

A little ball of fur greeted us with a strange cry that sounded like, "Pou-kwee!" It resembled a large cotton ball, but according to the AR it was the witch's familiar, a type of cryptid called a "puffbird."

In the corner of the room was a witch's most iconic item: a cauldron, set over a fire, with strange green liquid bubbling inside.

The AR display labeled it a **Witch's Cauldron**. A very straightforward name.

Still, she'd left the fire burning when she went out to meet me? Now I really felt like I'd wronged them.

"I'm in the midst of brewing potions at the moment, so please forgive me if the place smells of herbs."

"Not at all. I have an interest in alchemy myself, so I don't mind."

I guess she'd noticed me staring at the cauldron and taken it the wrong way.

"Still, Madam Witch, don't you use a Transmutation Tablet?"

"That cauldron is a kind of Transmutation Tablet itself, you see. It's a Magic Item that imbues the potion with the abundant mana from the source to dramatically increase its efficacy."

It turned out that the tower itself was a mana-focusing facility. *Since cities have City Cores, maybe towers have cores, too?* I couldn't bring myself to ask such an impolite question, so instead we formally introduced ourselves.

I checked the detailed information in the AR display next to her. Despite being humanfolk, the woman was older than even the elf girl Mia, at an age of 217 years old.

Do witches just live longer, or is it because she controls the source?

The woman was level 37, which seemed relatively low for her old age. She used Water Magic and Practical Magic. She also had a very witchlike assortment of skills, including "Meditation," "Transmutation," "Formulation," and "Magic-Tool Crafting."

Her title was Witch of the Forest of Illusions, which would've been all well and good if it weren't also her name.

Curious, I asked the witch about her actual name while we chatted, and she told me she had cast it off when she inherited the source.

So part of the ritual for inheriting a mana source required you to throw away your individual name. I hadn't known there even was a ritual involved in inheriting sources.

When I gained control of the Valley of Dragons source, I'd done no such ritual, so maybe massacring the dragons with Meteor Shower had been the equivalent?

I also wondered whether I hadn't been able to take over the source of the Cradle of Trazayuya because one person couldn't control multiple sources, or if Mia had gained it instead because of her Cradle Master title.

For some reason, nothing like Source Controller appeared in my titles or

notes, so I had no way of confirming this.

I probably just hadn't noticed that I'd gained control over the Valley of Dragons source because I hadn't checked my log after using Meteor Shower.

After we'd discussed mana sources, I asked the old witch to show me her finished potions. When I analyzed them, every one came up as **High Quality**.

"These are beautifully made. Do potions become more effective depending on the amount of magic or mana put into them?" I asked as I handed the potions back to her.

"In theory, yes. However, after a certain point, any excess mana will simply seep back out, so there isn't much reason, normally. If you use it immediately, it'll be more effective, but in terms of MP efficiency, recovery magic is more practical."

I see—that's why that wasn't mentioned in my alchemy textbooks.

After that, the witch and I discussed alchemy for a while. It was mostly just the old woman lecturing me, but it still ended up being an insightful conversation.

I heard clattering from downstairs.

Just as my radar had indicated, the witch's apprentice was back. Her steel guardians must have been slower than the panther, as they were still trailing through the woods.

The apprentice rushed up the stairs and burst into the room with great force.

This girl needs to chill out.

"Inenimaana, before you barge into a room—"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mistress! Umm… I-I'm very sorry about earlier!"

Imitating her teacher, the girl dropped to the floor.

The puffbird flapped across the room and hopped onto the apprentice's head, puffing out its round body. Apparently, this was its home position.

"It's my own fault for carelessly trespassing on your territory. If I accept your apology, will you please stand?"

It seemed a haughty way to put it, but acting in a way she expected was the only way to get through to her.

What a mouthful of a name, though. Doesn't she have a nickname, like Ine or something?

"How is the potion coming?"

The old witch spoke up, and Ine hurried over to stir the contents of the large cauldron. Since she was the same height as the cauldron, the stirring rod looked like an oar in her hands.

"It's coming along well, Mistress. This means we'll be able to fulfill our end of the pact again this time."

"Yes, indeed. Can I count on you to watch the fire tonight?"

"Yup! Just leave it to me!"

This seemed like a sign she would doze off and fail somehow, but it was rude to make fun of other people, so I ignored it and kept my mouth shut.

The word *pact* jumped out at me, prompting me to ask about it.

I was just curious. I had no intention to push the subject if they didn't want to talk about it, but the old witch had no problem giving me a simple answer.

"It's a pact we have with Count Kuhanou. In exchange for their keeping outlaws and hunters out of our forest, we deliver them three hundred special potions twice a year."

Three hundred? Collecting all those ingredients seems like a hassle, but I guess with a cauldron this big they could make them all in one go.

Though the old witch had put it nicely, it sounded like a tax to ensure the autonomy of this forest.

Hordes of kobolds had apparently been attacking silver mines in the county in the past few years, so there was extra pressure to hold up their end of the bargain.

Certainly, with that much fast-acting medicine, it was hard to imagine the army incurring casualties even against a large monster pack.

Maybe the shortage of cores in the town of Noukee and that official buying up vials for potions were connected to the witch's potion making?

Well, based on the state of affairs in the county, I had no intention of interfering.

The old witch and I resumed our discussion of alchemy that had been interrupted by her apprentice's return.

The witch explained that she made her own transmutation gear, including the cauldron, and taught me some useful knowledge about magic tools in addition to the alchemy lecture.

Since she'd so generously taught me all those designs and recipes, I'd have to collect more materials and try some new concoction.

Though she asked for no compensation for the information, the old witch did have one request.

When I informed her that I was journeying toward the old capital, she asked me to deliver a letter to one of her acquaintances along the way.

The person in question lived in a forest some distance from the main road, but I didn't mind, so I agreed anyway.

To my surprise, she told me that the recipient of the letter was a forest giant.

If this were a game, this definitely would've been a "Deliver the letter to the giants' village" quest.

Since I'd be helping out both the old witch and her friend the giant, and I'd get to see a giant village on top of that, this seemed like a win-win situation to me.

And with not only giants but unicorns living in the forest, too, I was looking forward to the trip.

Now, I didn't want to overstay my welcome, so I decided to head home. Liza and the others were probably worried about me, anyway.

Closing the heavy wooden door behind me, I left the tower.

The old witch had offered to carry me back on the elder sparrow, but it was

cruel to make an elderly person fly out at night in early winter, so I politely declined.

Coming to see me off, the old witch cast a spell that created a path of faint glowing lights on the ground.

The magic, more advanced than it looked, took about 10 percent of the witch's MP.

However, her MP recovered at an amazing rate—at about half the speed of my insanely quick recovery. Mia's and Arisa's recovery rates were incredibly slow compared to mine, but this was much faster than that.

This was probably another benefit of the mana source.

Of course, since our base MP amounts were different, comparing recovery rates by percentage wasn't necessarily very accurate, but it worked well enough as a rough estimate.

Banishing these irrelevant thoughts from my mind, I bade my farewells to the old witch and left the tower behind.

This path of light would take me back out of the territory.

When I'd first come to this forest, I'd thought it failed to live up to its name, but I was wrong.

Lilies of the valley flickering like fireflies, butterflies glowing a faint green, grasshoppers as transparent as glass… The forest was full of fantastic creatures.

Not all of them were beautiful, either. When butterflies fluttered across my path with all-too-realistic human faces on their wings, I didn't know whether to laugh or shudder.

In a small meadow among the trees, fairies called "fauns" danced about happily while beating on drums.

I bet if I took the younger girls here, they'd join right in.

I saw fewer and fewer of these spectacles as I drew closer to the Disorienting Charm Barrier.

I was a little sad to leave, but I'd seen more than enough to satisfy me.

On the way back home, I brought down a wild boar that I found lurking along the path. *A souvenir for Liza and the others.*

When I returned to the inn, Arisa, near hysterical with worry, gave me a tongue-lashing.

The gist of her tirade was that it was too dangerous in the forest at night for me to wander off on my own. When did I tell her that I'd gone outside the city?

She dodged the question when I asked what she was doing in this room instead of her own, but given her rather short nightgown, she was probably trying to sneak into my bed again.

I probably could've gone on the offensive by pointing this out, but since Arisa's tearful lecture was kind of adorable, I simply embraced her and apologized without making excuses.

I'll have to show her sometime that I can get around in the dark without any problems so she won't worry like this anymore.

◆

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of a creaking bed.

I could hear someone else's breathing. Was Arisa trying to harass me first thing in the morning again? That girl never learned.

Dimly irritated, I opened my eyes.

"……Master…please…I entreat."

An unexpectedly sexy voice woke me up in a heartbeat.

Nana was directly on top of me, her hair loose. She was expressionless as usual, but her face was flushed suggestively.

She peered down at me from all fours, so I had a generous view of her cleavage through the wide neckline of her shirt. I was sorely tempted to bounce them from below with the palm of my hand.

I hadn't caught everything she'd said, probably because I'd turned off my "Keen Hearing" skill the night before so I wouldn't have to listen to the snoring of the old man next door.

“Master, hurry.”

“…Sure.”

Bewitched by the feverish heat in Nana’s voice, I nodded involuntarily.

Nana sat up straight, and just like that, she ripped her shirt up and off. Pulled along with the shirt, her round breasts jumped triumphantly into the freedom of the morning air.

After one beautiful moment, her long blond hair quickly covered the view as it briskly chased down after them.

In a trance, my hand moved instinctively toward Nana’s chest.

“Good morniiing! Your beloved Arisa is here tooOOOOOOO?! What is *this*?!”

Arisa’s shrieking brought me to my senses. Looking around, I saw that Liza and Lulu weren’t in the room. They had probably woken up and gone to prepare for our departure already.

Now, what to do with this hand that’s just floating in the air here?

…Should I just squeeze them anyway?

Still half-asleep, I reached toward Nana.

“Arisa uses Impenetrable Barrier!”

Arisa made a wild leap toward me, so I automatically caught her in my arms.

Nana stared at Arisa and me, mystified.

“Master? Please hurry up with the calibration of my foundation instrument, I request.”

“Huh? You’re not doing anything dirty?” At Nana’s words, the fury drained from Arisa’s face.

Yeah, let’s go with that.

“OF COURSE WE’RE NOT.”

“Really? There’s something fishy about this…”

“NOT IN THE LEAST.”

Arisa glared at me accusingly, but I fended her off with the help of my “Poker Face” skill.

Then we listened to Nana’s explanation.

As it turned out, the faulty MP recovery Nana had complained of the day before had become a major issue, so she had asked me to help her adjust it.

“Don’t you have the ‘Magic Manipulation’ skill?”

“Since my foundation instruments are not functioning correctly, I cannot perform the procedure at present, I report.”

“All right. I have ‘Magic Manipulation,’ too. I’ll try it. What do I have to do?”

“Place your hand close to my heart and allow magic to flow through it. I will alert you to any required adjustments as necessary, I declare.”

Nana let her arms fall to her sides, offering up her exposed body.

Nearby, Arisa let out a low growl.

Sorry, but this is in the name of medical treatment. Yep, I have no choice.

I reached for her chest triumphantly, but just before I could make contact, Mia stopped me with a word.

“Back.”

“That’s right! If it just needs to be near the heart, there’s no reason you can’t do it through her back instead! Great thinking, Mia!”

“Mm, anytime.”

Mia had poked her head in from the entrance of the room, and now she trotted inside and hopped onto my knee.

“Mia’s proposal is accepted. There will be no effect on the efficiency of the adjustment if it is performed through the back, I guarantee.”

Nana stood, turned away from me, and sat back down.

Her white modern-style underwear was stunning, but I could feel Arisa and Mia glowering at me and started the process without staring.

Nana gathered up her hair and moved it over her shoulder to the front of her

body. The wispy hairs at the nape of her neck and the smooth line of her back were painfully attractive. *Never underestimate the sexiness of shoulder blades.* If I let my guard down for a second, I was afraid I would lose control.

At this point, I was sorely tempted to run a finger along her spine, but I focused all my willpower on resisting that urge.

I put both hands on her back and let magic flow from my left hand to my right.

I faintly sensed my magic stream getting caught on something. Adjusting the strength of the flow slightly, I tried to clean its path.

This “foundation instrument calibration” seemed to be going well…

“Mnn… Ah… Master, a little more gently, please… Aaah…”

…Uh, Nana? Could you stop with the sexy moaning, please? I’m afraid my lower body is going to react.

“Mrrrr. Lewd.”

“Grrrr… It’s definitely, absolutely my turn next time!”

Mia’s sulking notwithstanding, I worried Arisa was about to burst into bitter tears, so when Liza came to wake me, I asked her to take them to breakfast.

The adjustment was done in about ten minutes. Possibly overstimulated, Nana collapsed facedown onto the bed after we were finished and remained that way for a while.



Her expression in profile seemed happy enough, so I let her be until it was time to leave.

◆

Our sixth afternoon since leaving Seiryuu City passed with a slight air of satisfaction.

We left the Kuhanou County town of Noukee and set up camp around late afternoon in a meadow near a little brook.

In order to ward off trouble, I'd chosen a shady place around the trees that would be difficult to spot from the main road.

I'd chosen to camp here so that we could butcher the beasts we'd collected the day before.

Even if they wouldn't lose any freshness in Storage, they still had to be processed before we could use them for cooking.

With the camp preparations finished, the beastfolk went about the main task of stripping the bodies. Lulu and Nana also helped with preparations for processing the meat afterward.

Mia and Arisa disliked the smell of blood, so I sent them downstream to look for wild grass and herbs.

Now, there was a lot to do this time. *I should really help out, too.*

I summoned my resolve and joined Liza and the others as they took care of the wolves by the riverbank.

"Is something the matter, Master?"

Liza placed the wolf head she'd just removed onto a nearby stone and turned to me.

—I made eye contact with the freshly severed head.

My motivation was draining with tremendous speed.

"Oh, no, I just happened to bring down a wild boar on my walk last night. Could you disassemble it, too?"

My mouth moved on its own, quickly changing the subject.

I used the Garage Bag to reach into Storage and take out the small boar.

Liza admired it and said, “You never fail to impress, Master.”

“Boar meeeat?”

“It looks delicious, sir!”

Pochi and Tama accepted my offering and placed it on a large stone under Liza’s instruction.

“I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Yes, please look forward to tonight’s dinner.”

Liza put a hand to her chest excitedly, so I told her I trusted she’d do a great job and ventured a little ways downstream.

“Ah, Master! We’ve got a big catch!”

“Satou.”

Arisa showed me a basket full of fish. She’d used Psychic Magic on the river to catch them.

The basket Mia held as she played the reed pipe contained a plethora of nuts, berries, and mushrooms. I’d have to analyze the mushrooms later.

…That’s right, even if I can’t deal with beast corpses, I should be able to handle fish, at least.

I returned to the campsite with the two to process the fish that Arisa had caught. Of course, I had Liza show us how to do it first.

To begin, I grasped the slippery body of the fish and removed the scales. The way the scales stuck to my hands was kind of gross, but I managed it anyway and inexpertly chopped the head off with a kitchen knife.

Next, I removed the pectoral fin and slit the belly open, removed the intestines, and tossed them away into the river just as Liza had. I did my best to throw out the memory of the slippery, squirmy guts along with them.

I had to take a break after I dropped the slime into the clean water of the

creek.

After that, the rest was easy. My “Disassembly” and “Cooking” skills took over to fillet the fish into three pieces.

We took care of the rest of the fish in the same way.

As I cleared my head of thoughts and mechanically performed the motions, I gained the skill “Serenity.” *If samurai existed in this world, I bet they’d be pissed at me for attaining that so easily.*

I also gained the rather strange title of Demolition Worker. *I have to say, that sounds more like it has to do with knocking down buildings than cooking.*

“Excuse me, Master. I’m impressed with your remarkable finesse. But what are we going to do with all of these?”

…Yeah, I didn’t think that far ahead.

My silence spoke volumes to Arisa, who shook her head in a long-suffering manner.

I racked my brain to come up with a use for the fish.

“We could fry them… Oh, but we have no oil.”

“Or breadcrumbs and eggs.”

We didn’t have nearly enough oil to make any fried food. We had plenty of fatty meat, but it’d be a pain to make oil from it. I’d have to buy enough for frying when we reached the next town.

Suddenly, I looked to Liza and the others as they dismantled the brown wolves.

With all the meat and entrails they were producing, there was no way we’d use it all up for tonight’s dinner. If we cooked fifteen fish on top of that, nobody would be able to finish.

“All right, let’s dry them, then.”

“Yes, considering what’s happening over there, that’s probably for the best.”

Looking at the mountain of meat piling up next to Liza and company, Arisa wearily trudged toward the river to join Mia in gathering shiny pebbles on the

bank.

Arisa was a former Japanese person and previously a princess, so I imagined she was as uncomfortable as I was about disassembling game.

I watched her out of the corner of my eye, then laid out the filleted fish on a wooden tray and salted them generously.

All that's left after that is for the sun to dry out all the moisture, and they'll be done… I think.

"Master, if you are drying fish, it is necessary to immerse them in salt water first so that the salt will soak into the inside of the body."

I'd started to line up the salted fillets in the sun, but Liza stopped me.

She explained that the proper procedure involved soaking the fish in a salty brine for thirty minutes or so, then rinsing them with water, and finally, drying them in a sunny place with good ventilation.

I followed the steps according to Liza's explanation. Thanks to the support of my "Cooking" skill, I had a general idea of how much salt was necessary. I could tell when it had been long enough without checking the clock, too, driving home the power of the skill system.

I washed the fillets and laid them out side by side on a large plate.

Now I just had to make sure bugs wouldn't get them.

I called out to Arisa down near the riverbank.

"Arisa! Sorry, but could you help out with Insect Repellent?"

"Okeydokey."

Arisa's Insect Repellent spell was an original spell designed by yours truly. I'd come up with it after seeing her use the Psychic Magic spell Anxiety Field to drive away pests.

This particular magic made insects wary. I'd made one for small animals, too, but Tama was so sensitive to nearby critters that she couldn't calm down, so we'd discarded that one.

The intent of the spell was to ensure that we could sleep comfortably at night

during a campout. Just one use would last until the next morning.

Now, time for the main event.

Having cleared the fish-handling mission, I was a new man.

All right, time to disassemble some wolves…

"…Liza?"

"Yes, what can I do for you?"

I was a little nonplussed at Liza's fixation on the collection of severed heads. "Oh, I was simply wondering if we would be able to cook these somehow, since there are so many…"

We could probably use the tongue and brain tissue and whatever else, but I kept that to myself. I definitely wasn't ready to watch someone take apart a severed head.

"I can ask for you next time we visit a butcher shop in town."

"Yes, please do!"

Liza's expression was bright with anticipation, which was a little surreal given the wolf head in her hands.

I carefully avoided meeting its eyes this time and assisted with the rest of the disassembly.

These were slimy in a different way than the fish, but I didn't want to look bad in front of everyone, so I kept my cool. The trick was to avoid eye contact with the corpse when I cut off its head.

Along the way, I tried the Demolition Worker title that I'd gotten earlier, but it didn't make a difference as far as I could tell. *What exactly does it mean, then?*

With all the butchering we were doing, the smell was becoming awfully potent.

I caught sight of Mia and Arisa, still searching for pretty stones on the riverbank, and called the elf over. I asked her to wash us clean with magic.

