
Goodbye Otherworld,
Author Kazamidori
Illust Nimoshi
See You Tomorrow
I
The Traveling Paintbrush and the Hefty Backpack


Goodbye Otherworld,
Author Kazamidori
Illust Nimoshi
See You Tomorrow
I
The Traveling Paintbrush and the Hefty Backpack

contents

Prologue
An Indigo Carpet of Night

Chapter 1
A Train Station Floating on Horizon Blue

Chapter 2
A Steam Workshop in Van Dyke Brown

Intermission
Beyond the Blue Light's Reach

Chapter 3
An Ivory Honeymoon

Intermission
Scarlet for the Bonfire

Chapter 4
A Hazy Phantom Gray in the Distance

Chapter 5
Olympia Green Awaits

Curtain Call
An Aurelion Dawn

Afterword



Goodbye Otherworld,
See you Tomorrow.

Prologue — An Indigo Carpet of Night

I spied a dark speck further up the road. As I drew near, it resolved into a more recognizable silhouette: a steam-powered vehicle. I drove slightly closer and came to a stop behind it, a little way to the side.

Despite my faint hopes for something more, the vehicle sat to the side of the road covered in snow-white dust, its bare metal rusted to a reddish brown. I just stared out through my windshield for a while. The light of the setting sun poured into my car through the passenger window, its pure brightness dazzling me.

I closed my eyes, biting my lip. Then I slapped my cheeks and left the car.

The roadside vehicle looked a little like a delivery truck to me, and that alone stirred up a whirl of memories and longing. I inched closer, calling out for whoever might be there.

I strained my ears, holding my breath. There was no reply; the only sounds that reached my ears were the blowing wind and the swell and fade of rustling grass. There was nothing more to hear.

Circling around to the driver's side, I put my hand on the door. As I heaved it open, the shrill squeal of the hinges joined the hoarse sound of my breath in my ears. Something inside sparkled, reflecting the dim light back up into my eyes: atop the driver's seat sat a mound of crystals.

There was no one inside, just bottles of booze in the footwell and a pile of clothes. The passenger seat held a large travel bag with a brown hat resting on top of it, along with a piece of cream-colored paper which had been folded into thirds.

The urge to just shut the door then and there assaulted me.

My teeth clenched against a rush of emotions that even I didn't understand. I didn't know if I wanted to scream or weep. I hesitated. Finally, I brought my hands together in prayer before leaning into the vehicle. The crystals rattled

lifelessly as I brushed against them.

The sheet of cream-colored paper—once I'd spread it open—proved to be a hand-drawn map. It depicted a road and some mountains with a river above them. Partway along the straight line of road, two lines crossed it diagonally. The rectangle with a window drawn in it probably indicated a city. There was a drawing of a bridge crossing the river, right at the top of the map. That illustration was circled several times, so I guessed it was where the driver had been headed.

Carefully, I refolded the map and put it in my pocket. I left the mound of crystals where it was, shutting the door. It felt strange to think that it might never be opened again.

Next to the driver's door was a sliding door into the cargo area. The metal handle had rusted stiff, and it took quite a lot of effort to open it. Once I got it moving, though, the door slid smoothly to the side and I climbed in, opening the wooden crates inside.

They were packed with cans. There was also soap, a lantern, other sundries, and even some alcohol. Further inside was a huge drum of water, along with some mana stones. Both were required to get a steam-powered vehicle moving.

I returned to my own steam vehicle—the Kettle, as I called it—and moved it alongside the truck. Then I fully opened the back of the truck and began to pick out what I'd take.

The Kettle was pretty much a box on wheels; its only curves amounted to the mudguards around the big tires and the two headlamps bulging out from the top of the hood. The whole thing was a monument to function over form.

It would hold far less than the truck, and while I could put the bigger items like the water and mana stones in the metal roof carrier, anything that needed to stay dry had to be put in the main body. Despite how selective I was, the space filled up quickly. There was still a literal mountain of things inside the truck, but I couldn't fit anything else in the Kettle.

I closed the truck door again and climbed back into the Kettle's driving seat. Using one hand to grip the wheel, I pushed the throttle lever with the other.

Steam issued forth from the boiler, running through the engine and setting the pistons in motion. With huffs and puffs, the Kettle began to move.

I passed by the truck, picking up speed as I opened up the throttle. Eventually, the truck vanished from my rear-view mirror, and all I could see was a vast white plain with sporadic patches of green. The mountains and sky made up the entirety of the view ahead of me. Huge clouds had blown in from somewhere, covering the mountains as the setting sun lit them up in a bright red.

I used my free hand to pull the map from my pocket and spread it out over the wheel. The truck would have been driving on this road, so if I could see any landmarks, I'd be able to figure out where I was.

I refolded the sheet and tossed it onto the passenger seat.

Man, I thought to myself, *I really want to see another person*.

Before the sun sank completely, I pulled up at the side of the road and made a campfire from the dried wood that I had gathered. I heated two cans of food to serve as a meal, and after I'd eaten, I put a gun to my head.

A slow breath left my lungs as I screwed my eyes shut.

My index finger tightened its grip, but the trigger was too heavy. My hands started to shake and great gasps of air ripped their way through my throat.

My left hand grabbed hold of my right and forced the gun down hard enough that it felt like I was tearing my hand off.

My heart was suddenly pounding in my ears, sweat was beading across my forehead, and my breath was ragged. Every movement I made felt clumsy, like I was underwater.

I was still sitting with my back against the car door. I tilted my head back and ground it against the hard surface. The dark, heavy carpet of night sky stretched out above me, unbroken by clouds and speckled with stars.

I'd failed again.

The hunk of metal still clasped in my right hand drew my gaze. Suddenly, I couldn't bear to hold it anymore and flung it away. It buried itself halfway into the white sand with a dry rasp. The flickering light of the campfire shone

ominously across the metal, and a chill ran down my spine.

I looked away, either from the gun or from my own actions, and picked up three more twigs which I dropped into the fire. Then I wrapped my arms around my legs and curled up, burying my face in my knees.

The night was quiet; not even wind broke the silence.

I was tired of this world with nothing and no one in it. It was too quiet, and loneliness was the only constant. That loneliness stuck to my skin, refusing to fall away from me. Just as it always had.

For some reason, this world was already long dead by the time I arrived.

[Keisuke’s Notes] The Kettle

It’s a steam vehicle that burns mana stones as fuel. It huffs and puffs like a steam train as it moves. It’s got a round steering wheel, a brake pedal, and a throttle lever, so it’s easy to get it going. I don’t have a license, but that’s okay, since there’s no one to check for that anyway. It’s always boiling water to move, so I christened it the Kettle.

Chapter 1 — A Train Station Floating on Horizon Blue

1

Four days had gone by since I found that truck.

I still hadn't seen anything that could be called a landmark, and I'd probably have been reduced to tears if I hadn't stocked up from the truck. My optimism about the situation was dwindling at the same rate as the food and fuel I had left.

On top of being lost, I had to deal with the Kettle not doing too well. You could say it was breaking down, and not knowing what was wrong with it made me all the more nervous.

If it just stopped running that would be one thing, but given the pressure from the steam, I was terrified the engine might explode out of nowhere. Each time I put my hand on the throttle, I could feel a nervous sweat start up.

Suddenly, the back tires slid out and the vehicle started to shake. I hurriedly pushed at the throttle and sped up, stopping the shuddering just as quickly as it had started. A moment passed.

"I'm gonna be in trouble soon."

I could do with finding somewhere to take a load off sooner rather than later, what with the nerves. Straining my eyes at the horizon, I fancied I could see something on the edge of the plains. But, no, the landscape was as undisturbed as ever. The tension in my back started to wear on me. I was sick of keeping up such rigid focus when the same tranquil scenery just stretched on forever.

Kicking my shoes off and crossing my legs, I fished out my phone. I tapped at the screen, starting up some familiar western music. *I'd have downloaded loads more music if I'd known this was going to happen*, I thought idly.

I'd only started driving after arriving in this world, and so for me driving was free time. After all, the only thing I had to do was keep a hand on the wheel. The monotonous sights, the flat road, and the soft English lyrics had me zoning out before too long.

And so I wasn't quite sure if I was dreaming or not when I saw it. My vision was wavering like when you see a mirage in the desert. It was only when the waves of sleepiness and wakefulness rolling over me surged their furthest toward the latter that I came to and suddenly understood that it was real.

I could see a train station.

There was a long building—a train station—standing on a huge pool of water. The water, which tightly encircled the station, reflected the blue and white of the sky. Two rails extended from the station, one to the left and another to the right. A single black train sat halfway out of it.

I rushed to pick up the map from the passenger seat and unfurled it. There was only one train station on it, so this was probably the one.

A weight suddenly dropped from my shoulders. You may as well call it relief. It was the first time I'd realized how heavily not knowing where I was had been weighing on me.

A train station. That's where I was—a train station. That knowledge alone lifted my spirits more than I'd have thought possible.

My drowsiness having vanished in an instant, I opened up the throttle. The Kettle said nothing, but I could feel its speed rising as I urged it toward the train station.

Finally, I reached the water. Apparently a depression in the ground had formed the pool, and the water covered roughly a third of the tires. The steering wheel instantly grew heavier.

Ripples spread across the water's surface as the Kettle progressed. The reflection of the sky warped as I cut through the water and closed in on the station. I parked up by the entrance and finally got a look at the building up close.

The station had a white facade, but it had been heavily worn by the wind and

rain. Even so, the building looked completely normal if you ignored the tired exterior. It almost felt like people might come pouring out at any moment. The station building stood at a slight elevation, which must have been how the interior had stayed dry, and a set of stairs seemed to rise from the water up to the entrance.

I shut off the fuel valve and pushed the door open, only to see the sky spread out beneath my feet. I took my socks off and stuffed them inside my shoes before rolling the cuffs of my pants up. When I put my feet into the water, I noticed it was pleasantly chilly.

After opening the rear door, I hauled my backpack onto my back. Shoes in hand, I sloshed through the water toward the stairs. I climbed up a step, and then another, before sitting down on the highest step and taking a towel from my backpack to dry my feet. Replacing my socks and shoes, I stood up and faced the entrance again.

Blue shadows filled the interior, and sunlight streaming in from the windows along the walls dappled these shadows with spots of light. There were benches, and a counter with what looked like a ticket window, but no signs of people. Only the colorful posters and notices on the walls, along with the timetables, gave any hint of the station having ever been active.

The air in the shadowed areas was cold, making the hairs on my arms rise up. Each time I walked through the sunlight, though, the light warmed me up and made me want to close my eyes in pleasure.

The premises weren't that large. I passed the ticket window and walked out into a corridor, then through some sort of ticket barrier into an area shining with yellow light, which seemed to be the platform. Orange metal pillars held up the roof, interspersed with back-to-back dark gray benches. I could see the vivid greenery of the plains beyond the platform, and the mounds of white sand that almost swallowed up the green. The parked train loomed before me. And...

Sparkling silver threads swayed through the air.

I came to a stop.

There were holes through the thin roof, letting the late spring sunlight form pools in scattered places across the platform. A girl stood in one of them. Each

tiny movement she made sent the sunlight scattering from her silver hair. She wore a blue dress—the lighter shade stood out against the sky—that bared her pale shoulders and legs.

The girl was facing the train, and a three-legged easel held a sketchbook level in front of her. She was painting—the brush in her hand moved ceaselessly over the paper as she worked. The scene captivated me so much that it took me a moment to process it. The gentle, dappled light set the girl in stark relief against the shadows around her. It was like looking at some kind of idyllic artwork.

Suddenly, the girl lifted her head.

Just as I thought she might be surveying the sights, she turned casually toward me and I saw her eyes widen. They were a deeper blue than the sky reflected in the water outside. I guess you'd call them azure.



Time stood still as we stared at each other. Neither of us knew what to say. After all, this world had barely any inhabitants, so you didn't expect to run into anyone.

Well, I'd noticed her first, so I decided I should speak up first as well.

"Hi there."

I hadn't greeted anyone in quite a while. It felt like I was using a different part of my throat than when I talked to myself, and I sounded clumsy and hoarse. I cleared my throat to try to play it off.

"Hello...there," she replied after a short pause.

A breeze would have easily drowned her out, and she sounded as hoarse as I had. She covered her mouth and let out an uncertain mewl that reminded me of a cat.

We were too far apart to talk properly, so I moved toward her. The air grew pleasantly warm as I stepped out into the open. I stopped about three meters short of her, held back by the suspicion in her eyes.

"I'm not a weirdo. Well, I guess I just sound more like one if I describe myself like that," I started, saying something I'd never before thought I would. "I've been driving for ages and came across the station and decided to take a break, and then you were here."