But one round wasn't enough to eliminate the obstinate smell completely.

“Sorry, Mia, but can you drink an MP recovery potion and try again?”

“Nuh-uh.”

Mia refused, making an X over her mouth with her fingers.

“Bitter.”

Are MP recovery potions really that gross?

“It’s true. No one wants to drink them except in an emergency. Why don’t you wash up normally with hot water? I’ll even wash your back for you, Master.”

“Mrrrr. Lewd.”

Thanks to Arisa’s careless remark, Mia downed a magic recovery potion in one gulp and used the spell on me again. Her face was screwed up in disgust, so I gave her some of the thorn licorice to cleanse her palate.

Since I’d cleaned off first, I sat in the shade of the carriage building magic tools.

I had been in charge of the kettle for a while, but though I had bathed with the beastfolk girls before in the castle guesthouse, I felt I should leave once Nana and Lulu started getting undressed.

Clearly, women in this world didn’t have much shyness or modesty when it came to nudity.

Memories of the pearl-white skin of the woman at the Gatefront Inn in Seiryuu City drifted to the forefront of my mind, and I shook my head rapidly to clear it of impure thoughts. *The last thing I need is for my libido to act up here.*

Shutting down any carnal desires with sheer willpower, I decided to go back to work on Magic Items.

This time I was gunning for a water heater. The circuit for converting magical power into heat, similar to a Tinder Rod, was relatively simple, so I thought I could tackle it.

Last time, I’d drawn my circuit on a wooden board, but this time I was working with a heater. I figured it’d be better to use something nonflammable.

I opened up Storage in search of a base with good heat resistance and thermal conductivity.

I had a few candidates in mind and settled on some spare pots. One was a thick, probably fireproof iron saucepan, and the other was a copper pot of about the same size.

I drew the heating circuit with circuit solution on the bottom of the pot.

When I passed magic through it, the circuit glowed bright red with intense heat. In the end, the temperature was too high for the copper pot and melted a hole in the bottom. The iron one was fine, but the circuit itself melted a little.

The temperature was too high to use with a kettle, so I adjusted the circuit to lower the temperature to around that of a bonfire.

I poured some water into the pot and carefully charged it with a tiny trickle of magic. The circuit glowed red-hot, and tiny bubbles rose from the bottom of the pot. Before long, the bubbles frothed as the water began to boil.

So in a single pot, one MP was enough to increase the temperature by thirty degrees. Considering that Fire Shot used only ten points per shot, this didn't seem very efficient.

According to the magic tool textbook, iron tended to diffuse magical power, so that was probably to blame.

Still, I could boil water in less than a minute—that wasn't half-bad. If I tried to heat it any faster with this simple circuit, it would probably melt.

Because of where I'd placed the circle in the pot, it was totally uncovered, so this tool wouldn't be good for cooking. You could easily scrape the circuit with a ladle while stirring and break it. Plus, food might get into the crevices of the circuit, making it hard to clean.

For now, I'll just use this as an electric kettle.

Fresh and flushed from the bath, Lulu and Nana went about preparing dinner under Liza's guidance.

Once they'd set out the tableware, the younger kids had nothing else to do, so they were left to their own devices. Pochi and Tama joined Mia in collecting

pebbles on the riverbank, and Arisa plopped onto a rug with a spell book.

I looked at the meat that was piled up for dinner.

The fully butchered brown wolves added up to nearly nine hundred pounds of meat alone. Aside from what we were eating tonight, we'd buried the rest of the innards.

There was a small mountain of sliced hearts and livers on top of a platter. The dark-red color wasn't exactly appetizing.

In that case, I preferred the color of the rocket-wolf meat from the day before.

Right, since I have the "Cooking" skill and everything now, maybe I should try it on that meat.

"Liza, I want to try the rocket-wolf meat from yesterday. Could you teach me how to cook it?"

"If you like, I would be happy to cook it for you."

Liza offered to take care of everything for me, but because I wanted to see the effects of my "Cooking" skill, I insisted that I wanted to do it on my own.

First came the preparations. The rocket-wolf meat was red with very little fat, like foreign beef. I sliced off a small piece of the meat, notched the sinews with a kitchen knife under Liza's direction, and seasoned it with salt and pepper.

Next, I dropped some fat into a heated pan and coated it in the oil, then fried up some garlic slices and slid them onto small plates. I quickly grilled the meat, listening to the sizzling oil. A little worried about food poisoning, I cooked them well-done.

What's with this insanely delicious smell?

I flipped the meat once it was nicely seared. Now I just had to wait until it was finished. It seemed to take a long time, maybe because it was monster meat, but going by the senses imparted on me by my "Cooking" skill, everything else about it worked just the same as normal meat.

"Wh-what in the world is that appetizing smell?!"

Setting aside her spell book, Arisa rushed over and peered at my frying pan.

Pochi and Tama had abandoned their pebble collecting and appeared behind Arisa with drool on their lips. For some reason, even Mia and Nana, despite being on vegetarian and liquid diets respectively, showed some interest.

“What do you mean? I’m just cooking the rocket-wolf meat from yesterday so I can taste it.”

“My, my—is that all you’re making? That doesn’t look like nearly enough for everyone.”

Well, yeah. This was just so I could taste it and make sure it didn’t do anything weird. Then I would let someone else try a bit and see if we were unaffected through the next day.

Once I explained, a chorus of volunteers responded.

“I’ll do it! I shall become the ultimate sacrifice!”

“Tama toooo!”

“I wanna be the sacrifice and eat meat, sir!”

“No, this is too dangerous to leave to the children. Allow me to be the subject of the experiment instead.”

“Master, I belong to you. Any duty that is yours is mine as well. Thus, I am the most appropriate subject for an experiment, I advise.”

“Mrrrr. Meat?”

So everyone wants to eat it? Aside from Mia, anyway, who’d only been charmed by the smell and lost interest once she learned it was meat.

…Nana, you need to stick with your liquid diet for a little longer.

“We’ll decide with rock-paper-scissors. Nana, you’re still not supposed to eat solid foods, so you can’t do it.”

“Master! Please reconsider!”

“Nope.”

Nana did her best to convey shock and mortification with her expressionless

face, but I dispassionately shot her down.

I felt vaguely guilty, but I could hardly subject the person with the weakest stomach to this experiment.

“Hooray! I win!”

Lulu hopped up and down triumphantly, her fists in the air. I had never seen such straightforward joy from her before.

Watching affectionately as Lulu realized what she was doing with instant embarrassment, I sliced the finished meat into two pieces. Then I tossed one into my mouth.

…What the—?

The meat was more delicious than any I’d ever tasted… No, I guess of *all* the meat I’d ever had, the fillet of Ohmi beef that the company president had once treated me to was probably a bit better.

But still, why was this steak so delicious?!

The simple seasoning of salt and pepper had drawn out the original flavor of the meat itself.

Despite being so well-done, it seemed to melt in my mouth with a single bite. There wasn’t much in the way of juices, but the savory liquid flowed directly over my tongue. The melted fat from the pan only added to the flavor.

I definitely hadn’t expected it to be this delicious. And the garlic that I’d added gave the taste even better depth.

As the gamy taste, so different from beef, overwhelmed me with enjoyment, the small piece of meat disappeared down my throat.

The scent of garlic in my nose and the aftertaste on my tongue made me long for a second bite.

But, remembering my goal, I forced myself to stay strong.

I checked my log to be sure, but I saw no strange status resistances or anything. As my “Analyze” skill had suggested, the meat didn’t seem to be dangerous.

“It’s delicious. All right, Lulu, you eat it, too.”

I picked up the other piece with chopsticks and held it out to Lulu. Holding her hair back with one hand, Lulu opened her little mouth wide and bit down on the piece of meat. I was surprised she hadn’t hesitated a little more, like her usual shy self.

Delicious food really was bewitching.

Lulu rapidly cycled through several expressions before settling on a blissful smile.

“Ahh… Master, the person who marries you and gets to eat this sort of food every day will be very lucky…”

Lulu let out a suggestive sigh and mumbled as if her appetite itself had possessed her.

“That’s right! Lulu, I’m sure you can get Master to fall for your good looks! How about it, Master? If you marry Lulu, you’ll get a bonus Arisa for free! Just imagine, having two beautiful sisters to have a th—”

Arisa’s sentence was heading down a dangerous road, so I interrupted it with a Forehead Flick Mk II. (The Mk II part doesn’t mean anything.)

Usually, Lulu would respond to any kind of praise with a flood of negativity, but enraptured as she was with the steak, she paid no attention to Arisa at all.

Checking my log, I saw that I had gained the new titles Meat Master Chef and Sorcerer of the Dining Table.

When I closed the log, my eyes fell on the dish covered in oil from the meat, so I washed it in a nearby pail. Oil stains could be very stubborn, after all.

“Aah!”

“My hopes and *dweams* are gone, sir…”

All I’d done was wash the steak dish, but it evoked a scream from Tama and a wail of despair from Pochi.

…Did they want to lick the juices off the dish?

Liza didn’t say anything, but she didn’t react as the pot boiled over, either.

…All right, all right. I guess I have to make some for everyone.

In the end, everyone but Mia ate some of the rocket-wolf steak.

At first, I had planned to make Nana hold off, but when she called upon the mysterious legendary technique known as the “jiggle-jiggle,” I had no choice but to give in.

Not wanting to accept the reality of the legend, Arisa and Mia protested in some way or other, but I was too deep in my own bliss to remember very clearly.

Everyone was still hungry after the small steak pieces, but I didn’t want them to eat a lot and get a stomachache, so I offered them the cooked hearts and livers from the brown wolves instead.

Compared to the rocket-wolf steak, the brown wolf meat was a bit of an acquired taste, but it was still delicious in its own way.

I guess a maxed-out “Cooking” skill could probably make even low-quality ingredients taste good.

I should note that I made a vegetable and mushroom stir-fry for Mia, since she was left out of the meat dishes. Unfortunately, I didn’t have a very extensive cooking repertoire.

“Ahh, to think we’ll be able to eat such delicious food every day from now on…”

“Not really. I’m only going to do it when the mood strikes me.”

I liked good food as much as anyone, but it was impossible to make something like that every day. I’d definitely get tired of it. Plus, I’d feel bad, since Liza had been teaching Lulu and Nana to cook.

However, I did enjoy meals made with a maxed-out “Cooking” skill, myself, so I figured I’d take on cooking duty once in a while from now on.

“Aww, reallyyy…?”



“Mrrrr…”

“Master, please reconsider!”

Dominated by their appetites, Arisa, Mia, and Nana all protested.

The beastfolk girls and Lulu seemed disappointed, too, but they refrained from joining in on the protest.

Right…I guess they’re mindful of their status as slaves.

As in the fable of the north wind and the sun, the modesty of the beastfolk girls affected me more than the complaints of the others, so I gave in and said I would lend a hand with lunch once a day.

In the blink of an eye, the mountain of hearts and livers had totally disappeared.

Guess I should make some stomach medicine next.

A Conspiracy and a Reunion

Satou here. I once heard at a seminar or something, "Never be complacent about your current situation—always strive for better!" But I think it's important to take it easy without worrying about anything once in a while, too.

"Looks like a ghost town."

"Yeah."

On the afternoon of our seventh day since leaving Seiryuu City, we arrived at an uninhabited village.

I had noticed a broken barrier post from the road, so I'd stopped by to check if something had happened. Now that we were here, we could see that whatever had happened had likely been years in the past.

I took the younger group with me to search the town and left the older group near the horse-drawn carriage to keep watch and start preparing lunch.

Judging by the broken barrier posts and craters in the ground, my guess was that a large monster had flown in and destroyed the village. Could have even been the work of that hydra.

Four of the usual six barrier posts were damaged, and there were only holes where the remaining two would normally have been, as if people had pulled them out of the ground.

All the posts were hollow on the inside.

While I examined the scene with Pochi and Tama, Mia and Arisa called out behind me.

"Satou."

"There's a well over there, but it smells unpleasant, so I don't think we should use it."

“Hmm. This place is pretty close to Sedum City… I wonder why they left it like this.”

Why wouldn’t they just rebuild the barrier and the town?

“Hmm. In places like my hometown, they import barrier posts from the Saga Empire, so maybe they’re too far away from any territory that makes them?”

Oh, I see. I’d been thinking of them like telephone poles, but barrier posts were also a kind of magic tool.

I took Arisa and the others with me to survey the village some more.

Apparently, pottery had been the main livelihood of the village, with kilns and areas for collecting clay in the hillsides nearby.

Two of the three kilns were broken, but one seemed to be intact.

Pochi and Tama clearly wanted to play with the clay, but I told them not to for now.

Following the path of broken bowls and plates, I walked toward the village square where our carriage was parked.

Along the way, Tama spotted some russet wort, an herb used for MP recovery potions, and we collected it as we returned to the others.

We had an early lunch in the village square. Just as I’d promised the day before, I cooked up some of the brown wolf meat.

It was a pain to keep grilling it in batches, so I made steaks too big for the plates for everyone who wanted one.

Because it was more sinewy than the rocket wolf, steak wasn’t necessarily the best way to prepare it, but Liza praised it for “feeling wonderful under her teeth.” Pochi’s and Tama’s enthusiasm as they tore into their steaks was adorable, too.

For the others who couldn’t chew it as well, I cut their steaks into small cubes.

I stir-fried vegetables for Mia again, but I mixed it up with different ingredients. I chopped some of the pickled vegetables that Arisa had bought and tossed them in along with some herbs to add to the flavor and aroma.

I'd limited the portions so nobody would overeat, but once we'd finished, everyone was still too full to budge for a while afterward.

During our break after lunch, I formulated some elixir to use for transmutation.

For practice, I started out with one of the crimson needle bee cores from the Cradle.

First, I crushed it into a powder. I used a tool from the alchemy set that resembled a screw-style nutcracker to smash it, then ground it into a fine powder with the mortar and pestle.

Since the process was a bit of a pain, I decided to try crushing the core with my fingers the next time.

After that, I mixed the stabilizer. All I had to do was throw in a pinch of the powder I'd gotten in the alchemy shop, which contained bat wings, charred newt, and a bit of salt.

With a core that was only the size of the tip of my little finger, I could make twenty potions' worth of elixir.

I stored the completed elixir in the **Alchemy** folder under the subfolder **Elixir/HP Recovery Potions/Russet**.

I was curious how effective of a potion I could make, so I practiced with a low-grade HP recovery potion.

Perhaps because I'd gotten the "Magic Manipulation" skill, operating the Transmutation Tablet seemed easier than before.

My completed magic potion came out as **Highest Quality**.

Since the salesperson at the alchemy shop had wanted red grade-3 cores or better, I had assumed rank was critical for potion making, but it could be done even with grade-1 cores.

This time, I tried a recipe from Trazayuya's documents for brewing five potions at the same time. Unfortunately, these ones came out a rank lower, at **High Quality**.

Next, I tried it out with rank-2 and rank-3 cores. The results came out as

Highest Quality, even when I used the five-at-once recipe.

Basically, the grade of the potions was based on the grade of the cores used, it seemed.

Most likely, the reason I could make high-quality potions even with low-grade cores was that I had a maxed-out “Transmutation” skill.

I had plenty of red cores from grades 1 to 3, so I made twenty of each kind into elixir. It would be a huge pain to put them all into little packages; I just stored the powder on its own.

While I was at it, I used some of the russet wort we’d picked earlier to make a few low-quality magic recovery potions.

Since Mia and Arisa had mentioned the terrible taste, I tried to reduce the bitterness by adding small amounts of honey and thorn licorice sap.

The efficacy fell slightly, but in exchange they came out surprisingly tasty. I’m sure my “Cooking” skill had something to do with that.

For the potions I didn’t have any empty vials for, I made folders to keep them in liquid form in Storage.

I really want to stock up on vials for potions soon…

I’m sure I’ll be able to get some if we go to Sedum City.

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“Master, suspicious individual detected inside the forest. The target has already fled, but it is possible that they have already signaled reinforcements at this time, I report. Recommending an increase in alertness level.”

“Fishy.”

On the main road a little ways away from Sedum City, Nana gave a report while she drove the carriage, supplemented by Mia.

There was indeed a person in the forest. It was a man belonging to a guild I’d never heard of called “Duckweed.”

The guild was probably local to Sedum City. Since some of its members had bounties like Murder on them, I guessed it was a criminal guild like the Street

Rats back in Seiryuu City.

Furthermore, more men from the same guild were lurking up ahead: a few at an intersection and twenty or so in a little clearing by the bank of a river on a side road.

Just to be safe, I took the reins from Nana.

The men waiting at the crossroads up ahead definitely looked like crooks to me. They were blocking the road with a crudely made bar.

“Hey, the coachman ain’t a lady!”

“There’re some brats riding in back, so it’s gotta be this one.”

“No, didn’t he say it’d be an old hag and a little girl?”

My “Keen Hearing” skill let me detect what the villains were muttering among themselves.

So these guys are only targeting carriages with either elderly people or young girls as their coachmen? This sounds awfully suspicious to me.

Well, not like it’s any of my business.

Determining that we weren’t their target, the ruffians moved the roadblock out of the way.

“Did something happen?”

“No, nothin’. Just keep movin’.”

I had addressed them politely, yet the group of scoundrels chased us off with a deliberate display of the machetes hanging at their waists.

I certainly wondered about it, but you wouldn’t catch me complaining about avoiding trouble.

Putting the suspicious matter behind us, we passed the roadblock and arrived at Sedum City.

This place was a castle city about the same size as Seiryuu City, but with at least 20 percent more people. There were even fewer demi-humans here than in the last city, though the proportion of catfolk was a bit higher.

Along the outer wall a little ways away from the city gate were clusters of emaciated people in dirty, tattered clothing living in little shacks.

According to the AR display, they weren't citizens of Sedum City. Their titles read **Refugee**, so they'd probably come here from other territories or kingdoms.

While I was paying the city entrance tax at the gate, I inquired about it and learned that they had fled from the Muno Barony some twenty years ago. The fight between Zen and the Marquis must have been to blame.

Over the course of two decades, most of the people had moved into the city or nearby villages, but about two hundred people who hadn't been able to relocate still remained.

After this conversation, I reported the suspicious bunch we'd passed by to the Sedum City gatekeepers, and a knight assured me that he would take some men on patrol to investigate.

Despite his haughty mien, he accepted the job without even asking the details. *I guess you can't always judge a book by its cover… I shouldn't have assumed that he was a no-good layabout guard based on his appearance.*

◆

"Yes, they are demi-humans, but they are my master's beloved slaves. As you can see, they're wearing expensive clothing, so it would cause some trouble if they slept in the barn and were robbed. And if their clothes were stolen, would the inn be able to compensate, I wonder?"

"No, we wouldn't."

"In that case—"

"Which is why we must decline. They cannot stay in our inn."

Not even Arisa's nigh-invincible negotiating skills were enough to overcome the thinly veiled rudeness of the clerk at the inn near the gate.

After our arrival, we'd visited the nearest inn in the hopes of establishing a home base, but we were curtly rejected.

Oh, I wonder if I can use that introduction letter here.

Figuring I had nothing to lose, I pulled out the letter I'd received from the

constable's aide at the public office in Noukee and showed it to the ill-mannered clerk.

I wasn't sure whether an authority from another town had much clout here, but since it was technically a letter from a noble of the same territory, maybe it would have some influence.

"Th-this is from the baronet…? P-pardon my rudeness. We will prepare a room for you right away."

His face stiffening as if in a silent scream, the clerk quickly changed his tune. *I guess the letter of introduction works in this city, too.*

Arisa shot the clerk a withering look of contempt as his attitude changed.

"You're going to ruin your cute face," I hissed quietly to Arisa before discussing our room arrangements with the innkeeper.

The biggest room they had was for six people, so we decided to rent it for five days. I tried to rent another single-bed room for myself, but a chorus of protests from my group shut down that option. It was too late for that now, since they'd grown accustomed to sleeping in a huddle.

Since we'd racked up a long list of things to buy, I asked the inn's clerk where I could find a company that sold a wide variety of products.

It would be a pain to go around and negotiate with each individual workshop. I figured it'd be easier to order a bunch of things in one place.

Since we were limited to items they could get their hands on during our stay, we wouldn't be able to find everything we wanted. Still, since I told the merchant from the outset that I'd be willing to pay up to three times the market price if he could get things in time, chances were good we'd get close to 90 percent of the goods we wanted.

It wasn't as if I were buying a large quantity, so paying triple the going rate wasn't a big deal.

For more specialized parts, like materials for magic tools, I went directly to the workshop contracted with the company to order them in detail.

I ordered all kinds of potentially useful metal fittings, too, like tubes, wires,

nuts, and bolts. With that, I should be able to concoct anything I came up with on the spot.

Most of the blacksmiths were busy producing or repairing armor and weapons for fighting off the kobolds in the silver mines, but luckily I got a chance to work out a deal with the company's exclusive artisan.

After ordering parts, I chatted with the head of the workshop and got him to tell me more about the menace. He explained that the viceroy of Sedum City was stubborn and unyielding, so he had strong-armed the administration into aiding him with a knight-led force to help exterminate them.

I also learned that kobolds and dogfolk were different species. Specifically, kobolds were a race of evil fairyfolk characterized by their pointed ears, a doglike mouth, and blue skin.

According to a rumor going around, they had a stronghold deep in the mountain range just northwest of the Muno Marquisate.

Strangely, not even the magic and alchemy shops in Sedum City sold magic potion vials.

The company I'd been ordering from dealt in potions but not vials. I'd had them introduce me to a local pottery studio, but they brusquely informed me that I would have to wait a trimoon and drove me off. *A trimoon… So at least ten days.*

It was like someone was beating me to the punch for the sole purpose of harassing me.

Just in case, I asked the person in charge of fulfilling my order back at the company to ask around for anyone selling vials and to buy them if he found them.

Since most of my shopping was finished, I decided I'd spend the next day checking out the marketplace and the rest of the city.

◆

My frustration had started to build again, so I slipped past the watchful eyes of Arisa and the others and headed out into the city at night.

Unlike the town of Noukee, the red-light district of Sedum City was about the same size as the one in Seiryuu City.

It seemed uncouth to make a beeline for one of the shops I was there for, though. First, I decided to stop in at the tavern responsible for the smell of some delicious grilled chicken.

“Welcome! Today’s specials are grilled grass pigeon skewers and whole-roasted sparrow. We do have ale, but we’ve just gotten in an excellent order of Noukee cider—you might like to try it.”

A charming young waitress greeted me with a bright smile and guided me to a table.

The dishes and leftovers of the previous customer were still there. The waitress briskly collected the dishes on a tray and swept the food scraps off the table with a cloth.

It seemed unsanitary to me, but I supposed it was normal in this world, so I didn’t say anything.

Scanning the tavern, I saw that a lot of the other customers were drinking hot ale and snacking on plump grilled sparrows.

I ordered a cold ale and grilled skewers. One of the customers had something that looked like daikon radish boiled in soy sauce, and I ordered that, too. My total came to the very reasonable price of one copper coin.

I preferred not to drink alone, so like I’d done in the tavern in Kainona, I joined the ranks of the locals by treating them to a whole cask of ale. Even in a parallel world, nobody could say no to free booze.

“You seem like a well-to-do fellow. Now, normally I’d only offer this to regulars, but…”

Now that the cask of ale was ready, the waitress started talking me up for a sale.

“The shop manager has a special aged brew from Muno called ‘Giant’s Tears.’ It’s pricey, but it’s a hidden gem that you can only drink right here in our tavern. People have even come from all over just to drink it.”

Judging by the name, it must be made by giants. I decided to go ahead and order it, and it tasted like sweet brandy. It certainly was delicious, but it seemed to have a high alcohol content, enough to knock out a lightweight.

While I drank the sweet liquor, I convinced a chatty older fellow to tell me about some of the famous attractions of Sedum City.

As I noted the places that sounded like they'd be good to check out with everyone, I heard a suspicious conversation from a table across the room.

"…So how'd it go?"

"Nothin' yet."

"Seriously? The cutoff is the day after tomorrow at sunset! Most other years, it'd already be here by now."

"Don't ask me. Isn't it better if it's slow anyway? Even if we can't steal it, once they're all broken, the pact'll still be—"

I found the source of the voices—a few hooded men drinking at a table in the corner.

One of them had long silver hair spilling from under the shadows of his hood, and he tucked it back in irritably. If it weren't for his distinctly masculine, sagacious voice, I would've mistaken him for a woman.

Just as the suspicious conversation was getting interesting, the old man grabbed my shoulder to get my attention.

"You listenin', sonny?"

"Yes, of course. The statue of the ancestral king in front of the government office sounds magnificent."

I poured some of the cider I'd ordered into the old guy's cup. A bit of ale was left in the bottom, but he didn't seem like the type to care.

"…and if we can get our hands on that, we could even build a new town."

"If you're going to be viceroy of a new town, sir, I hope you'd at least promote my family to be your assistants."

"Sure. I always reward loyalty. But don't get the wrong idea… I'm aiming to be

the lord of my own territory, not just a viceroy.”

“Hey now, that’s awfully greedy…”

The silver-haired man’s frosty voice had fooled me. I’d thought they were discussing some kind of conspiracy, but now it sounded more like the drunken ramblings of a ruined noble.

Based on what Arisa had told me, building a new town or getting a City Core would be no easy feat. It’d probably be impossible unless you found a core underneath a fallen city or something.

“Hey, listen when your elders are talkin’ to you!”

My wandering attention had put the old man in a bad mood.

“I was listening. You were saying that there’s a monument to people who passed away in the epidemic five years ago in front of the viceroy’s castle, right?”

“Oho, so you weren’t ignorin’ me after all. My old lady almost died of that disease, too, but she survived thanks to medicine from the witch of the forest. We really owe her one.”

Whoa, so aside from the regular delivery of the stamina recovery potions, she does stuff like that, too? If we were a little closer in age, I could end up falling for her.

“Hey! I brought the guy we was talkin’ about!”

Now another drunken customer brought me a sober-looking middle-aged man.

…Who were we talking about again?

“So it’s you? You’re the rich guy who wants to order pottery?”

Oh, right. When I was discussing the shortage of potion vials earlier, somebody said they’d go get a friend of theirs who works at a pottery studio.

“Oh, wow, thanks for going out of your way for me…”

The middle-aged man was the owner of a little studio with its own kiln. Since the pottery guild had a monopoly on magic potion vials, he couldn’t just make

them without permission.

“…But there is a way around that.”

I listened to the studio owner’s explanation. In brief, we could make them ourselves in his studio under the pretext of a “pottery class.”

“But there’s just one problem…”

“What is it?”

The man hesitated, furrowing his brow.

I thought he was going to hit me with a high price, but that wasn’t it.

“My studio’s a poor one. I’ve only got one humanfolk apprentice, and the rest of ’em are just demi-human slaves for manual labor. The slaves are the ones who knead the clay we use in our pottery. So if you ain’t comfortable handlin’ clay made by demi-humans, we got nothin’ to talk about here.”

The workshop owner was grimacing, but I told him it wouldn’t be a problem and asked whether he’d be able to accommodate a large group of people, explaining how many of us there were.

“Yeah, that’s fine. The shop used to turn a big profit in generations gone by, so the place itself is pretty big. We have enough pottery wheels for lotsa people, too. So about the price…”

I accepted his offer without even trying to negotiate. He must’ve been poor for a while, because the price he offered was so low that I felt bad about it.

I invited him to stay and have a drink, but he said that he had to prepare for the next day and left with an extra spring in his step.

After I’d enjoyed chatting with the regulars for a while, one of them offered to take me to the best brothel in Sedum City.

However, shortly after we left the tavern…

“Master, we’ve come to pick you up.”

“Let’s go.”

“Master, it is well past the recommended sleeping time, I report.”

Somehow, Arisa, Mia, and Nana had managed to find me and come to bring me back to the inn.

“Heyo, if you’ve got three pretty wives like this, you oughta go home to them! See ya later, and thanks for the great drinks! Let’s do it again sometime!”

“Thank you for taking care of my husband. I hope you’ll stay friends in the future.”

Arisa, in a good mood after being referred to as my wife, bade a polite farewell to my drinking companions. Though really, her comment sounded more like something a mother would say than a wife.

While Arisa spoke to the men, Mia and Nana were quick to grab hold of my arms. My left arm was envious of the right one in Nana’s grip.

When she turned back to us and saw that the other two had already claimed my sides, Arisa threw a tiny fit. *I only have two arms—what do you want me to do?*

I gave in to the three and let them lead me back to the inn.

I asked on the way how they’d found me, but Mia replied only that it was “secret.”

She’d probably used some kind of Elvish technique. But I’d like to think they went around town asking about me or some other answer from a fantasy.

◆

“Ahh, it’s no use, sir! This is no good at all, sir!”

“N-nooo… Ahh, I can’t do it!”

At Pochi’s and Lulu’s wails, I turned around.

“The clay man just won’t calm down at all, sir!”

“I’m afraid I’ve failed.”

After lecturing the misshapen lump of clay on the pottery wheel, Pochi began rolling it into a new ball.

Lulu, also balling up her failure and starting from scratch, met my eyes and smiled bashfully.

On the eighth morning since our departure from Seiryuu City, we had stopped in at the pottery studio.

The master had taught us only the basic steps and how to operate the pottery wheel, then left the rest to the catfolk slaves and resumed his own work.

It would have been too difficult for us novices to suddenly start making vials, so we started out by attempting teacups.

Pochi's and Lulu's adorable little incident was a fair representation of our progress so far.

"This is somewhat more difficult than I expected."

"It is difficult to calculate the centrifugal force, I report."

Liza and Nana were also struggling to shape the clay properly. They did well at first, but their pieces broke near the end of the process.

Mia, on the other hand, had some experience with making pottery in her home village and was showing some of the others how to do it.

"Watch."

"Mia, please supplement your demonstration with language, I entreat."

"Watch this."

Mia's wordless instruction confounded Nana and her theoretical understanding of things, but the more practical Liza had no such problem, it seemed, and completed her first vessel.

Examining her handiwork, Liza's face crinkled into a smile. The wide opening made her project look more like a small bowl than a teacup, but since she was so pleased, I didn't want to discourage her.

Smiling fondly, I turned back to my own work with a comment to Arisa as she fashioned a suspicious-looking object next to me.

"So, Arisa, what are you making?"

"What do you mean? A figure, obviously!"

"I don't think so."

I reached over and crushed the bizarre object under my fist.

“Aaah! Not ‘Statue of My Beloved Master’! I was almost finished, too!”

“I’m banning you from making anything that would be offensive to public morals.”

I cut Arisa’s protests short. Normally I would let her make whatever she wanted, but I wasn’t going to allow a nude statue of me or any similarly dubious figures to exist on my watch.

“Aww… All that was left was to design and sculpt the lower half…”

I ignored Arisa’s mourning and continued to work. The others were all making teacups for their own personal use, but I’d decided to try to sculpt potion bottles.

For the clay I was using, the catfolk slaves had prepared a combination of regular clay with a special formula for vials that I’d made back in the inn. I’d decided to try out the old witch’s secret recipe.

By the time I’d made my tenth vial, I had successfully optimized the process.

Roughly, it went something like this—press a small lump of clay down with my thumb to make the base, squeeze the clay in my other hand into a smooth string, then swirl it around on top of the base to form the shape of a vial.

Then I just had to lightly rest my fingers on it, spin the potter’s wheel, and it was finished.

This impressive finesse was all thanks to my skills, of course. Since I got the “Pottery” and “Clay-Working” skills as soon as I made my first clay base, I immediately put the max amount of skill points into both of them.

At my fastest, I could make one in about six seconds, but I didn’t want to attract any trouble by leaving everything to my skills and surpassing the confines of humanity, so I limited myself to a speed of one or two vials per minute.



Despite that, I made no effort to disguise the quality of my work, and my vials were all as homogenous as if they'd been made in a factory.

Checking the log, I saw that I'd received the title Potter.

"Have you gotten the hang of the clay yet, mister? I've finished my work, so I have a little time to show you the— Wait, what?!"

Pulling his apprentice along, the owner of the studio came booming affably into the room, only to give a shout of surprise when he saw the number of bottles I'd lined up on the floor.

His reaction suggested I hadn't held back enough.

"Damn, you'd never guess you made all these in such little time! We won't even need to shave these down before we fire 'em. You're not secretly some famous potter or somethin', are you?"

"No, it was just a hobby of mine when I was young."

In reality, before I learned the skill earlier, I had never touched a pottery wheel in my life, but the truth could hurt people sometimes, so I let my "Fabrication" skill help me out.

"Since they're so thin, you'd only have to let them dry out for five days or so before we put them in the kiln, even in this weather."

Amid his admiration, the studio owner muttered something that surprised me.

What was that?

"It'll take five days before you can fire them?"

"Yeah, and thicker ones would have to dry for at least a trimoon. Otherwise they'll crack while they're baking."

I thought they'd be finished later today…

Oh, right! If the issue is the moisture inside the clay, all we have to do is find another way to deal with that.

I based a new spell on the Water Magic spell Hard Dry. Instead of instantly evaporating water, it would gradually expel moisture from a vessel.

To help control the duration, I used bits of code from the Insect Repellent spell I'd made for Arisa.

Mia was free now that the workshop owner and his apprentice had taken over educating the other girls, so once I finished the spell, I got her to test it out. Since I was just concerned with getting results for now, the chant for the spell was rather choppy and uncool, but Mia used it without comment.

"…■■■ ***Clay Dry*** *Nendo Kansou!"*

Water droplets began oozing out of the surface of the vial and dripping to the floor. However, I must not have adjusted the speed enough, because the vessel cracked before the spell was done taking effect.

I improved it by adding in the humidity control code from the Water Magic spell Moisture Control so that it would stop at a certain degree of dryness.

This time, the drying process was successful, but the MP it required was way too high. At this rate, we'd be able to dry only twenty or so of the bottles before Mia's magic ran out.

I decided to change my approach, and instead of leaving everything to the spell, I let the caster choose when the effect would end. Luckily, my "Pottery" skill would tell me when it was dry enough, so this wasn't a problem.

I also changed the target range to an area of effect. Once I had Mia use the spell Clay Dry Second, we were able to finish drying all the vials.

"Oho, I didn't know there was a spell like that. You're awful powerful for such a small girl, aren't you, missy?"

"Mm."

Mia puffed out her chest with pride at the studio owner's praise.

Now that we could dry the vials quickly with magic, the owner agreed to bake them along with his own work.

Since firing the clay and glazing it would take until the evening, the rest would be done by the next day. Apparently the baking itself took a full day.

I was surprised the process was so time-consuming, but we still set all our finished vessels into the kiln and watched them light the fire.

“Wow, it takes more time than I expected. Wouldn’t it be easier to put the glaze on before baking it?”

“You’re an impatient young lass, eh? Plenty of studios don’t bake before glazing, but then the moisture left in the clay seeps out and changes the color of the glaze or dissolves it in places. If it’s going to be used for magic potions, the special glaze has to be uniform, or the quality of the potion will go way down. The pre-baking is essential,” the workshop owner politely explained, despite Arisa’s grumbling.

…Huh? In that case, since we already dried them out with magic, wouldn’t my vials be fine without being fired before glazing?

I didn’t want to have them stop their work in the middle, though, so I didn’t say anything, and we left the workshop.

In the afternoon, we visited the tourist destinations I’d learned about in the tavern.

“Biiig!”

“It’s as tall as two Lizas, sir!”

Tama and Pochi gazed up excitedly at the bronze statue in front of the public office.

“Girls, this is a statue of the ancestral king, so try not to be too noisy, okay?”

“’kay.”

“Yes, sir.”

When I chided them gently, Tama and Pochi clamped their hands over their mouths.

“Still, no matter how great a man he might have been, this is an exaggeration.”

“Mm.”

Arisa had a point. The ancestral king’s statue was more than ten feet tall. Relative to the rest of the statue, the huge greatsword in its hand just looked like a normal one-handed sword.

Before the bronze statue, a poet was reciting an epic about the ancestral king.

Most of the anecdotes were pretty hard to believe. In one, monsters surrounded him, and his Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis split into thirteen smaller swords that flew into the sky to protect him. In another, an assassin who broke into his bedroom had to fight the ancestral king's armor moving on its own. There were even multiple stories where he rode around on sky dragons or cursed hell demons.

Since this was all in the praise of the hero who'd founded the kingdom, no doubt there was a lot of embellishing.

Before I knew it, the beautiful voice of the poet had drawn a crowd of listeners.

When the song finally ended, I threw some money into the hat at the poet's feet and joined in on the generous round of applause.

This peaceful scene was promptly ruined by one man's jeers.

"Hey! You damn idiots! Outta the way!"

Clearing a path through the crowd of people, an aristocratic-looking man stomped to the front.

"It's unusual to see a noble going around without a horse-drawn carriage."

"I think that guy's a former noble who's fallen on hard times. I saw him in the tavern before."

"He's a former noble? In that case, it would be best to avoid him if at all possible, Master."

I gave Liza a puzzled look in response.

"Perhaps you have forgotten? That is the same man who tried to take the ant cores in…"

Her words finally jogged my memory. It was that small-time crook again. I thought perhaps he'd found new employment at the government office in Sedum City, but his affiliation still read **None**. Maybe he failed an interview?

Now, I'd always been the type who didn't remember the faces of people I

wasn't interested in, but forgetting him this often was strange even for me. I didn't have a "Forgetfulness" skill or anything, and my INT skill was really high, so you'd think I'd be better at remembering things…

Maybe my INT stat was actually too high, and it was filtering out seemingly useless information so that it wouldn't get in the way of normal processing.

Maybe it's like a compressed file on a computer?

This was just a baseless hypothesis, but since I didn't want to consider the possibility that I'd developed juvenile amnesia, I just went with that.

This was the only event that put a damper on our sightseeing, though, and we spent the rest of the day enjoying the sights of this world while the younger kids took turns riding around on my shoulders.

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The next day was the ninth afternoon since we'd set out from Seiryuu City. Returning to the pottery studio, we all worked on glazing the fired vessels.

Mia's magic must have worked well, since there were no cracks in the dried vials.

I'd expected the news that we had to let the glaze dry for several days before we could bake them, so we used a spell I'd prepared the night before called Glaze Dry so they were ready for baking in a short period of time.

From there, we decided to wander around the market near the city gate for fun.

"Say, do you have any bargains on pictures books, by chance?"

"We've no picture books, I'm afraid. How about these philosophy books and memoirs?"