The deluge of words leaving my mouth just sounded like excuses. Apparently, I'd forgotten how to hold a conversation.

"I...see," she said after another pause.

Damn, she's totally on guard. I get that, but I don't have a clue what to do about it.

Then I thought about things more calmly and realized it seriously looked like I was some pickup artist. Also, given the state of the world, it was even harder to say she shouldn't be on guard. I'd called out to her impulsively because I was desperate for human contact, but I should have given it more forethought.

I scratched at my cheek, at a loss. Of course, nothing useful came to mind. I could have asked if she was painting, but it didn't look like she wanted to chat.

“Um, well, sorry to interrupt,” I offered with a strained smile before turning on my heel.

I might not have intended it like that, but looking at it objectively, I’d just failed my first pickup attempt.

A quiet call came from behind me and I jumped in surprise. When I turned around, the girl had a hand over her own mouth like it had taken her by surprise as well. Our eyes met, and her gaze wavered. Sensing her hesitation, I waited in silence, but...

“No, it was nothing,” she said to her feet before turning back to her easel.

I wasn’t dense enough to miss that she was ending our conversation, so I returned to the cool shade.

There was nothing else in the station really worth talking about. There was a little room for the staff behind one of the windows, but it was an utter shambles. I wondered how many people had kept the station running as the end of the world became apparent. The world ending would obviously mean more people wanting to board a train to somewhere else, but I doubted it’d make more people want to organize those trains.

The setting sun gleamed on the water’s surface as I returned to the entrance and walked outside.

Guess she’ll be there for a while, I mused with a glance back toward the building.

I was tired of it all—just sitting in the seat constantly, holding onto the wheel and driving through featureless plains—so I wanted to camp here. The girl had been here first though, and she was wary of me, so maybe I shouldn’t.

Ah well, I decided, *I’ll shift away from the station and camp out of the damp.*

My shoes and socks needed taking off again, and once I’d done that and rolled my pants legs up, I headed down the stairs barefoot. The chill of the water enveloped my toes as I stepped into it. When I reached the Kettle, I opened the driver’s door and threw my shoes and bag inside, then dried my feet off before settling into the seat. I reached for the throttle and realized...

“Huh...”

The needle on the dial that showed the boiler pressure had dropped all the way down. When I went inside, I’d left the boiler warm. I always did that so I could get going again immediately, until I parked wherever I was camping for the night.

That’s weird, I thought, an ominous chill running up my back.

I glanced over the other dials next to it. The fuel pressure gauge showed it was ready to go, lit and everything. I wound the fuel valve around again. That should have opened up the pipe between the fuel tank and the boiler, turning the water into steam. However long I waited, though, I couldn’t hear the water start bubbling. The needle on the pressure gauge shuddered a bit, but nothing more.

Back around the other way the valve went before I turned off the burner. Then I just collapsed across the steering wheel. The blood drained from my face as I pressed hard against my temples. I just lay there, my head spinning.

I’d expected this, I told myself. There had been signs the car was breaking down. If anything, I was glad I’d made it this far considering how little I’d done to keep it running.

Biting my lip, I opened the door. This time I just jumped down into the water with no fanfare. The legs of my pants got soaked, but I didn’t pay that any mind.

I walked around to the front and opened the hood, gazing upon the Kettle’s heart. The steam pistons that drove the wheels resided here, along with the boiler that made the steam itself. I checked everything over from front to back. Then I did it thrice more. There was nothing to see though—nothing as obvious as a crack in one of the pipes or leaking oil, at least.

I gave up, closed the hood, and went back to the driver’s seat.

Through the start-up process again I went: Ignition lit, setting the mana stones in the fuel tank alight and making the fuel pressure rise. No problems with the water level in the boiler. Prayers in my heart, I slowly opened the fuel valve.

I counted the time on my watch. The hand went around. Once, twice, thrice...

The needle on the boiler's pressure gauge rested on its stop, utterly motionless. I closed the valve and extinguished the fuel.

Today was done for; the question was if there would be a tomorrow. There was an abandoned station in front of me, and a flooded hollow around me. Other than that, nothing.

2

I had a cylindrical stove among my things, small enough that I could carry it in one hand. Long use had dulled its original color—probably gold—and the metal surrounding the cup-like burner at its center had been scorched a bluish-black. I'd inherited it in this condition, and I couldn't even guess how long it'd been in use. This stove—they'd called it a Svea camping stove—was dead simple, which meant that it was rugged. They always used to say that Svea stoves would still be around even after everyone had gone.

A small key dangled off it, attached with a chain. I put that key into the pipe connecting the stove's fuel tank to the burner and turned it as if unlocking the pipe. Then I put a match to the burner. *Womf.* A flame began dancing on the top of it. It ebbed and grew with a faint sputtering noise. The flame was unstable until the heat reached the mana stones in the fuel tank.

I peered inside my match tin and gave it a shake. The bottom of the tin showed through the matches. I'd used a fair few of them, and I decided I'd need to find some more from somewhere as it went back into my storage box.

I sat down on the station's stairs and crossed my legs, staring vacantly up into the sky. The edges of the clouds floating in the sky glowed red, and the expanse of water below reflected that same gorgeous color.

The Svea quieted down and the flame stabilized. It took some feeling around in my backpack, which I'd taken from the car, but I eventually pulled a small kettle from the bag. Then I scooped up some water from the bottom of the stairs.

Spreading a handkerchief on the floor, I took a cup's worth of roasted coffee beans from a leather bag and placed them in the middle. Then I wrapped the

cloth around them and used the back of a small handaxe to break them. I kept hitting them, only opening up the cloth once they'd stopped giving any resistance. The beans weren't exactly *ground*, even coarsely, but this was the best I could do under the circumstances.

I poured the broken-up beans into the kettle, put the lid on, and placed it atop the Svea. I toned down the flame, and then all I had to do was wait.

Once steam started rising from the kettle, I plucked out a metal cup and a sugar container from my bag. I used a leather glove to pick the kettle up and slowly transferred its contents into the cup, making sure not to shake it. The brown liquid poured forth, and the scent alone was glorious.

They called this brewing "in the field"—an old method passed down from cowboys and Native Americans. In some ways, you could call it the most traditional method. I blew over the cup, sending the steam away and cooling the drink, then took a sip.

"Bleh..."