The small, dodgy-looking man Arisa had addressed directed his reply toward me instead.

There were a few bound books at his booth and around ten that were held together with thread. Next to the stall was a stack of five or so bundles of paper wrapped with string.

"Is it all right if I have a look inside?"

“Certainly. These are research papers that some rich person’s heir sold to me on the cheap. I’ve brought them to scholars and magic users, but nobody would buy them, so I’ve been waiting for someone with a sharp eye to take a liking to them.”

I don’t think this little man is very well suited to business. Who would buy something after that kind of pitch…?

“What is it? Did you find something interesting?” Arisa asked me curiously.

What had caught my interest wasn’t the book in my hands but the pile of papers casually stacked next to the stall.

“I’d sell you that book for just one gold piece.”

Because my “Estimation” skill told me the book was worth only one copper, I flatly replied that I was just surprised by the terrible penmanship and asked about the pile of papers instead.

“One copper per bundle is enough for that. If you buy all of them, I’ll even part with the lot for one large copper.”

“I was just going to use them to pack some pottery, but at that price, I’d be better off using sawdust…”

“Two pennies for the lot, then! Take them, you thief!”

I agreed to the man’s desperately shouted bargain and got him to throw in the saddle-stitched research notes from the rich heir for dirt cheap while I was at it. Apparently, he hadn’t sold a single one yet.

“What’d you go and buy junk like that for?”

“Beats me.”

I shrugged off Arisa’s question, indicating that I wasn’t sure myself.

In truth, it was my “Estimation” skill that motivated me to buy the paper bundles.

For some reason, their market price displayed as just —. The only other objects I’d ever seen like that were unique items like the Garage Bag and the Holy Swords I had in Storage.

I'd never seen my "Estimation" skill give a price higher than 250 gold coins, which must mean those items were worth even more than that.

I'd bought them on a treasure-hunting whim, so I looked forward to finding out what was written inside.

For all I knew, there could be a treasure map in there.

I added, "We'll just have to see," to befuddle the still-curious Arisa, slipped into an alley to stow the papers in the Garage Bag, then moved on to the next stall.

"Master, mysterious rotating object detected. Be vigilant, I request."

Nana grabbed on to my arm and pointed at one of the stalls.

Her face was very close. Seeing this, Mia started sulking.

"Mrrrr…"

"Excuuuse me a moment. All right, break it up, break it up."

Sounding like a schoolteacher, Arisa pushed herself between us from behind, moving Nana away from me.

What Nana had detected was a spinning top. The upper portion had an eye-catching red glow that left a faint afterimage as it spun.

"You there, the well-to-do-looking young man. Care for a peek at a magic tool from the royal capital?"

I made eye contact with the shopkeeper, and he called me over. There was a crowd of children clamoring around the stall, and the salesman shooed them away to make room for me.

It was natural to treat customers differently from curious onlookers, but I felt sorry for the kids who were chased away, so I apologized to them as I approached.

"Is this a top?"

"That's right, but not just an ordinary top…"

Grinning, the salesman picked up the top in both hands. The grooves in its surface glowed red, and the top began spinning on its own.

“This is no fake! Try passing some magic through it for yourself.”

I could already tell that it was real thanks to my AR screen, but I gave it a shot anyway. According to the display, the top’s official name was a **Rolling Disc**.

Being careful not to break it, I let a little magic flow through. With a single point of magic, the center of the top began to rotate, though it was still in my hand. When I released it, the exterior spun in the opposite direction from the inside.

It must use a motor-like mechanism that runs on magic.

With a mechanism like this, I could probably make a mixer or something.

Since there weren’t any motor-like circuits in my magic tool textbook, maybe this was an original design by the creator.

“Pretty interesting. I’d like to buy two, please. How much?”

“Normally I’d ask two and a half gold coins for one, but if you’re buying two, I can knock it down to four.”

The price matched my estimated market value. It was a high price for a toy, so maybe I could get a better discount.

I managed to talk him down to three gold pieces for two. The reason I bought a spare was so that I could dismantle one to inspect it.

As I pulled out the gold coins, I asked on a whim about who the creator was, and he answered me easily. The inventor was an old professor from the royal capital named Jahado.

The man was famous for making useless magic tools, he said.

I’d gotten a bit hungry while we were browsing the stalls, so I followed my nose to a tasty-smelling product called roasted dumplings, a Sedum City specialty.

These turned out to consist of pickled vegetables wrapped in a thin layer of kneaded wheat flour and baked, sort of like *manju* steamed buns. Despite being a vegetable-only dish, it proved popular even with the beastfolk girls.

Glancing over, I saw Liza’s eyes were fixed on a nearby chicken skewer stall,

so I gave her some change to buy some for the group.

While we were enjoying this little snack break, a blue light appeared on the radar in the corner of my vision.

The location indicated the person was near the main road. Since a blue spot denoted an acquaintance, I thought perhaps it was Zena chasing after me, but I was wrong.

The point actually belonged to the witch's apprentice.

She was riding in a carriage flanked by an escort of four living armors, heading toward Sedum City.

I thought for sure she would go to the nearest town, Noukee, or up north to Kuhanou to deliver the magic potions. But since the carriage's cargo was indeed potions, she had to be coming for a delivery.

I didn't know why they'd go so far out of their way to transport goods in Sedum City, but I was sure there was some reason for it.

Since the reason the delivery had been rushed in the first place was the kobolds attacking the silver mines, maybe they'd chosen Sedum City for the shipment because it was closest to the mines.

…Which means those guys at the crossroads before were planning to ambush the witch's apprentice?!

I rechecked the map.

The carriage had already passed the crossroads, where the group of thieves was amassed off to the side of the road with the condition **Bone Fracture**.

The living-armor guards had probably beaten them up.

It had taken me a while to notice, but now that I knew that the witch's disciple had traveled all the way out here, I headed toward the gate to meet her.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, I just thought I'd say hello to an acquaintance of mine."

"An acquaintance?"

“Yeah. I told you I visited a witch’s tower deep in the forest before, right?”

“What? So ‘witch’s tower’ wasn’t the name of some business full of pretty women?!”

As I chatted with Arisa on my way toward the city gate, I noticed some strange movement on the radar. A few of the villains from the crossroads were chasing after the apprentice’s carriage, and they were gaining fast.

“We need to hurry, actually. It looks like there’re bad guys chasing after her.”

With that, I rushed toward the gate. Liza picked up Arisa and Nana scooped up Mia so that they could follow close behind.

“Aaah! Pochi, Tama, please put me down!”

“We’ll carry you, miss!”

“Gotcha, Luluuu!”

When I turned around in surprise at the chorus of voices behind me, I saw that Pochi and Tama were trying to carry Lulu together, with her legs over their shoulders.

Whoops. I guess I should have told them that the slower members of the group could take their time following us.

There was a commotion outside the city gate.

The robbers had caught up to the panther-drawn carriage, and the battle had already begun.

The four living armors lined up to meet the ambush with pitchfork-like weapons.

The witch used her Earth Magic Sling spell to knock back all the approaching villains in one fell swoop.

Despite how close this whole situation was to the city gate, none of the gatekeepers were coming out to intervene.

In fact…

“Hey! You there, witch! Use of magic is prohibited near Sedum City. What if you hurt innocent passersby?!”

…all they were doing was shouting idiotic things to hinder her.

A few soldiers attempted to leave the gate to stop the ruckus, but the haughty-looking knight shouting at the carriage, who was apparently the captain, stopped them.

This guy seemed to be working with the villains, too, or at least being paid off.

I told Nana to guard Lulu and Mia, and then I brought the beastfolk girls with me toward the carriage. Just in case, I asked Arisa to deal with the knight and use her Psychic Magic to keep the area under control.

“Liza, Pochi, Tama! Don’t let the bad guys near the carriage!”

Without waiting for a reply, I broke into a run.

“You lot! If you’re going to join in on this ruckus, you’ll answer to the law, too! We’ll—”

Partway through his statement, the knight suddenly collapsed in a fit of apparent anemia. The soldiers around him all dutifully cried out, “Captain!” but none actually went to his aid. *Guess he isn’t very popular.*

“Oh dear, perhaps he has anemia?” Arisa remarked to Lulu in a loud, unnatural voice, throwing a quick wink in my direction when our eyes met for a moment.

She must have used her Psychic Magic spell Mind Blow to knock him out with a single strike.

Seeing us rushing in to help, the magical puffbird familiar on the apprentice’s head alerted her with a loud, “Pou-kwee!”

“We’ll back you up.”

“I-it’s you! The person with the Elvish bell!”

“…The name’s Satou.”

I reminded Ine—*uh, what was it? Right, Ine-what’s-her-face*—of my name, then helped her fend off the robbers.

Since the knight holding them back was now out of the way, the gatekeepers came to offer assistance.

“Leave this to us and get inside the city, please.”

The man who appeared to be the vice captain called Ine back and headed over to arrest the villains, who seemed less eager to join the fray now that public servants were involved.

Ine’s carriage and her living armor escorts rushed by us to enter the city.

Realizing they’d failed, most of the villains fled in groups of twos and threes into the forest, but a few of them stubbornly insisted on pursuing the carriage, so the beastfolk girls knocked them out on my order.

Then, leaving the gatekeepers in charge of the captured villains, we went back into the city.

As we passed through the city gate, a boom signaled a heavy collision, followed by the crash of breaking objects, and lastly a scream from Ine.

Hurrying to the scene, we saw carts loaded with logs that had sandwiched Ine’s carriage, and that the living armors had destroyed the logs, and, finally, the tragic remains of the crate of magic potions, crushed between the living armors.

Plip, plip… Liquid dripped slowly from what was left of the crate.

Let’s Make Some Potions!

Satou here. There are plenty of PC games where you can make potions, but usually when you gather the materials and mix them together, the finished potion comes complete in a bottle. I always used to wonder where the bottle came from whenever I looked at the recipes.

“Aaah… The potions… But that means the Forest of Illusions will be…”

The little witch, Ine, began wailing like a child, huge tears dripping from her eyes. Two living armors stood protectively at her left and right.

Meanwhile, the men who’d arranged the wreck were using this chance to make a break for it.

“Arisa, take care of her, please.”

“Okeydokey!”

Arisa responded cheerfully, so I left her to look after Ine and took the beastfolk girls with me to chase down and capture the men.

“Liza, Pochi, Tama, catch the guys who went that way.”

“Understood!”

“I’ll do my best, sir!”

“Me toooo!”

Pochi and Tama weaved through the crowd hot on the heels of the men shoving onlookers out of the way.

“Gotcha, sir!”

“Justiiice!”

Tama and Pochi pulled the men to the ground, and Liza pinned them with her foot.

After I confirmed this with a sideways glance, I slipped in front of the remaining men and struck them with the side of my hand without even turning around, knocking them out.

We brought our captives to the vice captain of the gatekeepers.

“Thank you for your assistance.”

“I was just helping out my friend’s daughter here.”

The guards helped me pull the logs from the wrecked carts away from the carriage.

“Ahhh… Ab, Seb… I’m sorry. It must have hurt. I’m sorryyy…”

Clinging to the two unmoving living armors with crushed torsos, Ine started sobbing again.

First, we had to assess the situation.

“Inenimaana, stop cryi—”

“You really think saying it like that will help a child stop crying?!” Arisa interrupted me harshly.

“I-I’m not—*hic*—a ch-child… Wehh…”

What with all the sobs and hiccups, Ine’s denial wasn’t very convincing.

“Inenimaana, try to settle down first. At the very least, we have to determine how many potions are intact and if the carriage can still move.”

“O-okay… I’ll have Gab and Rob take down the box so I can check.”

Her voice was still choked with tears, but Ine stopped crying and instructed the remaining living armors to gently lower to the ground the box that had contained the potion vials.

Working together to count, we learned that of the 300 vials, about 180 of them had broken and spilled their contents.

Pretending to check the broken vials, I snuck some of the intact vial bases and remaining potion in the box into Storage under the **Witch** folder. I recovered about forty of them.

Under the carriage, a nest of weeds had sprung up—probably the result of the 140 or so potions soaking into the ground there.

Despite its broken sides, the carriage could still move without a problem, so we decided to bring it to the city hall, where someone was waiting for the delivery. We could at least give them the intact potions and arrange for the rest to arrive at a later date.

I accompanied Ine to the city hall. I wasn't heartless enough to make a kid I knew fend for herself.

Honestly, even if I'd never met her before, I doubted I could've left well enough alone in the face of such a desperate expression.

"Arisa, you come, too. I have some tasks for everyone else…"

I took Arisa to the city hall for her negotiating skills and asked the others to take care of a few errands to prepare to deal with the worst-case scenario.

◆

"…I see. However, a pact is a pact. I'm afraid you'll still have to deliver three hundred magic potions by sunset tonight."

"But…"

In a room in the city hall, the viceroy's silver-haired aide responded coldly to Ine's explanation.

Incidentally, though the aide was sitting in a chair at his office desk, we had to stand while we explained the situation.

Knowing Arisa would have some choice words for the man's cruel remarks, I clamped a hand over her mouth from behind.

While we'd been permitted to stand in the room as Ine's attendants, we were forbidden to speak.

I had some thoughts on the aide's response myself, but there was a strong sense of déjà vu about him.

Besides, I was concerned about another individual in the room with us.

Standing at an angle behind the aide with a derisive smirk was none other

than our petty crook.

Why is this guy here?

Though he'd been wearing a threadbare civil official's uniform last time I saw him, now he was sporting fancy aristocratic clothes. It didn't suit him at all—more like a costume or something.

"Now, I'm very busy. If that is all, I'll ask you to take your leave."

Ine's small shoulders trembled at the aide's chilly voice. Arisa elbowed me in the side, prompting me to give the witch's apprentice a hand.

Right. As an adult, I should probably step in here.

"If I could speak with you for a moment, please…"

"Silence, commoner! Attendants are to keep their mouths shut!"

I spoke up to request permission from the aide, but it was the crook who butted in to try to shut me down.

Ine flinched at the man's shout. Arisa narrowed her eyes as if she wanted to say something, but I stopped her with a hand.

With guys like these, we'd already lost when we stepped into their court.

Back in my own world, the violent atmosphere might have frightened me. But here, where a bloodthirsty lizardman had threatened my life and I'd fought to the death with a greater hell demon, these guys were about as threatening to me as a yapping dog on a leash.

I ignored the crook and stared levelly at the aide, waiting for his answer.

> Title Acquired: Proud Dog-Tamer

> Title Acquired: Coolheaded Negotiator

A few new lines in my log promptly reflected my thoughts.

The aide raised a hand to silence the small-time crook, then jerked his chin my way to allow me to finish.

"One hundred and eighty of the potions were damaged in the incident—that's more than half the batch. If we can acquire the other hundred and forty

potions by some other means, would you accept the delivery as completed?”

In other words, I was gunning for permission to buy the rest of the potions somewhere in the city.

“That is unacceptable.”

After a moment of thought, the viceroy denied my proposal in an icy voice.

“This pact is between the count of Kuhanou and the witch of the Forest of Illusions. We can only accept the potions if they’ve been made by the witch herself.”

When I’d asked the old witch about the pact, she’d explained she had to send specially made potions, but I didn’t think that meant she needed to make them all herself. In fact, the potions listed Ine as their maker.

It was almost as if these guys wanted this delivery to fail so the pact would be broken…

…Wait, maybe it’s more than “almost” like that.

The aide brushed his long silvery hair behind his ear. It seemed to be a habit of his. Light from the window reflected off the silver strands.

That was lovely and all, but he was still a guy, so it did nothing for me. His long hair made him look like a character out of a classic manga for girls.

However, something about the movement rang a bell somewhere in my mind.

…Huh?

Between that and the smirk on the criminal’s face, I sensed I was on the verge of remembering something.

There was something familiar about the aide’s icy voice, too. Where in the world had I heard it before?

…Now I remember! These two are the former nobles I saw in the tavern!

In which case, that conversation was a lot more than just idle bragging. Were these guys planning to steal the old witch’s mana source and build a new city there?

I didn’t know if that was even possible, but for now it was probably best to

assume that was their plan.

Similar things had happened back in my world, but I didn't want to see it occur here.

And so I decided to use some of my skills, like "Fabrication" and "Negotiation," to cross-examine the aide about the clause he'd seemingly added to the pact. *"Judgment" skill, I'm counting on you, too!*

"I do not believe there was any such provision in the pact. Would you happen to know who added that clause, sir?"

"Why should a commoner like you know anything about the contents of the pact?"

"Madam Witch and I have worked together on occasion."

In a heavy voice, like a crack forming in a glacier, the aide countered my question with one of his own.

Frankly, if you were going to ask that, you probably should've done it when I first came into the room as an attendant.

The aide stared at me in an attempt to read my true intentions, so I relied on the help of my "Poker Face" skill to fend him off.

Maintaining a bland smile, I activated "Coercion" for just a fraction of a second, causing the aide to recoil. A line of cold sweat trickled down his handsome face.

"…Very well. As long as the potions are of the same level as the witch's, we will accept them."

At this, Ine raised her drooping head a little.

But there was a small problem with the phrasing he'd used.

"Good sir, if I may, does this mean you will accept only goods of the same quality, or higher as well?"

"…Higher? Do you intend to empty your savings to purchase potions of higher than intermediate quality?"

I responded with only a sweet smile.

Unlike low-grade potions, intermediate potions were very limited in distribution. Even if we bought up every one available in Sedum City, we'd be lucky to get 20 percent of what we needed.

And the aide was sure to know this as well.

"Hmph. If you think you can gather enough, be my guest. I'll accept any potions of equal or greater efficacy."

Scowling, the aide tried to dismiss us.

But I wasn't done yet.

I placed two sheets of paper on his desk and smoothly wrote out the conditions we'd agreed upon. This was an easy task, since I'd planned what to write in my networking tab's memo field as we previously spoke.

Before long, I'd drawn up two copies of the document. Thanks to my "Penmanship" skill, the writing was so neat that I could barely believe I'd written it.

"I've recorded our agreement in writing. If you have no complaints, I would like you to stamp them with your seal of approval, if you please."

Just as with an agreement between companies, I wasn't about to accept a verbal contract. If it wasn't recorded in writing, whoever had the most powerful position could easily win out after endless debate over what was or wasn't said.

In this case, when the other party clearly didn't want the agreement to be fulfilled, a contract was especially important.

"…In writing, you say?"

"Are you saying you can't trust the words of a noble, commoner?!"

The small-time crook piped up again, but I ignored him.

Ultimately, my business here was with the aide.

"Sir, I understand you are quite busy. I am concerned that you may be otherwise engaged at the time of delivery, and if there is some miscommunication, an official may not be able to receive it. Now, I'm sure it's far from your purpose for the appointed time to pass, thus breaking the pact.

Correct?”

The aide was obviously intent on getting the pact broken, but in his position, there was no way he could confirm that.

With a pained look on his handsome features, the aide signed and sealed both documents, then placed them side by side to add tally seals.

I didn’t have a seal of my own, so I used Ine’s instead. Apparently, the old witch had given it to her. *Once this mess is done with, I should probably make one for myself.*

“I assume this will do. You may leave now.”

Stone-faced, the aide made sure to drive us away for good this time.

On our way out, I heard the crook exclaim, “Even if you can make the potions, good luck finding any vials to put them in!” Shortly after, the aide harshly told him off for saying too much.

…So *that* was the reason he’d been going on ahead of me and stocking up on vials. *Doesn’t he have anything better to do?*

With a livid Arisa and teary-eyed Ine, the three of us exited the city hall.

◆

“All right, one hundred and eighty potions it is. The vials might pose a problem, but there’s plenty of time before sunset, so I’m sure we’ll figure something out.”

“Weh? W-we’re going to make them?”

Ine chewed her lip. Behind her, Arisa had drawn a portrait of the aide in the dirt and was stomping on it vigorously.

The apprentice witch looked troubled at the prospect, but unfortunately, we didn’t have much of a choice.

After all, on top of the shortage of potions in the city, the available ones weren’t good enough to substitute for the witch’s high-quality brew.

“That’s right. I do have a hundred vials, although I’m not sure what to do about the other eighty.”

“But I’m sure there’s something we can do, right?”

“Yeah. Everyone else is running around the city searching for them even as we speak.”

Arisa looked to me with trust. It was a stark contrast with Ine’s palpable anxiety.

“Argh! So what if you have vials?! There’re only three chimes or so until sunset, you know! Those potions took a whole night to make in the cauldron. And the prep work before that took my mistress and me a whole month… There’s just no way!”

Ine gazed up at me in teary-eyed frustration, ready to start crying again at any second.

“It’s all right. Our master is a great cheater, so I’m sure he can take care of things.”

…I appreciate the show of faith, but could you find a better way to phrase that, please?

At that moment, Lulu returned with Tama and Pochi in tow.

“Master, we’ve finished checking.”

“Thanks. Any luck?”

“Well…”

The results Lulu reported were anything but favorable.

I’d sent them to find out if we could speed up the process of firing the vials—maybe bake another hundred while we were at it—but they couldn’t even take the first set out of the kiln until tomorrow morning at the earliest.

Next, Mia and Liza arrived from the market.

“Satou.”

“We have returned, Master.”

The baskets they carried were loaded with herbs and a vegetable that looked like spinach.

These were ingredients for magic potions. They'd been able to get only ten bundles of the main ingredient, blue mugwort, but they had nearly three times the amount of the other ingredients we'd need. I could just use the leftovers to make potions for our own use at a later date.

Lastly, Nana returned from the company.

"Delivering twenty-five vials for stamina recovery potions and twelve lesser-grade stamina recovery potions purchased from the company, I report."

I checked the vials Nana had brought me. I'd had her buy the lesser-grade potions so that we could use the vials.

Since the witch's magic potion was basically an improved version of the lesser-grade stamina recovery potions, the same vials would work. My "Analyze" skill told me the vials had a shorter shelf life than the ones from the old witch, but in this case, that shouldn't be a problem.

If only we could use the vials from the pottery studio, we'd just need forty more, but there's no use dwelling on that.

"I guess we really need to figure something out for the vials, huh?" I mumbled.

"Aaargh! Why don't you get it?! It's not the stupid bottles that're the problem! Even if you had all the ingredients and vials in the world, it'd still be impossible!" Ine shrieked, on the verge of hysteria.

No, maybe not the verge. She was already distraught.

"Why is it impossible?"

"'Cos… 'Cos…"

In an attempt to calm her, I met Ine's gaze and addressed her. Unable to properly form the words, Ine just kept stammering, "'Cos."

To be honest, we should have started immediately, but I still had no clue what to do about the vials.

I tried using the map to search the city for vials and stamina recovery potions, but even if we gathered every single one, we'd still be short over half of what we needed.

Most likely, the viceroy had requisitioned all of them before leaving to fight the kobolds in the silver mines.

There was a large number of vials in what appeared to be a noble's mansion, but that was almost definitely the collection of the aide and his crooked sidekick. Borrowing from there would be a last resort.

"'Cos we… We don't have enough magic. If we were near the mana source, we'd be able to recover it easily, but it won't work here."

"We'll just have to drink potions for that as we go, then."

I had plenty of completed MP recovery potions, not to mention materials to make even more.

"Blech… B-but they're so bitter…"

Unable to stand her whining any longer, the puffbird, which had been sitting motionlessly on her head like a hat, screeched its strange "pou-kwee!" and pecked at her forehead.

"Ow, ow, owww!"

Ine shrieked in pain, but my kids were thrilled.

"Whoa! It's not just a hat?"

"Master, permission to care for this spherical creature, I request."



Arisa's and Nana's reactions caught my attention in particular. Of course, I dismissed Nana's request.

This hair ball is the witch's familiar, right? … I wonder…

"Inenimaana, is it possible to speak to your teacher through this little thing?"

"Um… y-yeah, you can… Why, are you gonna tell on me 'cos I failed?"

It was a childlike reaction, but since the Forest of Illusions's fate was on the line, I figured it was important to contact the old witch to report the situation and obtain her guidance.

"That's not it at all. I'd just like to ask her a few things."

"… Yeah, okay. C'mere, Pou."

So the puffbird was named after the weird sound it made, huh?

"■■ ***Call*** *Yobidashi!"*

Ine used a short spell, and the puffbird's demeanor changed. It still made the same weird "pou-kwee" sound, but somehow with a deeply intellectual air.

"The mistress can hear you now. She can't talk back, though."

In that case, you really ought to make your familiar a parrot or some other talking bird. Instead, I wrote *yes* and *no* in the dirt so we could communicate that way.

I gave the witch a status report and explained a few possible action plans.

Then I asked whether it was possible that Count Kuhanou himself might be involved in the conspiracy.

The answer was—*no*.

So this was the aide's own plan, then.

The viceroy of Sedum City was currently leading a party of knights to reinforce the troops fighting in the silver mines, and Count Kuhanou was in faraway Kuhanou City.

It'd be nice if we could get the count to come put the viceroy's aide in line, but…

Just to be sure, I asked if he could actually carry out his scheme in the Forest of Illusions if the pact was broken.

Unfortunately, the answer was *yes*.

I couldn't really suss out the details with yes-or-no questions, but one thing was clear: We had no choice but to deliver the rest of the magic potions and fulfill the contract.

After asking a few more questions of the old witch, I ended the call.

Once I'd wrapped up my consultation, I turned to Ine and the others to discuss preparations for making the potions.

"Now, about the vials…"

"Here, heeere! I know this one!"

Arisa shot her hand into the air like an elementary school kid. As she hopped up and down eagerly and stretched her hand as high as it would go, her cute behavior matched her childish appearance for once.

"What, you have an idea?"

"Ee-hee-hee, do you wanna know? You really wanna know?"

"Just spit it out already."

Arisa folded her hands behind her back and looked up at me mischievously. I pinched her cheek, hoping she'd wipe the smirk off her face and explain. Her cheek was really stretchy.

"Owww! Leggo, leggo!"

"Oh, sorry. I got carried away."

"Sheesh. I'm talking about the village! You know, the abandoned one we found before?"

Oh yeah… There was an unbroken kiln in the foothills behind that village, wasn't there?

"But will we even be able to finish them before sundown if we start now?"

If we made it, we could collect the hundred vials in the pottery studio, too.

“Well, I’m counting on your superhuman tricks for that part, Master.”

No plan, huh? I’ll have to talk to someone who might know how to shorten the time.

With that thought in mind, I started to make my way toward the pottery studio, but Mia stopped me with a single word: “Hoze.”

… Hoze? Not haze*, like the fish? … Oh, right, one of the ratmen we helped out before. Come to think of it, he did give me a piece of paper with notes about pottery in Japanese.*

I took out the note and gave it another read.

The tiny writing described the process and time required for various kinds of pottery. It even included extremely detailed notes about what the processes were for and why each amount of time was necessary.

As a bonus, there were diagrams illustrating tools or passages that were hard to understand. The level of thoroughness was almost scary.

It was as if the author had known they were going to a parallel world and had prepared by collecting detailed knowledge about the world they came from.

… Well, I’ll have to worry about that later.

Mentally, I sorted through the information I’d obtained from the note.

The reason the baking took so long was because of the time it took to raise and lower the temperature inside the kiln.

Back in our world, we’d dealt with that by using microwaves to rapidly increase the temperature.

If I had some way of generating that much heat besides firewood—besides combustion altogether…

I searched the depths of my memories. Events floated across my mind and faded like a rotating lantern.

… I’ve got it. A heating method that even melted through the bottom of a copper pot before long.

I nodded at Arisa, who was beside me peering at the paper.

“See? You’ve got an idea already.”

“Yeah. You think we can just use an abandoned village’s facilities like that, though?”

“Why not? It looked to me like nobody’s been there for a long time.”

True enough. Going out of my way to request permission at the government office would just be asking for trouble.

I checked the location on the map. There was a small mountain on the way, so it was unlikely anyone would see the smoke and get us in trouble.

“All right, let’s go with that.”

I announced the plan to everyone, handed out assignments and the requisite tools, and we set off for the abandoned village.

I wasn’t sure if we’d have time to lower the temperature of the kiln after, but as long as nothing unusual came up, we should make it just in time.

◆

We took Ine’s carriage to the village and arrived in no time.

It was nearly twice the speed of our own horse-drawn carriage, but with hardly any shaking.

“This is remarkable. What are you using for the suspension?”

“What’s ‘suspension’?”

“How does the carriage absorb impact?” Arisa asked Ine as they hopped down from the carriage.

“I dunno.” Ine only shook her head in response. The old witch had probably made it.

We parked in the square and unloaded the tools.

“Lulu, Nana, Arisa, you three ready the kiln. That means cleaning the inside and removing any nearby weeds to prevent fire from spreading. I want to do a little experiment, so if you have time, clear out whichever of the other kilns is the least damaged, too. The rest of you, come with me to collect clay.”

As soon as I finished my instructions, everyone sprang into action. Ine seemed a bit nervous.

We gathered earth from the clay source from before the village was abandoned. Thanks to the beastfolk girls' hard work, we filled at least half of a large bucket in no time. *This should be plenty.*

Mia, unused to heavy lifting, looked discouraged, and I patted her on the head before speaking to Ine.

"Inenimaana, can you use Earth to Mud on this soil?"

"Okay, got it."

Ine's magic dampened the clay into mud, and we strained it through a coarse sieve into another bucket in order to remove any stones or roots.

This left a lot of rocks and debris in the original bucket and the sieve. Some of them even looked like gemstone ore.

I carefully mixed the formula for the vials into the mud. It was based on the old witch's recipe, of course.

"Now use To Clay, please."

"O-okay. Um, j-just a second."

Ine seemed to be having trouble remembering the spell, so I opened an Earth Magic spell book and showed her.

"Nnngh, I just forgot for a second, okay? I know it…"

Muttering excuses, Ine cast the spell. Her magic returned the wet mixture into its original clay state.

I touched the clay experimentally. Maybe it was because it had been made using magic, but the clay had a uniform stickiness to it. Turning it into liquid must have pushed out the air from inside it as well.

According to the pottery notes, you'd normally have to knead it roughly to firm it up, then wedge it to get rid of the air inside, but the two spells had skipped these steps entirely. What a lucky miscalculation.

The notes also stated the clay would become flaky if it was not set to rest, but

it didn't feel any different from the clay we'd used at the pottery studio. Maybe this was another effect of the magic?

Well, I guess that doesn't matter right now. We're pressed for time, so I'd better move on to the next task.

"Everyone, make balls of clay about this big and line them up."

I showed everyone a sample clay ball so that they could get started.

I took a pottery wheel and a working stool out of the Garage Bag and set them up. Then I had Liza spread out a mat to put the finished bottles on.

"Rouuund?"

"This one is Master's, this one is mine, and next is Tama and Liza, sir!"

"Mrrrr…"

"I'll use yours too, of course, Mia."

Tama and Pochi happily set about making clay balls. Ine and Mia quietly worked away, too.

Once there were about 150, I moved on to molding the vials.

"Liza, you pass the clay balls to me, please."

"Certainly, sir."

This process was the same as it had been in the pottery studio, so I had no issues. Remembering my old part-time job on a factory assembly line, I fell into a working rhythm.

"Master, that was the last of the clay."

When Liza's somewhat tired voice brought me back to my senses, I found that I'd made a whole host of containers.

Tama had started arranging the vials for me while I was working. Doing a quick estimate, I determined that there were at least four hundred. When I carefully counted later, I came up with a total of 453. I'd made too many.

All right, next is drying them.

"Go ahead, Mia."

“Mm.”

Mia cast Clay Dry Third on the completed vials.

To make the spell easier, she did only around fifty at a time.

After three times or so, Mia was down to about 10 percent of her magic, so I gave her a honey-flavored magic recovery potion.

Mia wrinkled her nose reluctantly as she popped the cork-like stopper out of the vial. The gentle scent of honey wafted out of the opening.

“Honey?”

“Yeah, I tried to make it a little less bitter.”

Mia brought the vial up to her mouth gingerly and drank it down. My improvement seemed to be a success, because she looked like she wanted more when she was done.

“Yum.”

I was relieved that she liked it. Supposedly, it was less effective, but Mia’s MP was fully restored. I didn’t see a problem with that.

Before long, we’d finished drying all the vials. Magic was so handy.

While Mia worked her magic, I divided some premixed glaze into a few buckets.

“All right, everyone, now it’s time to glaze them. Be careful not to apply too much glaze or drop the vial into the bucket.”

Passing out brushes to everyone, I asked them to help coat the clay. We had just done it that morning at the pottery studio, so we were already well practiced. I had Pochi and Tama teach Ine how to do it.

“Huh? That was fast.”

“Yeah, Inenimaana’s magic helped even more than I expected, so we shaved off some time.”

In front of the kiln, Arisa wiped the soot from her face with a damp towel.

Just then, Nana and Lulu returned from the other side of the kiln.

“Master, all work is completed, I report.”

“I’ve finished my assignment as well.”

After the kiln was clean, the two of them had even cleared the grass and weeds in the area.

“Good work, everyone. It’s spotless.”

After thanking them for their hard work, I asked Lulu to wash the herbs they’d bought in the market and sent the other two to help with the glazing.

I poked my head into the kiln to check that the interior was intact. Perhaps because of my “Pottery” skill, all I had to do was rap on the inner wall to get a good idea of the kiln’s condition.

It was sturdier than I’d expected. Now I felt confident that it wouldn’t break before we were done.

I popped back out and started working on a magic tool to heat the kiln faster.

Using as a template the failed water heater circuit I’d made before, I improved it by adding a mechanism I’d found in Trazayuya’s documents.

I drew the heating circuit on a palm-size bronze plate that I’d bought at a blacksmith’s workshop, then repeated the process until I’d made twelve.

It would be difficult to start them all at the same time, so I made a horseshoe-shaped stand out of a few planks of wood and carved a transmission circuit into it. Finally, I set the bronze plates on the stand, and it was done.

Since I didn’t want to jump straight to the real thing, I decided to experiment with one of the broken kilns first.

I set up the heating circuit inside the kiln and put firewood next to it for fuel. I didn’t feel like going to too much trouble; I just dropped a whole bundle of wood in there and dusted it with some sawdust I’d gotten at a woodworking shop for kindling.

For the pottery itself, I pulled out a clay bowl from Storage.

I sent a bit of magic into the circuit, careful to regulate it so it wouldn’t blow up.

The heating circuit lit up bright red, and in seconds the firewood around it had burst into flame. The tremendous amount of heat got me sweating in an instant.

… This isn't going to explode, is it?

I watched the kiln a bit nervously.

It didn't explode per se, but the ferociously rising temperature created an unexpected airflow inside. It was a good thing that I'd left the firewood tied in a bundle. If I'd spread it out, there would be pieces of burning wood flying around in there.

Checking the temperature of the kiln with the AR display, I determined that it should reach the temperature required for firing soon and suspended the experiment.

I put the magic circuit away in Storage and doused the fire.

Because I didn't want to throw water over it and get an explosion of steam, I threw soil over it instead.

Once I checked the magic circuit, I found that not only had the circuits melted, but the bronze plates were melting, too. Surprisingly, the wood foundation was only a bit scorched.

It wouldn't work in the long run, but luckily I needed it to last only long enough to finish raising the temperature in the kiln. Iron would hold up to heat better, but it diffused magic.

I think the change in air currents was probably due to the sudden difference in temperature.

As a countermeasure, I added extra heating circuits on the walls and near the ceiling of the kiln. The adhesive would probably melt partway through, but as long as I reinforced them with timber it should be fine. All that mattered was that they didn't fall on top of the vials.

I set up the new magic circuit system and lined up some firewood.

I had Mia finish the glazed vials using the Glaze Dry spell, then placed them in the kiln. In case some of them broke, I decided to bake some extras for a total

of about two hundred.

“Whoa, you really did make a magic tool. I assume from the burn marks on that other kiln that it went well?”

“Yeah. I wanted to make a microwave oven kind of thing, but it was too difficult to do with the mechanisms I have, so I gave up for now.”

Arisa looked impressed as I finished preparing for ignition.

I had everyone back away before I started up the magic tool with a jolt of magic. Once the firewood was burning, I closed the kiln door, leaving it cracked a little for ventilation.

Trying to avoid causing another sudden current like last time, I gradually increased the amount of magic flowing into it over the course of ten minutes or so.

After that, it would be fine as long as we periodically added fuel.

“All right, the vials will be ready in three hours. Next we have to gather some herbs.”

“U-um, Master, there are still quite a few vials that haven’t been glazed yet…,” Liza said anxiously, but I told her we could take care of those after we’d collected the herbs.

In order to keep the glaze from drying out, I put a damp cloth over the top of each bucket.

With everyone accompanying me, I trekked over to the herb-rich areas in the hills behind the village that I’d located on the map.

Since we’d have to wade into a thicket, I made sure everyone was equipped with long sleeves and pants.

“Not exactly the height of fashion, is it?”

“It’s mowing gear, sir!”

“Swish, swish!”

“Mm.”

Arisa grumbled, but the other younger kids delightedly posed with their

baskets and little sickles.

I chose Arisa, Lulu, and Ine to tackle the nearest patch of herbs, since they had the lowest stamina, with Nana as their escort. There weren't any dangerous animals around or anything, but I just wanted to ensure they'd be safe.

The second patch was near the peak of the hill and infested with slime and spider-type monsters. Together, we took care of the ones that might have attacked us while we were harvesting.

There were still some slimes left in the nearby water hole, but I was confident Liza could handle them.

I left this area to the beastfolk girls and Mia before heading toward the last area.

I couldn't reach the summit of the hill by normal means. Once I'd navigated the fissures and overhangs, there was a paradise of herbs clearly untouched by people or animals alike.

On top of all the blue mugwort for stamina recovery potions, there was even a colony of the russet wort used in magic recovery potions.

I grinned to myself as I gathered the herbs and stowed them away.

In a book somewhere, I'd read that you should never completely exhaust a source of herbs—though I couldn't remember why that was—so I made sure to leave some behind.

I finished the harvest in about thirty minutes. Afterward, I straightened up and enjoyed the scenery.

From here, I could see all of Sedum City. There should have been a village nearby, too, but I couldn't catch a glimpse of it through the trees.

I checked in with everyone, but nobody else was done, so I just took Ine back with me to the square of the abandoned village.

"Rinse the herbs in this bucket. After that, put them in this sieve here."

"Y-yeah, uh, okay."

Leaving Ine to take care of washing the herbs, I started on the steps for the

formula.

I chopped the herbs and spinach that Lulu had washed earlier into roughly one-inch chunks, then ground them down with a big mortar and pestle.