Of course, traditional did not in any way mean tasty. The drink was intensely bitter. The rough breaking of the beans and the long steeping time meant that all the bitterness and other unpleasant flavor notes came right out into the drink. It'd been some time since I'd found the beans, and they'd just gotten worse and worse. It was more like a caffeinated slurry than actual coffee.

A mound of sugar dumped into the drink made it somehow—only just—bearable to drink.

The cup rested in my lap as I looked vacantly out at the scenery, occasionally sipping the bitter mud. The olive green Kettle was enshrined within the pool on the plains. Wind blew across the water's surface, sending ripples skittering across it, which swirled around the Kettle's tires before carrying onwards. They warped the reflection of the setting sun, making it feel like the motionless world had come back to life, if only by a little.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps and turned to look in their direction. The girl was standing in the dark shadows of the station, a rucksack on her back, carrying her easel in front of her. She was leaning back to balance the easel's weight.

“Evening,” I greeted, trying to hide the slight awkwardness I was feeling.

The girl frowned, not hiding her distrust as she answered in kind. I tried to keep the conversation going.

“I figured I’d stop here for the night. Want some coffee? It’s pretty bad though.”

After a long pause, she asked, “You’re offering me something that tastes bad?”

“It’s all right once you’re used to it.”

“Thank you,” she said, drawing out her words, “but no thank you.”

The girl moved to the stairs at the edge of the entrance—as far away from me as she could—and put her things down. She then crouched and started undoing her high-cut boots.

Her hair had a strange color to it. The sunlight on her bangs gave the silver a reddish hue and an almost transparent sheen. The rest of her hair was a much lighter gray, probably due to how the light fell.

She leaned forward and her hair fell in a curtain, covering the side of her face. As she brushed it back over her ear, I could see that the ear came to a sharp point.

“Have you not seen a half-elf before?” she asked icily.

“Sorry, I was just thinking how your hair had a strange color to it. I don’t know anything about half-elves.”

Whatever reason I had, it was rude to stare at a girl like that, especially when I didn’t know her at all. I turned back around and sipped at my coffee for something to do.

Splashing drew my attention and I looked over out of the corner of my eye. I could see the girl walking away. She had tied her boots to the easel, and they swayed with each step she took. The hem of her dress fluttered over the surface of the water, just barely skimming it. She walked around the side of the building and then I couldn’t see her anymore. I guessed that’s where she’d parked her car or whatever she was traveling in.

My eyes followed the ripples she had left in her wake, but before long they had vanished too and I was assailed by loneliness. Speaking with someone had reminded me of normalcy, so it weighed on me all the more.

The remnants of my coffee were bitter as they went down my throat. The harshness had increased as it cooled, making my face pucker up.

Well, there was nothing to do about it. Growing close to people in a world like this wasn't easy.

I could feel grit in my mouth from the coffee beans. Since I hadn't used a filter, they had settled in the bottom of the cup. I threw away the last mouthful and scooped up some more water to rinse it out.

3

Eating is one of the great pleasures of life.

That being said, the only ingredients I had were water and canned food, so I hadn't eaten fresh meat or fish in quite some time. I often saw plants growing, but I couldn't tell which were edible. All in all, I had a pretty unbalanced diet.

Darkness had fallen over the area. There were no streetlights, but the moon in the sky above cast a soft light over everything. My lantern was dimming, so I spun the handle on it. The rotation generated electricity, allowing me to also charge my phone a tiny bit.

I lined up my cans and looked over the labels by the lantern light. Of course, I couldn't read the writing from this world, so I didn't know what the labels said, but experience opening up various cans and looking inside meant that I could tell their general contents from the label's size and design.

The can I'd picked for tonight held a dark-red sauce and lumps of meat. Its spiciness prickled at my nose, yet it also smelled slightly sweet. I picked up a lump of the meat with my chopsticks and put it in my mouth. It was sweet and sour, and also...

"Agh, hot!"

It stabbed at my tongue. Spiciness could taste nice, but this was just

excessive. The meat—something like chicken—was pretty common in the cans here. This was the first time I'd tasted this sauce though; it reminded me of a chili sauce. It was spicy at least, and far hotter than I could enjoy.

As I pondered how to cook it, I lit the Svea, sending flickering red light up the wall of the station. I put a small pot atop the burner and emptied the chili chicken into it. Then I scooped up some water and used it to wash the remaining sauce from the can into the pot. It cleaned the can and also diluted the spice: two birds with one stone.

Two more familiar cans came out from my stockpile. One contained boiled beans, and the other some sort of pickled cabbage. Both of them went into the mix. I used a spoon to mix it all up and let it simmer. Once it was hot enough that the mixture was bubbling around the edges, I took a spoonful and tasted it.

I paused before uttering a nonplussed, "Well, yeah."

About what I expected. That was the only phrase I had for it. It was just one of those tastes.

I took a small case out from the box and opened up the metal fasteners on it. An assortment of bottles and cylinders lay inside. This was my spice case of seasonings from this world.

I took out the sugar and added some to the pot along with some powdered stock, hoping that would bring out the flavor. Then I tossed in some chopped herbs and a pinch of salt, all of it by eye. This wasn't a restaurant, and I was the only one who'd be eating it. I always cooked by instinct, and it usually turned out pretty well. The mixture simmered away, and I made sure it didn't burn.

Eventually it thickened up, and when I fished out some cabbage with a spoon, it had softened. I blew on it and pulled it off the spoon. It was painfully hot on my tongue. I sucked in air to cool it and could then actually taste it.

It had a thick sweetness to it, and the sourness had abated. The flavor now had some depth, like you would get from dashi stock, probably because of the powdered stuff I'd used. It was far less spicy and much more pleasant on the tongue. My mouth still stung slightly after I'd swallowed, but it was a pleasant heat.

“I might just be a cooking genius,” I said with a serious expression.

Obviously I was just speaking to myself, and there was no one in this world to offer a retort. My dreams of a comedy double-act were dead on arrival.

I extinguished the stove and took out a cylindrical can. Inside was an evil, hard, plain-tasting bread that stuck to the inside of my mouth and sucked up all the saliva inside. This was the main base of my diet.

It was then that I heard splashing from outside my field of vision. I stiffened. People were naturally more on edge at nighttime; I could feel a chill run down my back as I grew warier. I tightened my grip on the can and looked out into the darkness. Shadows moved in the pale moonlight.