Ine was too engrossed in her task to look in my direction, so when I finished processing each formula, I put them away as is in Storage.

Once I'd finished the last batch, I set up the Transmutation Tablet and other equipment, then called Ine over.

"Sit here, please. Can you use a normal Transmutation Tablet?"

"Yeah, I can."

"All right then, I'll prepare the ingredients and charge it with magic, so you try operating the Transmutation Tablet."

"Okay."

The potion we made with red grade-1 elixir didn't reach **High Quality**.

But, when we used grade-3 elixir instead, we made **High Quality** potions even when we made five at a time.

The reason I used this roundabout method was so that Ine's name would be listed as the creator of the potions. When I used "Analyze" to check, it had worked just as I'd hoped.

Since I'd set my name to blank, even if the process resulted in a joint signature, only Ine's name should be left.

This took a little extra time, but I wanted to minimize the possibility of anyone finding fault with the results.

After a bit of trial and error, I worked out exactly how to record Ine's name as the creator with as little work as possible to reduce the amount of time it took.

I'd been able to speed up the process pretty well, but after about twenty rounds of transmutation, Ine's magic was running low.

I had provided most of the magic, but the final process had to be done with Ine's magic.

"M-my magic… is, um…"

“Drink this, then.”

“Oh, but, um, that’s gonna be bi—Ow!”

As Ine stammered reluctantly, trying to dodge the potion, the puffbird on her head started pecking her forehead again.

She begrudgingly brought the liquid to her lips, but she gulped it down once she noticed the sweet taste. I could tell she must have really liked it—she turned the vial upside down and whacked it a few times to get every last drop.

“Is your magic fully restored?”

“Y-yeah. That was, um, really yummy.”

“All right, let’s keep going.”

I took the vial out of Ine’s reluctant hands, and we went back to work.

I had been depositing the completed potions in Storage, but Ine didn’t seem to trust the process, so I filled an empty beaker with water out of Storage to reassure her and poured it into a nearby cask.

“E-e-excuse me, Masterrr?”

As Ine finished forty rounds of transmutation, Arisa, Lulu, and Nana returned with baskets full of herbs.

For some reason, Arisa was upset.

“Welcome back, Arisa.”

“Thanks— Wait, no!” she bellowed as she pointed at Ine, who was sitting on my lap.

Alarmed by the other girl’s threatening behavior, Ine leaned into me—which just made Arisa angrier, creating a vicious cycle.

“Please stop, Arisa. You shouldn’t scare a small child like that.”

“Master, we have returned, I report.”

Lulu embraced Arisa gently, trying to calm her. From behind them, Nana gave her report.

“Calm down. This is the only way we can both use the Transmutation Tablet.”

“Why are you doing it together?!”

I tried to explain the situation to an unconvinced Arisa.

There’s no reason to get mad at me for letting a little kid sit on my lap. Tama and Mia do it all the time.

Arisa reluctantly calmed down after my explanation, so we resumed our alchemy.

Once I had the three girls store their bounty in the Garage Bag, I let them rest for a bit.

I couldn’t discern much from Nana’s expression, but Arisa and Lulu were clearly exhausted.

Ine looked tired, too, but she had to keep working a little longer. Just ten more times.

After their break, I had Lulu and Nana continue the glazing and put Arisa in charge of the fuel for the kiln.

Up until now, I’d been taking care of the fire myself in between alchemy sessions. I was pretty worn out, too.

By the time the beastfolk girls and Mia came back, we’d completed all fifty rounds of transmutation.

We’d met with failure four times and insufficient quality six times, but I had factored into my plan the possibility of a few failures.

“Let’s take a little break. I’ll call Arisa over, so Lulu and Nana, please make some snacks. You can use whatever you’d like from the Garage Bag for ingredients.”

After giving instructions to Nana and Lulu, I went to check the status of the kiln with Arisa and summon her over to the group.

Along the way, I stowed the glazed vials and tools in my pocket dimension.

“How’s it look in there?”

“Just a bit longer, I think.”

Checking inside the kiln, I responded to Arisa’s question.

I didn’t know if it was because of the success of the initial heating, the special glaze, or Mia’s drying magic, but whatever the reason, the vials were coming along even faster than I’d expected.

Checking the clock in my menu, I saw that only two and a half hours had passed.

“We still have two hours until sunset, so it looks like we’re gonna make—”

“Don’t say it!”

Arisa forcibly interrupted me by clamping a small hand over my mouth.

“Honestly! Why would you try to go and jinx us like that?!”

Fair enough. Whenever a character says “We’re going to make it!” trouble is pretty much guaranteed.

Just to be sure, I marked the aide and the small-time crook on my map so I could keep an eye out for any attempts to sabotage us.

“You read too many books,” I told Arisa with what I hoped was a confident grin.

She still looked apprehensive, so I held her hand while we walked back to the village square.

◆

Once we finished off the snacks, everyone except for Ine, Arisa, and me headed into the hills to gather mushrooms and wild plants. Mia had spotted a lot of them on their way back earlier.

Arisa’s muscles were in too much pain for her to move, and Ine was exhausted from the transmutation work.

Mostly out of curiosity, I had Arisa drink a potion to cure her muscle pain, but she declared that she was tired of hiking and rested on the blanket with Ine.

I had run out of magic recovery items and was in the middle of making more.

I tried brewing numbing and laughing gas agents with the “numbing mushrooms” and “laughing mushrooms” growing near the kiln. The method for creating the former was recorded in the textbook, while the latter was a recipe

from Trazayuya’s documents.

In Trazayuya’s journal, he noted that these had been very handy in fighting off bandits who’d broken into his home while he was staying in Labyrinth City.

I finished the whole process in about ten minutes, then cleaned up the tools.

An uninvited guest had appeared on our radar—the small-time crook. Nearly fifty men were accompanying him, too.

I told the two girls about it and instructed them to hide…

“Inenimaana, Arisa, get on the panther and go hide in the mountains. You should be safe as long as you bring the living armors with you.”

“W-wait, I want to fight with you!”

“Y-yeah, me too! My guys are really strong, too. They’ll beat ’em up just like before!”

But they were champing at the bit to help me fight them off.

Since brute force had failed earlier, I figured our opponents probably had some other plan in mind.

I wanted to put out the fire so they wouldn’t find the kiln, but it wasn’t exactly the kind of thing you could just switch off, so there wasn’t much I could do.

I tasked Arisa and Ine with hiding the carriage in the foothills.

In the meantime, I searched for a way to conceal or disguise the kiln somehow, but they’d probably found us out because of the smoke coming out of the chimney anyway.

Instead of crudely attempting to hide the vials, I elected to draw our petty villain’s attention toward something else.

I thought a corrupt guy like him would probably be more interested in an easy source of cash, like some of the completed magic potions.

I made a few preparations and left to meet the small-time crook and his crew.

“I came ’cos I heard there were some suspicious folk in Uke Village… The commoner brats and the witch’s apprentice, huh?”

He rudely greeted me exactly the way you'd expect for a crook like him.

Thirty-some armed men waited on standby behind him. Two of them were hanging back by the road out of the village, and the rest had surrounded the village in the woods.

The reason they hadn't just attacked was probably the two living armors and the panther-type constructor.

Arisa looked calm, but Ine, no more mature than any other child her age, was clearly panicked.

"I can't imagine why you'd consider us 'suspicious.' We simply came to do our alchemy in an uninhabited area so the smell wouldn't bother others in the city."

As I spoke, I pointed at the small cask nearby.

The cask contained our failed alchemic results and water to dilute them.

"Is that so? Well, that's a lovely attitude and no mistake, but I'm afraid you can't just go around using the village's equipment without permission. In fact, there've been complaints from the villagers about some suspicious characters wrecking the place."

A shabbily dressed, timid-looking man emerged from behind the crook. The man's affiliation was listed as the name of the ruined village, so they really had found a former inhabitant and dragged him along.

"If you are the acting representative of this village, could I pay you directly? How much would you like for compensation?"

Ignoring the crook, I addressed the villager directly.

"Actually, I'm afraid this village is under the management of Sedum City now. That means I'm the one in charge. Let's see here—perhaps I should confiscate this freshly made batch of medicine as a fine for the disturbance?"

With that, the crook smugly reached for the cask.

"Aah! B-but that's…"

Thinking the cask contained the real potions, Ine cried out desperately.

Great, he took the bait.

My face remained impassive as far as I could tell, but the crook's own intuition must have alerted him, as he stopped reaching for the decoy.

"Hey, check in that nearby shed! There should be more than just one cask."

I reacted with the best display of chagrin I could muster.

"F-found 'em! They were hidden under a dirty old mat!"

The man's minions emerged from the nearby shed triumphantly, carrying a few more casks on their shoulders.

"Hmph, three casks, eh? Should be about right," the crook muttered quietly.

Looks like he fell for it.

Just as I started to relax… Ine jumped forward.

"Waaaah! Mr. Satou, they're going to take 'em all… Gab, Rob, go get 'em!"

As the two living armors sprang into action on Ine's command, the underlings immediately scattered like a bunch of baby spiders.

Damn. My "fool your allies to fool your enemies" strategy backfired.

"H-hey! If these things lay a hand on me, it's off to prison with you!"

The spineless crook backed away, still keeping a firm hold on the barrel.

I grabbed the two living armors and held them back. We'd have some problems, in more ways than one, if we injured this guy.

"Calm down, Inenimaana. We'll be in trouble if we harm him."

"Th-that's right! I'm a close friend of the viceroy's aide, remember!"

Flaunting someone else's power, huh? This guy really is a stereotypical villain.

The moment a sigh left my mouth, I heard an explosion and some men screaming from somewhere in the foothills. It sounded just like the backfiring engines I'd seen on TV.

Then I saw dark smoke rising from the other side of the trees.

… It was coming from the direction of the kiln.

"I knew it. You've been using the kilns without permission, too, eh?"

“O-oh no… If the kiln’s broken, we’ll never finish the vials in time! Wh-what are we going to do…?”

Arisa dropped to one knee in despair.

Ine, on the other hand, collapsed in instantaneous exhaustion without saying a word.

“Well, you’d better get outta here soon. I’ll let you off for the day in exchange for these three casks.”

With a nasty, sadistic smirk, the small-time villain cackled triumphantly as he strode away toward Sedum City with the casks.

There was only one chime—ninety minutes—left until the sunset deadline.

◆

Once I’d confirmed on the radar that the men were gone, we visited the destroyed kiln we’d been using. There was a large hole in it, and it was completely ruined.

Based on the state of the kiln itself, I doubted the men who’d broken it had escaped unscathed, but since there were no bodies, their comrades must have carried them away.

The fire hadn’t spread, either. Mercifully, there were no highly flammable trees close by. I suppose they cut down the nearby trees in the area when they first built the kiln.

“They’re all broken… It’s no use. There’s no way we can try again, right…?”

“Yeah, I doubt we can use this kiln again,” Arisa muttered as she looked at the flaming furnace, and I nodded.

But Arisa wasn’t ready to give up and stared into the kiln.

“… Huh? These shards here…”

Arisa turned to me, and I grinned.

I could move things into Storage from up to ten feet away, even if I wasn’t touching them.

That’s right. I had removed the vials from the kiln without touching them or

being scorched by the flames.

Then, since I figured they could suspect something if I left it at that, I replaced them with other vessels. There were plenty of faulty clay containers lying around nearby, so it was easy to gather enough.

Keeping the part about Storage to myself, I explained the rest to Arisa.

When I told her the vials were safe, she exclaimed indignantly that I hadn't needed to keep it from her, too, but I just listened complacently.

After all, Arisa's genuine despair had probably helped deceive the crook.

… But there was still a problem.

The temperature of the vials—I checked Storage and found that the firing itself was done, but when I took one out, it immediately cracked because of the rapid temperature change. I guess a flimsy vial like this wasn't built to handle such a rapid change in temperature.

Since objects placed in Storage retained their state from the moment they were stored, the vials were still piping hot.

There had to be some way I could gradually cool them…

Should I fix the kiln and make another fire to get the temperature back up and then gradually lower it?

No, that would be cutting it too close time-wise.

Plus, if the temporary repairs on the kiln suddenly failed and the kiln collapsed on the vials, there'd be no coming back from that.

Come on, there has to be something…

Some convenient method where I can gradually lower the temperature without taking them out of Storage…

Repairing the kiln might be the only way.

Well, this is useless.

This phrase suddenly popped back into my head.

Why would I be rubbing salt in my own wounds right now? What good does

that thought— Wait. When was that memory from?

It's clearly just an inferior version of Storage. If I take things out, it exposes the contents to outside air, too, so it won't be any good for heat insulation.

… Now I remembered.

That was back when I was comparing the Item Box and Storage.

Yep, the Item Box was terrible for heat insulation—meaning that the state of objects inside it changed over time. And air didn't flow in or out unless you actively removed something.

In which case…!

I moved one of the hot vials from Storage into the Item Box.

Then I opened the Item Box, starting to take out the vial, and immediately canceled it. A warm wind blew from where the black hole of the Item Box had been.

When I moved the vial back to Storage, I saw that its temperature had dropped ever so slightly.

Great! This will work perfectly.

By using the Blow spell to circulate hot air in the Item Box for about twenty minutes, I cooled down the vials.

When Liza and the others returned to investigate the commotion, we got ready to depart.

"By Jove, let's go back to that rascal and the silver-haired jerk and make them cry uncle!"

At Arisa's somewhat anachronistic turn of phrase, the rest of the younger kids cheered enthusiastically.

…"By Jove"? What time period is she from, anyway?

As Ine drove the jostling carriage, I checked the time and the map.

Perfect. Looks like we'll make it just in time.

◆

The bag over my shoulder rattled with each step.

We'd made it all the way to the city hall without anyone challenging us.

"You've got some nerve showing your faces here! Thanks a lot for giving me some watered-down potions, huh?! I made a real good fool of myself thanks to you!"

Obstructing the entrance, the crook derided us at a slightly higher pitch than usual.

I took a step forward to keep Arisa and Ine safe behind my back.

"What do you mean? Those potions should still work to treat minor injuries."

I nonchalantly warded off the crook's accusations. Besides, I never said those casks contained potions in the first place.

Noticing the big sack I was carrying, the triumph returned to the crook's face.

"You think you're gonna fool us with some more watered-down potions, huh?"

What a persistent moron. Clearly this guy gets his kicks bullying people.

"Or did you just mix some grass into the water to make it actually look like a potion this time?"

The man tossed back his head and laughed in a manner befitting a common buffoon.

He probably didn't have a whole lot of friends. Most of the city hall officials nearby were staring at him with confusion or annoyance.

Just as I figured, he wasn't very popular.

"Well, it seems that you have nothing to discuss with us. We have some business with the viceroy's aide now, so if you'll excuse us."

With Arisa and Ine in tow, I navigated around the crook as he howled with laughter.

Ine's living armors couldn't enter the city hall, so they waited on standby in the parking area with the carriage.

“Hey, wait just a minute! What’s your so-called business with the viceroy’s aide?”

The crook jumped back in front of us like a cartoon villain, face twisted with impatience and spit spraying from his lips.

The officials he’d shoved out of the way frowned and cleared their throats pointedly as they left the room.

“I’m afraid it has nothing to do with you, so you’ll have to excuse me.”

“Wh-what was that?!”

I was under no obligation to answer this guy, and I dismissed him with a thin veil of politeness and headed toward the counter. My business was with the aide only.

I told the receptionist that I had a delivery for the aide and asked him to relay the message.

Placing the sack on the table, I took out one of the bottles and handed it over.

“But how?! We destroyed the kiln and everything…!”

The crook was shouting about something, but I had no reason to answer. I just smiled and ignored him.

“Humph! I’m sure they just bought some low-quality potions in town anyway! Well, we aren’t gonna accept some shoddy diluted medicine!”

Fed up with the silent treatment from me, the scoundrel turned his wrath on the receptionist and the staff member who’d taken the potion.

He moved in closer to the staff taking shelter behind the counter. They looked annoyed, but they probably couldn’t ignore a friend of the aide’s, so they dealt with him as best they could.

“Actually, these are even higher quality than the one hundred and twenty potions they delivered earlier.”

“Y-yeah right…”

Encouraged by the shock on the crook’s face, the staff member continued. “The manufacturer name is the same, too.”

“N-no way… My perfect plan… ruined by a commoner…?”

Honestly, I’m more surprised he expected such a half-baked plot to work in the first place.

“Our path to greatness, gone…”

The crook muttered to himself madly as he backed away, crashing right into the counter.

Our eyes met over the sack of potions.

“Th-that’s right. Without these… W-without these, they’re through! We can still win!”

The man kept murmuring as if he’d lost his mind. Then, suddenly, he snatched the sack off the counter and roared as he threw it violently to the floor.

“My hand slipped!”

All the staff members froze at his loud, bald-faced lie.

The potion began seeping out of the bag.

“Nooo! Mr. Satou, the vials broke! The potions are leakiiiing!”

Ine shrieked and tried to rush over in a panic, but I stopped her.

“Oh, woe is me! My foot slipped this time!”

The man jumped on top of the bag, smashing the few remaining intact vials.

“What kind of idiot pulls a stunt like that in front of all these witnesses?” Arisa muttered next to me with a dry smile.

I felt exactly the same way.

“What’s all this noise?! You’re in the viceroy’s service, you know!”

The viceroy’s aide emerged from his office in the back.

“… What’s this?”

The aide gestured toward the sack and the puddle at the small-time crook’s feet.

“Those are the magic potions that the witch’s messenger delivered. Although

this gentleman has smashed them…”

“Was this after accepting the delivery?” the aide asked the staff member icily.

“N-no. We were still in the middle of assessing the quality.”

“Then I see no problem here. There is still half a chime until sunset. Bring another set.”

The aide’s cold-blooded reply shocked the staff more than us. A few of them tried to intervene on our behalf, but they quickly withdrew under the aide’s deathly cold stare.

“Wait just a moment.”

“What now? This man is the one who broke them, right? The county government takes no responsibility.”

Well, I didn’t expect them to.

“No, but I would like to be compensated for the damage to my property from this man. Those were worth ninety gold coins in all.”

“Fair enough. You are free to bill this fellow, then.”

“Wh-what?!”

The aide silenced the small-time crook’s protest with another icy glare.

Once the aide had returned to his office, one of the staff members whispered to me in private that I could enlist the aid of the government in collecting the debt, as well. If he couldn’t pay, the man would be sentenced to slavery.

Nobody likes this guy, huh?

“Ah! He’s running away!”

The culprit tried to sneak away, but Arisa spotted him and shouted.

The man bolted like a rabbit, and Ine’s puffbird took off after him.

As the man screeched to a halt with a shriek, trying to fend off the bird, Nana and the beastfolk girls captured him.

Once I’d praised the girls and the puffbird for their good work, I went to the counter to fill out the paperwork to request help in receiving my

reimbursement. As thanks to the staff member who'd whispered to me earlier, I slipped him a few silver coins.

After watching the guards take away the criminal, we moved on to our next course of action.

Only half a chime left until the deadline—forty-five minutes.

◆

"Come in… Ah, it's you. What do you want? If you've given up, I advise you to leave this city."

After a staff member guided us to the office, the aide met us with a frigid response.

Ignoring his question, I handed some papers to the staff member.

"Aide. I would appreciate your signature and seal on this."