A sigh of relief passed my lips as I realized the figure in the lantern light was the artist girl. Her boots were dangling from the fingers of one hand as she climbed the stairs with a deadly serious expression on her face.

“Excuse me,” she said sharply. “That smell is bothering me.”

“Th-The smell? Sorry, does it stink?”

She shook her head and frowned angrily. A moment passed before she spoke.

“The tasty smell is bothering me. I can’t settle down.”

I’m sure I looked stupefied.

Then I burst into laughter. I tried squeezing the bread can to resist it, but that didn’t work too well. *I wonder how long it’s been since I’ve laughed like this.* I wiped the tears from my eyes and found her still looking unhappily at me, her expression almost childishly upset.

When I beckoned her over, she stepped out of the darkness cautiously, like a stray cat. Even then, she stopped where she was still out of my reach, positioned so she could run away immediately.

“Have you eaten yet?” I asked.

She took a can out from the pocket of the jacket she was wearing over her dress and showed it to me.

“Is that it?”

“Food is...precious,” she said after a hesitant pause.

I nodded in agreement. That was even more true in this station on the water.

The lantern light made her hair look ashen in a different way than the setting sun had. The way her hair seemed to change color with the lighting drew my eye.

“Want to eat together? I’m pretty sick of eating alone.”

At first, she said nothing.

Then, shaking her head, she answered, “No.”

She was gazing steadily at the pot even as she voiced that refusal. Then her stomach growled, and she immediately hunched over and held it.

“You didn’t hear that,” she told me.

“Nope, heard it loud and clear.”

“It was a bird,” she insisted after a sullen pause.

“Oh right, that’s fine then,” I agreed with her.

She just kept glaring at me.

“How about we trade then?” I suggested. “You give me that can, and I’ll share this chili chicken and vegetable stew. How ’bout it?”

“Ugh,” she groaned.

She looked for all the world like she was facing down a tough math problem. Her gaze wasn’t on me though—it was on the steaming pot. I exaggeratedly stirred the contents with my spoon and heard her sniff. After that, she was silent for a moment.

“I’ll agree to your terms,” she finally proclaimed.

It must have been a tough decision. I laughed again.

“Come over here then.”

I ferreted around in the box for a metal bowl and spoon. I usually just ate straight from whatever I’d cooked my food in, so it had been just as long since I last used the tableware as it had been since I last ate with someone.

I dished up some stew and she approached, still moving warily. She'd probably leap up and dart off if I startled her.

"I'm Keisuke. Who're you?" I asked, passing her the bowl and spoon.

She looked at the offered food before glancing toward my face.

"Nito," she answered eventually, putting her can on the floor and pushing it toward me before taking the bowl.

Her unwavering stubbornness was honestly adorable. She stared down into the bowl, and I stared at her. When she suddenly looked up and our eyes met, I turned to face the pot again.

I took the bread out of its can and sliced it up. It held the cylindrical shape of the can, making round slices. I took the pot off the burner before using the flame to toast the bread.

A quiet cry of surprise broke the silence. When I looked up, Nito was holding the hand grasping her spoon across her mouth, like she was surprised at herself.

"Do you not like it?" I asked in concern.

After all, I'd seasoned it to *my* tastes.

She shook her head, though, and her expression smoothed out almost as if she was embarrassed at her reaction.

"I was just surprised... It's tasty."

"That's fine then."

"Are you a chef?" she asked eventually.

"Hardly. It's just a hobby."

I reached over and put the browned bread in her bowl.

"Ah," she muttered.

"It's even tastier if you put it on this. Well, it might be."

She hesitated.

"Bread wasn't part of the deal."

“It was always supposed to be served with bread.”

“That just sounds like you’re trying to justify your charity...”

“It’s your fault for not confirming the details before you agreed. Eat the bread too,” I told her, returning to toasting my own bread.

I carried on, unconcerned, even as she pouted at me. After a while, I heard the crunch of the toast, followed by a surprised murmur, and had to hold in my smile.

There were two types of meals: meals you ate alone, and meals you shared. We didn’t have a pleasant conversation or anything, but I could still hear someone other than me blowing on the food to cool it down, someone other than me crunching their toast, and the gentle clatter of someone else’s cutlery. There was someone other than me in this lonely world.

I soaked up the rest of the sauce in the pan with a piece of bread and put that piece in my mouth. It was much softer now and fell apart on my tongue. The bread itself was nearly flavorless, but when you ate it like this it had a pleasant salty-sweet aftertaste.

Nito had already finished, and the tableware looked almost like it hadn’t even been used. The look of longing on her face was probably just my own conceit though.

“Was there not enough?”

“There was,” she answered reluctantly. “It was tasty. Thank you.”

I took back the bowl and spoon she offered and put them on top of the pot.

Droplets of water began to fall from above. I couldn’t hear the plops, but they looked like they were making that noise as they landed on the pool’s surface. They started to fall faster; round ripples spread constantly through the water, distorting the reflection of the moon.

“We should head in before it gets too strong.”

We were in front of the staircase, and while it had a roof, we’d get wet if the rain fell at an angle. I shouldered my backpack and picked up the box, heading inside. The moonlight didn’t reach that far, and the darkness stretched out in

front of me, making me unsure where to step.

Then, suddenly, light filled the room. Nito had come in holding the lantern.

“Thanks, that’s great.”

“It’s nothing.”

We stood side by side, looking at the sky as the rain grew stronger. The moon was still visible, so I figured it might stop soon, but it also might carry on until the morning. Either way, Nito couldn’t leave until the rain stopped.

“You have a car?” I asked her.

“No, an auto-trike.”

“An auto-trike?”

Her expression showed blatant disbelief that I didn’t know what it was. At first, she said nothing, but then finally she explained.

“It’s a small, three-wheeled vehicle with space for luggage. It’s not as hard to drive as a steam car. I don’t have the qualifications for either though.”

“Ah, so you *do* need to be qualified?”

Her expression became baffled as she looked from me to the Kettle, a clear question in her eyes: *Do you drive that or not?*

“I learned how to drive it, but I’m not qualified. I’m not from this world.”

“Oh, you’re an otherworlder?” Nito asked with wide eyes, pausing in surprise. “So they really do exist. I thought they were just in books.”

“We do indeed. Nice to meet you.”

Nito’s gaze wandered.

“It must be tough in these circumstances. If you’d been here earlier, the country would’ve paid you.”

“That’s the first time I’ve heard that.”