Scanning the documents he had received from the staff, the aide narrowed his eyes.

"… A delivery completion certificate?"

"Y-yes. They delivered the remaining one hundred and eighty potions. We also checked over your memorandum, which they submitted along with the delivery to ensure that there were no problems."

The aide placed the documents on his office desk with a trembling hand, then glared up at me.

"What manner of trickery is this?"

"There were no tricks involved. We simply used wisdom, hard work, and friendship."

"Utter nonsense…"

In reality, I never would have been able to carry out this mission alone.

I had dodged the aide's question, but the real trick behind the delivery was this:

I'd noticed on my radar the small-time crook's marker lying in wait for us, so

I'd devised a new plan.

As I'd made a grand entrance in the front with a delivery of sixty dummy potions, Liza and the others brought in the real delivery through the back door. To make it look like all 180 were present, I'd included about a hundred unfired vials, and the crook was easily fooled.

The fake potions were the same quality as the real ones, too.

Basically, between the 198 vials I'd made myself, the thirty-seven that Nana had gathered, and the five that I already had on hand, about sixty spare vials remained.

Ine had pulled off forty rounds of transmutation for a total of two hundred potions, and I had recovered forty bottles' worth from the original batch after the crash, so we had a total of 240 potions.

In other words, I had sixty extras prepared from the very beginning.

And since the current market rate for potions was almost three times the usual amount, he had probably misunderstood my named price as covering all 180 potions, not just the sixty he'd broken.

I hadn't honestly expected the small-time crook to take such an idiotic course of action, but…

I wasn't planning to explain all that to the aide. *Time is money, after all.*

"Is something wrong? All that's left is for you to sign and seal it."

"Urrrgh…"

I pressed him politely, but the aide only groaned as if on the verge of death.

"Excuse me, Mr. Aide?"

Concerned about his strange behavior, the staff member attempted to speak to him, but the aide simply stood with his mouth set in a thin line and his eyes closed.

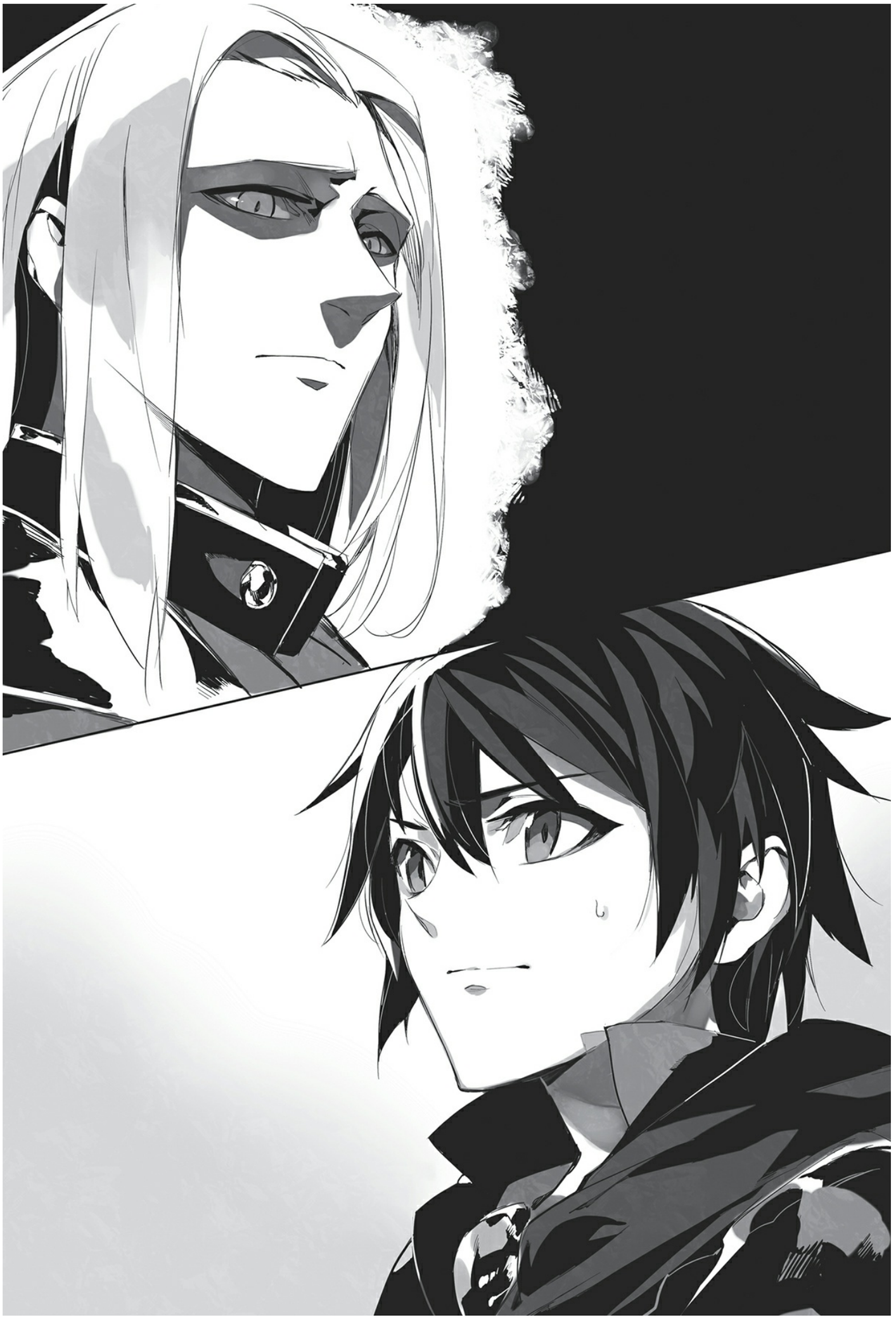
Apparently, he was just going to refuse to sign.

Oh dear.

I hadn't expected the seemingly prideful aide to resort to such a shamelessly

childish plan.

Time slowly ticked by as a heavy silence dominated the room.



…Nearly thirty minutes passed with the aide's mouth clamped shut. He was probably planning to keep this up until time ran out.

Maybe I should try the laughing gas to make him laugh?

I comforted myself with this ridiculous idea as I continued to put silent pressure on the aide.

Moment by moment, time slipped away. I checked the map and the clock on my menu. There wasn't much left until the deadline.

The door to the office opened quietly, without so much as a knock.

Since this was as good a time as any, I tried speaking to the aide.

"Mr. Aide, couldn't you please sign the certificate of delivery completion?"

Just as I expected, there was no response from the aide.

"I suppose I shall have to sign it, then."

At this unexpected voice, the aide opened his eyes.

The man who had spoken smoothly signed the delivery note on the office desk, then stamped it crisply with the seal on his ring.

"C-Count Kuhanou!"

The aide's startled cry echoed in the office.

I gave a nod to the person behind Count Kuhanou.

"M-Mistress!"

"It seems you've had quite a difficult time of things, Inenimaana."

Following my gaze, Ine yelped in surprise as well.

Yes, the old witch had ridden on the elder sparrow to pick up Count Kuhanou from Kuhanou City.

I'd worried it would be a close call when I checked their position on the map earlier in the abandoned village.

This had been a worst-case scenario backup plan, but I was glad they'd made it in time.

The old witch patted Ine's head gently, then bowed in gratitude toward me.

"Mr. Satou, I cannot thank you enough for your help in this matter."

Nestled in Ine's hair, the puffbird gave a little "pou-kwee," as if to say that it deserved some thanks, too.

Now, this peaceful atmosphere applied only to my party. The aide, on the other hand, was in serious distress.

"Wh-why are you already…?"

"Can you not tell? Mistress Witch here has informed me of your evil deeds."

The aide sank deeper into his chair, and Count Kuhanou stepped closer.

A few knights, clearly the count's guards, had slipped into the room unnoticed, and they pulled the aide up out of the chair.

"Your father was a vassal of Marquis Muno and a friend of mine at the royal academy. Thus, I thought I would help his family, who had left their territory to depend on ours… But it seems I was blind."

"Please, wait. This is a conspiracy between the witch and this man here—!"

"Hmph, a conspiracy, indeed! Do you take me for a fool?"

The aide tried to pin things on us, but Count Kuhanou cut him off in a booming voice.

"Have you forgotten the debt of gratitude my county owes to Mistress Witch? Why, your own younger siblings were among the beneficiaries of her medicine in the plague of five years ago, were they not? And in this current conflict with the kobolds, how many knights and soldiers do you think have lived thanks to her potions?!"

The aide withered under the count's powerful rage.

"A man who does not help the viceroy is not fit for the title of his aide. And you shall no longer have the privilege of perpetual aristocracy in my territory. I shall leave you only with the title of hereditary knight, that you, your elderly mother, and your younger siblings shall live as commoners with only the smallest of pensions," Count Kuhanou spat at the aide.

At this, the aide gazed up at him in a silent plea, but the count refused to change his decision.

The aide muttered with his hand to his chest, and something like static electricity forced the knights to let go of him.

“As the acting servant of the viceroy, I invoke thee—”

The aide mustered his strength for a desperate cry.

It was clear that he was trying something, but Count Kuhanou stopped the knights from grabbing him with a wave of his hand.

The count clearly knew what he was doing, so I refrained from interfering, too.

“…How foolish,” Count Kuhanou murmured pityingly, standing defenseless in front of the aide.

“Spirit of Sedum City, attack the enemy of our home! ■ ***Punish*** *Chuubatsu!*”

When the aide recited the final command word, lightning flew from the amulet in his hand toward Count Kuhanou.

I jumped in front of him immediately, but the lightning dispersed before it even reached me.

“How truly foolish. As the count of Kuhanou, I could never be harmed by such a spell in my own territory. Or have you forgotten who lent you your borrowed power in the first place?”

I see… That must have been an attempt to use magic from the City Core, then. So a count can grant a viceroy the right to use the City Core, and the aide is serving as a standin for the viceroy, but of course it can’t be used to harm someone higher-ranking than himself. Got it.

“I shall have mercy out of respect for your deceased friend. Instead of charging you with treason, I shall reduce your sentence to a simple capital—”

Wait a second.

Trusting my intuition, I jumped over the aide’s desk and in one smooth motion delivered a kick that broke his jaw and knocked him unconscious.

I hadn’t made an error in holding back my strength.

I had needed to very noticeably injure him.

“…And why did you feel the need to make such a show of interrupting?”

Count Kuhanou turned a cold stare on me as if I were an insect.

…So he really was planning to execute the man right here and now.

“Because there are children present. Forgive my insolence, but if you’re going to put the man to death, surely the execution grounds would be a better place for it. This is hardly something that a little child should have to see.”

To be honest, I didn’t want to see it, either.

If they’re going to throw him in jail or whip him, I could accept it, since it’s his own fault, but I seriously don’t want to watch an execution happen right in front of me.

I met the count’s gaze for a moment and smiled, which seemed to drain some of the fury from his countenance. After glancing toward Ine, he finally calmed down completely.

“It seems you have made yourself a most worthy acquaintance, Mistress Witch.”

With that short comment to the old witch, Count Kuhanou collected the amulet from the aide, and on his order, the knights carried the man away to jail.

The Mystery of the Bundle of Papers

Satou here. Encryption technology is sometimes necessary in game production. It's useful for preventing tools that hack save data or duplicate the product itself. But I've never been any good at decryption.

After the aide was taken to jail, the old witch and I went to meet with Count Kuhanou in the drawing room.

First, the count gave the old witch a somewhat roundabout apology for allowing the viceroy's aide's conspiratorial actions to go so far. After that, talk turned to the subject of a reward for me.

I'd honestly been expecting a punishment for interfering in the execution, but that wasn't the case.

"So your name is Satou? It seems you've been through quite some trouble. What would you like for a reward? Goods? Money? If you should wish to be employed by the government, that is within my power as well."

I wasn't sure how to answer the graying count.

I didn't have much use for more money or goods, and I wasn't really in the market for a job, either.

"This may be forward of me, but if I could receive permission to purchase Magic Scrolls and spell books within your territory, I would be most humbly delighted."

"I suppose as an acquaintance of Mistress Witch, it's no surprise that you should have such a thirst for knowledge. Very well, then, I shall issue you a permit."

I hadn't been expecting much, but the count generously agreed.

That seemed to be the end of his business with me, but since I hadn't been given permission to leave, I stayed to listen to his discussion with the witch.

They talked about the hydra in the mountains along the southwest border and how he wanted her to make an antidote for its poison to help the soldiers who would be searching for it.

He avoided specifically using the word *hydra*, but since he mentioned a report from the constable of Noukee, there was no doubt in my mind what he meant.

Apparently, a hydra had attacked about three years ago, damaging both Sedum City and the surrounding villages, meaning it must have destroyed the abandoned village after all. The count darkly explained that it was one of the monsters that had crossed the border from the Muno Marquisate some twenty years before.

When his discussion with the old witch was finished, Count Kuhanou informed us that he had a meeting to discuss countermeasures against the hydra, so we took our leave.

The count offered to treat us to a lavish dinner at the viceroy's castle, but since the beastfolk girls wouldn't be able to join us, I politely declined.

Once I'd received my permit from a staff member, we left the government office behind us.

"Mr. Satou, I would like to thank you for your help from the bottom of my heart."

"Um, thanks… A lot…"

At the corner of the city hall, Ine and the old witch gave us their thanks.

"Still, I must confess I was surprised. What sort of magic did you use to complete the task?"

The old witch gazed at me inquisitively. It seemed like she was simply curious, not trying to feel me out or anything. I supposed it was clearly impossible for someone of Ine's level and magic power to complete twenty rounds of alchemy.

"The trick is simple. I recovered the potions from the broken bottles and the bottom of the crate, that's all. We just had to put them in new vials."

"Ah! Now that you mention it, we only made about fifty potions!"

My "Fabrication" skill helped me spin a plausible explanation, and the

simpleminded young Ine reinforced my story.

“Yes, Ine worked hard and drank lots of magic recovery potions.”

“Yup! They were sweet and yummy, too!”

I went along with the flow of the conversation and complimented Ine, too.

I’d apparently convinced the old witch, who patted the girl’s head and thanked her appreciatively.

“Mr. Satou, there must be some way I can thank you for your help. Is there anything you might desire?”

As our conversation wound down, the old witch brought up the subject of a reward.

But I’d really been meddling only because I wanted to, and I’d already gotten a lot of knowledge from the old witch, so I didn’t feel like I should ask for more.

“I was only helping a friend. There’s no need to do anything in return. If you’ll let me come visit the Forest of Illusions and have a long chat again sometime, that would be more than enough.”

My request came out a little snobbier than I intended, but I was being honest. Talking about alchemy with the old witch really was fun.

“Well, you are welcome at any time. Please do bring Lady Misanaria and the other young ladies along with you, too.”

As she spoke, the old witch smiled the gentle, pleasant smile of an old lady sitting on a porch with a cat on her lap in early summer.

“Now then, a toast to our successful delivery!”

“““Cheers!”””

For some reason, we were having an after-party in the pottery studio.

When we came to return the potter’s wheel and other tools we’d borrowed to make the vials, I asked the owner if he knew any restaurants that allowed demi-humans, but he informed us that there were none.

Instead, he proposed that we use one of the unused workshop rooms in the studio as a dining hall, and I took him up on his offer.

Of course, we also invited not only the old witch and Ine but also the owner and his cat-people slaves. The studio's apprentice had already gone home, so he didn't participate.

We arranged on a long table the food we'd bought from stalls. Since the workshop owner didn't drink alcohol, our beverage options were tea or water flavored with fruit juice.

"This grilled bird is truly superb. You can enjoy all the flavors from the head to the tip."

"The rabbit skewers are delicious, too, sir."

"Everything's so tastyyy!"

The beastfolk girls were enraptured by the meat dishes. *I'll have to remind them to eat their vegetables afterward, too.*

"Yum."

"Mia, this fruit and vegetable stir-fry is good, too."

"Mm."

Since Mia was the day's MVP, I rewarded her by doling out food on her plate.

"Excuse me, Master! You're doting on Mia too much!"

"Hmm?"

Jealous that I was devoting so much attention to the elfin girl, Arisa piped up discontentedly.

"Oh, Arisa, you're too much. Master, this stew here is delicious, too. Would you like some?"

"Sure, thanks."

"Master, this baked parcel is of excellent quality, I report."

Once I tasted the stew Lulu had given me, Nana offered a dish baked in a pastry wrapping.

The radish and fish stew was stellar, so I recommended it to the old witch and Ine, too.

“This here is really good.”

“Why, thank you, Lord Satou.”

“Mistress, you should try this, too!”

“Oh dear. You’re spilling food everywhere, Inenimaana.”

The old witch took out a handkerchief and wiped the food off Ine’s clothes.

“You’re awfully popular, aren’t you, young master?”

“Well, these good relationships go both ways, you know.”

I responded to the studio owner as the cat-people girls bustled about, diligently waiting on him.

Still hungry for more, the master took a hefty bite out of a bone-in rabbit leg.

The cat-people girls were eating only roasted nuts and berries, so I suggested the meat skewers and grilled bird to them, too.

They still hesitated despite my suggestion, but when the studio owner put some on their plates, they timidly began eating.

“S’good, sirrr.”

“Verrry yummy.”

“Mmf, mrrf…mmm!”

With choruses of approval in broken Shigan language, the girls cleared their plates in the blink of an eye. One of them was so moved by the delicious meal that she started crying while she ate, but I politely pretended not to notice.

“This is good, too, ma’am.”

“This toooo?”

Pochi and Tama put their favorite meals on some smaller plates and brought them over to the cat-people girls.

“I highly recommend this,” Arisa added, offering them a plate of roast rabbit.

Watching fondly as the younger girls freely doted on the catfolk, I enjoyed my own food and conversations as well.

Time flies when you're having fun, of course, and the banquet ended when the supply of food was exhausted.

Everyone looked full and contented. The cat-people girls had even started thanking us with a gratitude that was a little too much like worship for my comfort.

The next morning was the ninth day since we'd left Seiryuu City.

We all went out to see off the old witch and Ine, who were returning to the Forest of Illusions.

As a parting gift, Ine gave me something that looked like a lantern with a shade.

"This is a thank-you gift, Mr. Satou."

"Is it a lantern?"

Ine shook her head at my question.

"It's a magic tool. My mistress helped me make it."

"Really? That's fantastic. Thank you, I'll use it with care."

"Yay!"

With my "Analyze" skill, I learned that it was a tool that used "light drops." It worked like a lantern that used magic instead of oil to produce an LED-like light.

"Well, I look forward to meeting again someday."

"Lord Satou, here is a gift that I once received from my grandmother, to keep you healthy."

The old witch made a complex gesture over me that was apparently a protective charm without a chant.

It didn't have any particular buff effect or anything, but that didn't matter as much as the sentiment behind it.

I gave the old witch my thanks, and we waved to the pair as they departed.

The broken living armors and the elder sparrow sitting in the back of the panther constructor–drawn carriage was a distinctly fantasy-like image.

Ignoring the whispers and stares as they left the city, the old witch and her apprentice headed home.

> Title Acquired: Friend of the Witches

◆

As we rounded out our stay in Kuhanou City, we continued sightseeing and started preparations for our next journey.

We met a merchant heading toward Seiryuu City, so I entrusted him with a letter to Zena. I felt a deep appreciation for postal systems.

Writing the letter was a bit difficult. I had no idea what kinds of manners and idioms were expected in letters in this world, and I turned to my merchant friend for advice as I struggled through the writing process.

I asked if Pochi and Tama wanted me to write a letter for them, too, but they said they wanted to write it themselves, so I respected their wishes.

Unfortunately, the impenetrable defense of Mia and the others had prevented me from going to any brothels, but I did frequent the tavern several times, which enabled me to collect some information about our next destination, the Muno Barony.

The more I heard about this place, the more I wanted to get through it as fast as possible without stopping to see the sights. If anything, I wanted to go around it, but in order to get to the Ougoch Duchy without going through the Muno Barony, we'd have to backtrack all the way to Seiryuu County and go around the royal capital.

Since that would take so much time, I was reluctant to choose that route.

The Muno Barony was a new territory founded by some incumbent nobles of Ougoch Duchy, who'd taken up the Muno family name and territory after Zen destroyed the Muno Marquisate.

It had always been an impoverished territory, but in the past three years the state of public order had become significantly worse, I'd heard. It was now in a condition of near-anarchy. Thieves were rampant, the officials were corrupt, and soldiers did as they pleased.

Normally, the lord of the territory or neighboring kingdoms would send in troops, but Count Kuhanou was too preoccupied with the kobolds, and Ougoch Duchy was in the middle of a very tense situation with the weaselfolk empire and the small country to the east, so they couldn't risk it.

Since it sounded best to avoid the villages and towns, I stocked up on nonperishable food so we could make it through the territory without stopping for supplies. For our group, about a month's worth should be fine.

I also found out why I'd spotted the aide at such a common tavern.

The owner hadn't known that he was the viceroy's aide, but he'd mentioned the man had been coming to drink Muno territory liquor for about a month now and that, like himself, the aide was probably someone who'd had to relocate from Muno.

Because the Muno Barony seemed unsafe, I used the leather armor I'd bought in Seiryuu City as a model to make some for all our members.

I gained the "Armor Crafting" skill after my first attempt, which led to them turning out pretty nice. For our vanguard, I sewed in some iron plates to increase their defense capabilities. I made sure to build the helmets particularly sturdy.

Since my merchant friend had told me mounted guards were good for warding off thieves, I purchased two horses with harnesses, and we all practiced horseback riding.

I quickly received the "Horseback Riding," "Taming," and "Animal Training" skills as soon as we started practice, and soon I was able to ride without a problem.

Mia could even ride bareback, but the only other member of our group who could make it at a quick trot was Liza. Walking was the best the others could manage.

Since I'd bought two horses for now, Liza and I would be acting as the cavalry for a while.

I received a summons from the town hall regarding the matter of the small-time crook and learned that since he'd been a man of little means, his assets

had come to only ten gold coins after he became a slave.

I didn't really care about the money, so I paid the processing fee and signed the documents.

Apparently, the villain would be sent to work in the silver mines under attack by the kobolds. I knew he was getting his just deserts, but I couldn't help but feel a little bad for him nonetheless.

Well, since he was such a determined, gutsy lowlife, he'd probably survive no matter what the circumstances.

The aide had been spared execution, too, and was now working as a slave in the count's castle in Kuhanou City. As far as I could tell from the information on my map, the count had him hard at work as an educator.

Considering how prideful the man was, he might've preferred death over this, but personally, I thought he ought to work hard to atone for his crimes.

On a whim, I searched out the aide's younger siblings on the map.

They were closer than I expected. I turned my head, and there were two people in the uniforms of low-ranking public office workers enduring a lecture from a woman who appeared to be an instructor.

The public office must have hired them, then. I was glad to see that they weren't wandering lost on the side of the road or anything.

The day after I received my permit, I purchased some scrolls and spell books and learned some new magic.

I spent a few leisurely days practicing chants and analyzing spells in the textbooks.

"Master, I'm returning this book. May I borrow the Foundation Magic one next?"

"Sure. How was that intermediate spell book?"

I accepted the intermediate Light Magic volume from Arisa and handed her the Foundation Magic book from the Garage Bag in exchange.

Even though I'd given her permission to take out and read whatever she liked,

she insisted on being conscientious.

Since we'd started having reading time after dinner, the others were enjoying their choice of books, too. Nana was helping the beastfolk girls with theirs.

"To be honest, figuring out Shigan language is more difficult for me than the contents themselves."

"It's still impressive that you were able to learn to read them at all in such a short period of time."

I remembered struggling to read technical programming books in English back when I was in Japan.

The other girls had all learned to read every one of the one hundred study cards. Aside from Nana and Mia, who'd always been able to read them, Arisa was the only one who could read entire books on her own.

Lulu and Liza could read simpler things like picture books, too.

Pochi and Tama were still struggling with the differences between spoken and written language. Since they'd learned to read numbers now, it was probably time to teach them arithmetic next.

"What are you reading, Master? …A menu?"

Arisa peered over my shoulder, surprised.

In fact, I was reading one of the bundles of paper I'd gotten from that sketchy stall before.

I was trying my best to divine what secrets they were hiding, but all I'd found so far were things like weekly dinner plans, complaints to colleagues, and journal entries speculating about the author's wife's infidelity, all in completely random order.

The only thing they had in common was that they were always dated, and the writing was as neat as if it had been made with a typewriter.

But since they weren't in chronological order, and the topics were so all over the place, it was hard to understand what was going on.

There was probably a secret behind the order they were in, but I just couldn't

figure it out.

I was pretty disappointed in my “Decryption” skill.

“Holy…Sword?”

Arisa muttered aloud, contemplating the paper.

“Where does it say that?”

“I just read it vertically instead of horizontally, of course.”

Vertically? So even in a parallel world, they still do the same sort of thing you’d find on BBS forums in ours?

She handed the paper back to me, and sure enough, she was right. The words were different, but it was pronounced the same way as *Holy Sword*.

I sorted them in order of the dates via Storage and tried reading them that way.

…So this *is why it was worth more than two hundred and fifty gold coins.*

“Brilliant, Arisa!”

“Hee-hee. But if you’re going to praise me, do so with your actions!”

I hugged Arisa tightly and spun her around and around.

“Wah! Hey, not so…suddenly!” Arisa shrieked in an odd voice, but oh well.

Seeing us spinning around, Pochi and Tama started running in circles around us.

Written in the bundle of papers…

…were instructions on how to create man-made Holy Swords.

A Letter to Zena

Without so much as a knock, someone slammed the door to our room in the barracks wide open and burst through.

Ugh, that must be Lou again.

I whirled around, only to find Lou as confused as I was. Just behind her, Iona seemed equally perplexed.

Finally, a little too late, I turned toward the person crouching in front of the door.

“Huh? Zenacchi?”

“Lilio!”

Her hair slicked to her forehead with sweat, the magic soldier under our watch—Zena, or “Zenacchi”—was grinning broadly even as she gasped for breath.

“Welcome back, Zenacchi. What’s got you in such a hurry?”

Given Zenacchi’s usual politeness, this was surprisingly crude behavior.

It was rather early for her to be back from the guard station near the labyrinth already. Did she run all the way here?

“Zena, you’d better wipe off that sweat. You’ll catch a cold.”

Lou tossed me a towel, and I plopped it on top of Zenacchi’s head.

“Miss Zena, please drink this. You must be dehydrated,” Iona said, pouring some water from a jug into a cup and handing it to our ward.

None of us could resist looking after our Zenacchi, after all.

“Thank you, Lou, Ms. Iona. You too, Lilio.”

“With pleasure, ma’am,” I replied jokingly, wiping down her hair.

For some reason, Lou and Iona didn't look impressed.

"So, what's going on?"

"A letter! I got a letter from Sir Satou!"

Wow, how conscientious.

Zenacchi showed us the letter with a sparkling smile.

That's great, but I can't read, you know.

"As the lingering winter leaves us at last, I hope that you have been well, dear Zena…"

I could understand only about half of the letter she read to us, at best, but piecing together the bits that did make sense, it sounded like he was attempting to express that he missed Zena despite the relatively short time since his departure.

"Miss Zena, that's just an expression people use in letters…," Iona murmured, but it fell on deaf ears.

Oh, so it's just an expression? I don't fully understand, but Zenacchi's interpretation that this was an expression of love is likely only a misunderstanding, judging by Iona's tone.

Well, thank goodness for that.

The three of us listened as Zenacchi happily read the letter aloud.

"Um, so… 'We had an exceptionally good time eating soup on a hill with a majestic megalith.' Wow! But is there really a place like that so close to Seiryuu City?"

"Geh, do you think he means those random rocks?" Lou said, contorting her face.

Oh, that place!

We went there on patrol sometimes, but it was dangerous, since sometimes monsters lurked in the shadows.

Iona quickly covered for Lou's improper remark.

“Judging by the state of the letter, it seems that he did not encounter any monsters.”

“It’s nothing to worry about. Sir Satou is very nimble, and those demi-human girls are strong, too.”

Well, well. Here I was expecting Zenacchi to be all worried, but she had so much faith in this guy that I was a little jealous.

I suppose when those monsters came in through the main gate before, he did protect the inn.

While I recalled the incident, Zenacchi moved on with her recitation.

“He says he drank sheep’s milk liquor for the first time in a town called Kainona. Isn’t that where you were born, Lou?”

“Yeah, but there’s nothing there but sheep, drunkards, and shepherds.”

Lou told us before that she’d gotten sick of that town and come to Seiryuu City to join the army as soon as she became an adult.

With that derisive comment, our discussion of Kainona was apparently over.

According to the rest of Zenacchi’s letter, this guy had been hunting deer in the mountains, eating delicious food at each destination, and generally enjoying a terribly pleasant journey.

Is traveling really supposed to be this comfortable?

“It sounds as though he is enjoying himself on his trip,” Iona commented, a little confused.

“Right? I mean, I know a couple of peddlers myself, but traveling is so hard on them that they all dream of setting up shop somewhere and settling down,” I replied, and Lou nodded, too.

“Even when we’re camping on patrol, it’s hard to sleep when you have to be on alert for wolves and monsters all the time.”

“It’s cold sleeping on the ground, too, so your body just doesn’t get much rest.”

I agreed. Even on a hard wood bed, the barracks was where I got the most

restful sleep.

“That’s true. But Sir Satou isn’t having all fun, either. He wrote that wolves attacked when he entered the neighboring Kuhanou County, and— What?!”

“What is it, Zenacchi?”

Zena’s face was suddenly full of worry.

Iona peered at the letter over her shoulder.

“…A hydra?”

Oh-ho? A hydra is that multiheaded boss monster that shows up in stories about heroes and knights, right?

He was just talking about wolves a second ago. Where’d this hydra come from?

“Y-yes… When he got rid of the wolves, it seems he witnessed a hydra flying away into the mountains. Luckily, Sir Satou and his friends weren’t hurt, but he says we should be careful, since it was so close to the border.”

Immediately, I tried to remember where we’d be patrolling next.

It’s all right. We’re going north next time. I felt a bit guilty about whichever troops were going to the border territory in the south, but I still breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’ll report to the captain later. I’ll let him know it’s still unconfirmed information first, of course.” Zenacchi’s face hardened from its relaxed, lovestruck expression into that of a squad leader.

At that moment, someone else leaped into the room with the same momentum as Zenacchi earlier.

“Aah, there you are, Ms. Zena!”

The person bursting through the door this time was Gayana, an engineer. If I remembered right, she was on the labyrinth supervision team with Zenacchi.

“The captain’s been looking for you, you know!”

“Ah! I forgot to submit my daily report.”

Zenacchi rushed out of the room in a panic.

To think that our no-nonsense Zenacchi would forget her duties… I guess they say that love makes you do crazy things.

Gayana watched Zenacchi hurry away, then came over to me.

“Huh? Is something else up, Yanacchi?”

“I just thought it was strange to see Ms. Zena like that. Besides, Lilio! I’ve just received a new supply of fresh gossip!”

Grinning widely, Gayana rubbed her fingers together in the tacit request for money.

Oh, all right.

I took something out of the cupboard and placed it in the palm of her hand.

“Hey! I wanted coppers, not snacks!”

She frowned at me, but she must’ve been hungry after her shift at the labyrinth, because she popped the baked sweet potato pastry into her mouth and munched on it anyway.

“Mmm, I’ll allow it, since that was so tasty. So, about that gossip—”

What Gayana told me this time was actually a pretty juicy piece of information.

So they’re going to choose some troops from the count’s army to send to the Labyrinth City Celivera, are they?

Right, the very same city that guy Satou is heading toward…

Zenacchi must have gotten an earful from the captain, since it was almost a full chime before she returned.

“I’m back, Lilio.”

“Welcome back, Zenacchi. So, listen…”



I relayed the information I'd just received to Zenacchi.

Though she didn't fully understand at first, her face soon bloomed like a flower into a radiant smile.

If I were a man, I'd definitely fall in love with that smile.

I'm still a little jealous of that boy, but I'm doing my best to support Zenacchi's love.

Good luck surprising him at Labyrinth City, Zenacchi!

Afterword

Hello, this is Hiro Ainana.

Thank you very much for picking up this third volume of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*!

First of all, in the hopes of inspiring you to take this book all the way to the cash register, let me go over the highlights of this volume.

This work has been published on the net, but for volume three, the majority of the content centers around new events written for this book.

Since volumes one and two were very battle-centric, I thought I'd try changing things up in this volume with a story about crafting.

Transmuting magic potions, making magic tools, pottery, leatherworking, sewing, and cooking—between that and using programming knowledge to develop spells, a lot of skills that hadn't done much in the previous volumes played a big role here.

Of course, the world of *Death March* isn't quite so gentle that you can do anything as long as you have the skills.

Even if Satou has the cooking skills to create divine dishes, it doesn't do him much good with his limited knowledge and repertoire…

This might be a bit of a spoiler, but I think you'll enjoy Lulu's unusual reaction to Satou's peerless cooking. That's just this author's recommendation.

The stage for this story is the towns and cities that our group visits on their way from Seiryuu County to Kuhanou County.

The heart of this third volume is basically the journey with the main cast, but as the story progresses, they meet a certain girl and get involved in a situation that they'll resolve with the help of Satou's creation hacks and everyone's cooperation.

Of course, besides the guest characters, we'll also be reunited with a surprising figure…

To find out who shows up, please read the main story.

Moving on! The guest characters aren't the only thing that's new in this book.

Since I selfishly wanted to see more of shri's beautiful illustrations, I made sure to change up aspects of the main characters besides Satou, like outfits or Mia's and Nana's different hairstyles.

I don't know if this part will be illustrated, but we'll also meet some cat-people girls; spy some half-man, half-goat fauna; and ride on the back of a new character's giant bird, increasing the fantasy elements from the web version by a huge margin.

In order to increase the amount of fluffiness, I included an adorable familiar that sits on somebody's head, too.

Well, since I'm getting close to the max amount of pages, I'll wrap up the contents of volume three around here.

I have one report before we move onto the acknowledgments. It might already say so on the book wrap, but as of this volume, a manga adaptation of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody* has been announced.

I was lucky enough to have a peek at the thumbnails, and all I can say is: It's amazing!

For more information, like the release date and magazine it'll be printed in, please refer to the official announcement from Fujimi Shobo.

Now then, it's time for the customary acknowledgments.

I don't have the words to describe how often my editor Mr. H has helped me. His wonderful notes and advice made a vast improvement on the hard-to-read first draft. I hope you'll continue to guide and encourage me from now on, too.

As of this time, I've only seen thumbnails for shri's lovely illustrations, but I'm sure they'll be even more splendid than I can possibly imagine. I can't wait to see them.

I would also like to thank everyone involved in the publication and sale of this

book, especially everyone at Fujimi Shobo.

Finally, the biggest thanks of all goes to the fervent support of all you readers!!

Thank you very much for reading all the way to the end of the book!

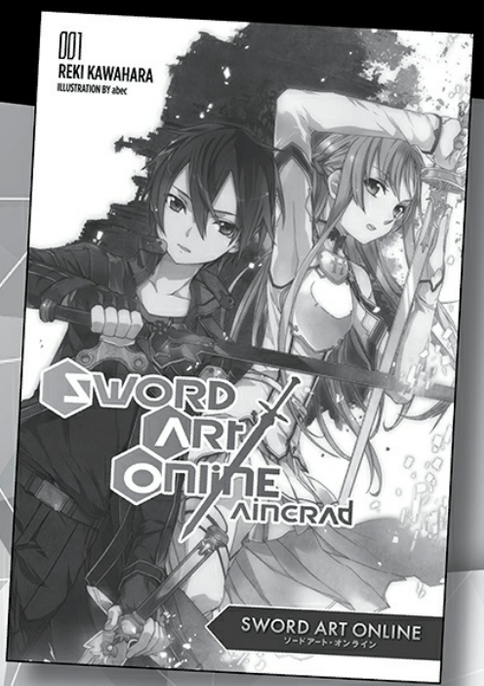
Well then, I'll see you in the next volume for the Muno arc!

Hiro Ainana


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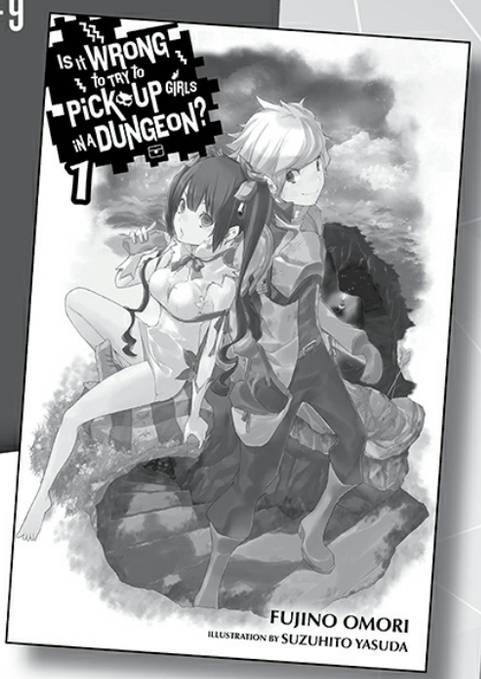
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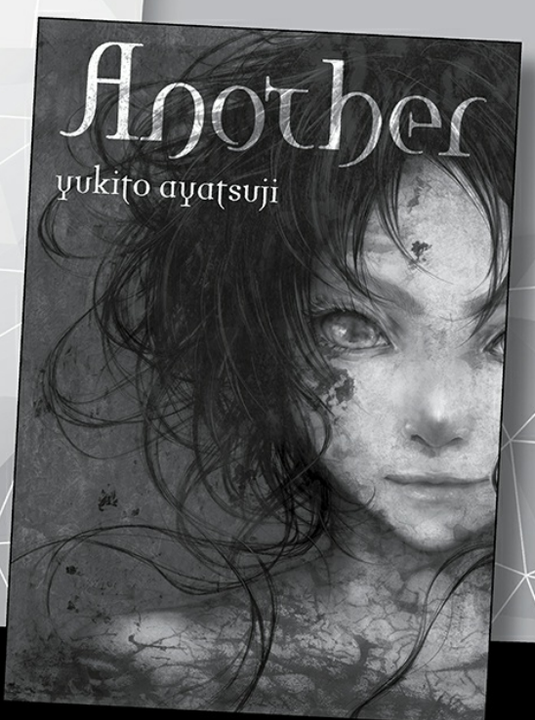


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