“Civilization here progressed due to what we found in the labyrinths, and the otherworlders who were summoned there. Every country desperately wanted to gain favor with them.”

“I guess it was the wrong time to come here,” I said after a moment. “Not that I *wanted* to come at all.”

I put a hand to my head. I didn’t have any knowledge that would help, but I’d much rather kick back as a state guest than have my current homeless life.

“Well, whatever, nothing I can do about it. Do you know how I can get back?”

She paused, considering.

“It used to be that an otherworlder would be returned when the labyrinth that had summoned them underwent a mana fluctuation, but the world is saturated with mana now, so that doesn’t happen anymore. I also heard that the labyrinths’ resources all ran out and they’ve been sealed. What I want to know is, how did you get here?”

All I had was a vague recollection of a stone ruin. I’d been heading out to camp for a couple of days, then it felt like I fell through a manhole, and when I came around I was in that ruin.

“I have no idea. I know of someone that seems to know what’s going on, but I don’t know where they went.”

“I...see...” she said, her gaze gaining a soft sympathy.

I decided she was a nice girl.

“Are you traveling too?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she answered hesitantly. “It’s my first journey.”

And didn’t that phrasing have implications! I mused over whether I should dig deeper. There was still a large gulf between us. People took time to get to know each other, and suddenly trying to get closer was just in bad taste.

“Right, guess we’ve both got it tough,” I said instead.

“We do.”

The rain came down steadily, covering the surface of the water in endless ripples. Thick clouds blew in and slowly blocked out the light of the moon.

“Actually,” she said, “my auto-trike has broken down. It won’t move anymore.”

“What a coincidence, my car’s broken too. It’d been struggling for a while.”

“Huh?” she cried, whirling to look at me.

I looked right back at her.

An uncomfortable silence fell as we continued looking at each other.

“I see then,” she said.

“This is a problem. What should we do?”

“You’d normally rely on Reboil Traction, but considering...” She trailed off, seeming to notice my confusion at the unfamiliar term, then made a small noise of understanding and started to explain. “Ah, they’re a mobile repair service for steam-powered vehicles. They drive along the roads and will repair broken-down cars they find, or tow you to a workshop.”

“Sounds convenient.”

We could really do with the help.

With the moon covered, I couldn’t see a single sign of life on the mountain or the plains. I wondered if you could see headlights across the plains or hear birds and insects back when the people that had used the station were still around. It was the same kind of feeling as you’d get standing in the ruins of a castle. It was difficult to imagine what the past had been like in a world you weren’t familiar with. More pressing than my emotions was the concern of what to do tomorrow.

“I should get going,” Nito said, bowing slightly. “Thank you for the food.”

“It’s still raining. Why not wait for a bit longer?”

“It’s not far, and it’s late.”

Like a princess whose curfew was approaching, she picked up her boots and walked down the stairs in the rain. I watched her go until she vanished into the darkness, and eventually the splashing of her footsteps faded out into the rain.

I stood there for a while, the night looking a little darker now that I was alone.

“Ah!” I exclaimed, realization hitting me like a lightning bolt.

Maybe she’d been asking for help? I wasn’t the only one stuck with no

transportation.

“‘What a coincidence,’ indeed, Keisuke.”

I was in the same situation, so I couldn’t help her, but I could have found a better way of putting it. I looked in the direction Nito had gone, but I couldn’t chase after her now.

I let out a deep sigh and went back inside. Time to turn in for the night.

4

Paper-white sunlight streaming down greeted me as I left my tent. I sat down on the stairs with bleary eyes and looked out. The big clouds that you see a lot in summer were billowing up from the mountains, and the pool of clear water in front of me reminded me of the sea.

A palmful of water scooped up from the pool let me wash my face. The sharp chill of the water felt good against my skin, and three rounds of it left me fully awake. I used the cuff of my shirt to wipe my face and then let myself fall backward.

The faintly shadowed underside of the staircase roof filled my sight. Narrow tubes that looked similar to fluorescent lights hung from it. The tiles against my back were ever so slightly warm and pleasant, sapping my wakefulness. As I closed my eyes and stretched out my arms where I lay, I heard splashing. It eventually became a pattering noise that drew closer, then came to a stop near me. A soft breeze carried over the scent of early summer.

“What are you doing?” asked a slightly high-pitched voice, a remnant of childishness in the questioning tone.

“Soaking up the sun,” I answered.

“Is that a custom from your world?”

“Nope, just a hobby of mine.”

“I see,” the voice replied after a pause. “It looks fun.”

I opened my eyes to see Nito crouched down next to me with her arms

around her legs.

“Morning.”

“Right, good morning.”

“Want breakfast? Give me just a minute.”

“I do not,” she insisted with reddened cheeks. “I am not so rapacious as to presume upon you like that.”

Rapacious indeed! It was the first time I had heard someone use the word in real life, regardless of how true it was.

“What’s up then?”

“I thought that your car might have a signal gun...”

“Well, there’s a little gun in a case at least.”

“That’s it. My auto-trike doesn’t have one.”

“And what will you do with the gun?”

“Call for help.”

“Give me the details,” I demanded, leaning forward quickly, which made her rear back in surprise.

“When your vehicle breaks down, or if you run out of fuel or water, you fire a signal that lets off red smoke. Reboil Traction sees it and comes to help.”

“Oh, so that’s the custom here?”

“I’ve only read about it in books though...”

I wasn’t sure there would be anyone weird enough to carry on staffing this “Reboil Traction,” what with the practically deserted state of the world, but this seemed more worth giving a go than just basking in the sun.

“Let’s try it out,” I said, standing.

Nito followed suit. I rolled up my pants legs again and descended the stairs, my feet sinking into the water. Nito trailed after me. The heavy rain had made the water level rise, and it was harder to walk than yesterday, but eventually we reached the car.

Out from the passenger seat the small case came. I set it on top of the hood, then unlatched it. The pistol was in two parts, each one nestled in an indentation lined with red cloth. The lid of the case had space for six bullets, but it currently held only two, both with red tips.

“This is it, right?” I asked, turning to Nito, who stood at my side.

“It is. The red-tipped bullets are the signals.”

It was loaded, but I had never fired it, so I hadn’t known there were signal rounds. I’d always wondered why the two bullets were red.

The gun weighed heavily in my hand as I took it out; though small, the entire thing was solid metal. As I gripped the handle, I felt a small lever just under my thumb. I pressed the lever in and held it as I pushed the muzzle down with my other hand. The gun bent, looking like it might break apart, before the base of one loaded bullet protruded out.

I took the two bullets out and put them back into the case’s lid before replacing them with the red-tipped ones and putting the gun back together. The hammer came back with a sharp click when I pulled it with my thumb. Now all I had to do was pull the trigger.

I glanced at Nito and found her looking at me with some amount of worry. She didn’t look like she was going to stop me, though, so I lifted my arm. I covered one ear with my upper arm and used my free hand to do the same for the opposite ear as I put my finger on the trigger.

Once I saw Nito frantically follow suit and cover her ears, I curled my finger tighter, only for the trigger to come to a jarring stop halfway through its course. Confused, I pulled harder, and it suddenly lightened. An instant later the sound and vibration of the gun firing traveled up my arm.

Nito looked up with her mouth slightly open, still covering her ears. A plume of smoke rose above our heads, straight up into the air like a vertical contrail. *It worked*, I thought as I looked down at the gun in my hand.

“What’s wrong?” Nito asked.

“When I was pulling the trigger, it just stopped halfway through. It got really heavy.”

“That’s the safety device.”

“The safety device?”

Oh, right... I’d heard that phrase a lot in movies. Weren’t those supposed to be levers or buttons though?

“The trigger is made so it stops halfway through to prevent misfires. If you put more force behind it after that, the gun fires.”

“I see. You sure know a lot.”

“I read about it.”

“You must be a savant.”

“No, I only know what I know,” she said, not showing any signs of kidding, despite having phrased it like some kind of philosopher.

Still, I never realized it had a safety.

I looked down at the gun in my hand. The weight of it never changed at all, no matter how often I held it. Knowing about the safety would come in handy.

“Is something wrong?” she asked after a pause.

“Nope, nothing,” I answered as I put the gun back in its case, closed the lid and latched it shut. “I just hope someone does come.”

“Right. If they don’t, we’re in trouble.”

The two of us looked at the sky. The red cord had risen high, thinning out toward the top. The wind muddied its outline. Was there still someone out there to see it?

We stayed like that for a while before a dull groan brought our gazes back down. Nito was hunched over with her hands covering her stomach.

“The birds are lively this morning, huh?” I offered.

“You’re awfully...discerning.”

“Right, let’s have breakfast. You’ll join me, right? It’s just canned stuff though.”

As I started to walk back to the station, I heard her movements from behind

me.

“I’ll pay you back...” she muttered.

I burst into laughter.

5

Once we’d eaten a simple meal warmed up on the Svea, we sat down on the stairs to wait. I looked at my watch and checked how long it had been. The red smoke had long since faded, and there was no sign of anyone coming. Neither Nito nor I said anything; this was what we had expected. We’d never thought anyone would come to begin with.

“Maybe we should give it another shot,” I said and stood, earning a frown from Nito as she looked up at me.

“Right now? I think leaving it a little longer would be better.”

“Waiting won’t help. It’s not like we know when the best time to fire it is,” I replied, rolling up my pants.

“B-But we only have one left. We should act carefully.”

“And carefully do what? Wait?”

“Ugh,” she grumbled, chewing her lip. Eventually, puffing her cheeks up, she said, “If you want to shoot it off that badly, go ahead. I don’t care.”

“Think of it like this. If we fire it now, we won’t need to worry about when to fire it anymore. If it doesn’t work, we can think of something else.”

“You’re too optimistic... Your skull must be nothing but an empty hollow...”

“And you’re pretty harsh,” I said, wishing she’d use that loquacity for something other than insulting me.

I stepped into the now warmer water and headed for the Kettle. The case was still on the hood. I’d always intended on firing both. I had no clue about Reboil this or Traction that, but I knew no one was ever going to turn up. The population as a whole had dropped, and systems of law and order would have vanished along with the collapse of schools and workplaces, so no one would

still be devoting themselves to a job like that.

I unlocked the case, took out the signal gun, and gripped it tightly, pointing it to the sky and pulling the trigger. On the first pull, the safety stopped it halfway, so I tightened my finger. That second pull sent the recoil up my arm as the loud retort of the firing resounded in my ears.

I looked up to see the red smoke climbing without any issues. Firing had gone more smoothly the second time. The practice from the first time had definitely stood me in good stead.

I pushed on the lever and opened up the gun to see the empty shell casings. I took them out and pushed them into the slots in the case's lid, then reloaded it with the two bullets that had been inside it earlier, before putting everything back away and setting the case on the passenger seat.

When I got back to the stairs, Nito was crouched near the entrance holding her knees, her cheeks still puffed out.

"Cheer up."

"I'm not in poor cheer," she said after a while. "The gun is yours, and you can fire it whenever you like."

"You might not realize it, so I'll let you know, but the way you're acting right now really makes it seem like you are."

"Oh? I'd never heard that before. I'll keep it in mind."

Her pointed tone had me smiling despite myself.

"It'll be fine, they'll be here soon," I offered.

Of course, I didn't believe it myself, so it just came out sounding blatantly false. *Well, whatever*, I decided, planning to go get my things from the Kettle and laze around thinking about what to do. But then...

"That's..."

Nito's head shot up and her eyes opened wide before she rushed forward to the stairs. I didn't even need to ask why: I could hear the metallic noise she'd moved in response to as well as she could. It was the sound of pistons being pushed by steam, of a huge engine venting. The distance muffled it somewhat,

but it reached us clearly enough.

Nito whirled around in surprise, pointing over the plains as she shouted brightly.

“Yellow smoke! It’s Reboil Traction!”

There was indeed a bright line of smoke climbing into the sky. Then, almost as if rising from the shifting sands, a black spot appeared on the horizon, unmistakably coming this way. It took a moment for my mind to catch up.

“Seriously?” I let out.

I couldn’t conceive of anyone still setting about their work like usual despite the decrepit state of this world, but my eyes told me otherwise. The vehicle let off another plume of yellow smoke and kept approaching us.

6

The bearded man with tanned skin opened the Kettle’s hood and looked in. He opened the back door and looked in. Then he spoke.

“Can’t fix it here. The joints from the boiler have melted apart. Whoever drove it wasn’t used to it and ran the thing too hot. The steam leaking from here’s ruined three of the fuel lines too.”

I gave a sigh, and he continued.

“There’s problems with the combustion chamber as well, the crank’s too noisy, and the whole chain needs replacing.”

I gave another sigh before his sharp look made me straighten. It felt like being hit by a brick.

“It’s your car, listen up,” he scolded.

“R-Right.”

“I’ll tow it back to the workshop. I need to get it open.”

He waited, his gaze boring into me.

“Please do.”

It’s not like I could have said, “Actually, no thanks.” I didn’t *want* to say that either, but even if I had, the way he spoke left no way to argue.

“So, what about the other one?” he asked, this time fixing his gaze on Nito.

He probably wasn’t angry or anything, but the look in his eyes was still plenty sharp. Nito jolted before scurrying around behind me. *Don’t use me as a human shield!*

The man glared at me for an explanation instead, so I helplessly pointed at the side of the station.

“Right,” he said, before taking his toolbox in hand and roughly wading off through the water.

“Come on, he’s gone now,” I told Nito, who was still behind me.

“Thanks...” came her reluctant, murmured reply.

“Were you scared?”

“I was not!”

She moved away and followed after the man. It was adorable how she was purposefully standing up straight. I trailed along after the pair of them.

As I went, I looked at the huge truck beside the Kettle out of the corner of my eye. Apparently *this* was Reboil Traction. Whatever it was, it was huge. Just in terms of width, you could probably fit three of the Kettle across it. Curled metal pipes, spare tires, and similar items hung off its sides, and a platform with a rusted yellow crane and winch made up the rear. It was more of a mobile workshop than a recovery vehicle.

When I rounded the corner, I saw another small set of stairs and a side entrance. Nito’s little vehicle that she’d called an auto-trike was there too. It was a literal trike—three wheels and everything—and had a pretty spherical shape. It had a driver’s seat and one passenger seat, with space for luggage behind them. At the moment, there was a canopy stretched over it. The tires were small too, and its simple design reminded me of a mini pickup.

The man had his head under the hood, but the noise of our approach prompted him to lift his head. Once again, Nito skittered around behind me.

“Hey, you’ve been driving this ’round without any real maintenance. You’ve got old mana stone ash baked into it,” he said as he shut the hood with a crash, then put his tools away and lifted the tool box. “We’re going to need to take this one back as well.”

That was all he said before he walked straight past us.

“He said it needs to go back to the workshop.”

“I heard,” she said at length.

“That’s fine then,” I answered.

I retraced my steps back to the Kettle with her glaring at me from where she was hiding behind my back. The mechanic had set about loading the car with efficient motions, and all we could do was watch. The only thing I actually did do was put my camping gear back into the Kettle.

The man hooked a thick wire to the underside of the Kettle. He climbed a ladder up the side of the recovery truck into the driver’s seat and gave us a look before he shut the door.

“What’re you spacing out for? Hurry up and get in it. We’re leaving.”

I did as I was told and got into the driver’s seat of the Kettle, putting the luggage from the passenger’s seat into the back. Nito was still standing alone. A puff of smoke came out of the recovery truck along with a shrill whistle.

“Come on, get in,” I said, sticking my head out of the window. She straightened and came over, then opened the passenger door after some hesitation.

“Umm... May I intrude?” she asked.

“’Course. Come on, or you’ll get left behind.”

The truck had started slowly moving off like some lumbering mammoth. She frantically slid into the passenger seat.

“Ah, whoa.”

The wire had gone taut, and the Kettle lurched into motion. Nito used both hands to pull the door shut and I gripped the wheel, just controlling the

direction. The truck ponderously swung around to the side of the station and came to a stop next to her auto-trike.

We both craned our necks to see what he'd do, and the man climbed out onto the platform. He put his hand on a lever nearby and then the loading arm started moving, venting steam. It looked almost like a claw machine in an arcade. Once it hung directly above the trike, he climbed down and fixed cables from the arm to each of the trike's four corners. He finished in a flash, and then used the levers again to hoist it up.

"Wow, that's something," I breathed.

"Huh... Won't that fall? I don't like it."

"It'll be fine. Probably."

"Probably? You just said probably, didn't you?"

She fretted as she watched the auto-trike float through the air. Contrary to her worries, it reached the platform without a sign of faltering, and the man bolted it down before slipping back into the driver's seat. We kicked back into motion. I was holding the wheel, but all I had to do was match the steering when we came out onto the road, and after that our path was just a straight line.

Nito had her nose pressed up against the window as she watched the station grow distant. The station stood quiet on the water, and the ripples trailing behind us died out before they reached the building. The whole scene was ethereal when you looked at it from a distance.

"I want to paint it..." came a longing murmur from beside me.

I remembered the look on her face when I'd first seen her on that platform, devoted to her painting. We couldn't stop our progress as the station on the water eventually shimmered into the distance. Once it was completely invisible, she moved away from the window and sat back against the seat.

Her expression was composed, but the slight downturn of her eyebrows spoke to her regret.

"Once your trike's fixed, you can visit it again, right?"

“That’s true,” she answered, but I could tell her heart wasn’t in it.

It was the type of “that’s true” that you used when you knew the person you were talking to wouldn’t understand even if you explained, or when you couldn’t bear talking about it in depth, or when you weren’t even sure where to begin talking. It didn’t signal approval or agreement, and it was a fairly indirect way of speaking. She sounded like someone from Japan—like a real modern girl.

The truck in front of us groaned and let out a blast of steam which engulfed us like a thick fog. Our vision went white, and we couldn’t see anything. We didn’t know where we were going, or what would happen to us.

[Keisuke’s Notes] Otherworlder

It looks like people from other worlds are much more familiar beings than aliens. Others of us came here in the past, and everyone used to know about them as a matter of course. There’s probably a way to get home then, but I doubt I’ll be able to find anyone that knows the specifics...

Chapter 2 — A Steam Workshop in Van Dyke Brown

1

“This is awful.”

Those were the first words out of my mouth when I laid eyes on the chaotic mess.

“How did you let it get this bad?”

The man lifted an eyebrow. Then, apparently deciding that wasn’t enough, he gave a snort before answering.

“I’m a mechanic. I ain’t no chef, maid, or housewife. Kitchen’s got nowt to do with me.”

“You should at least put away the plates you’ve used.”

“Right, I’ve been usin’ scraps of wood instead. I just chuck ’em when I’m done.”

“What do you usually eat?” I asked hesitantly.

“Whatever, so long as it’s edible.”

With that, he left the room, leaving me behind.

Hands on my hips, I looked over what I had to work with. It was a kitchen—or, more accurately, it had been a kitchen once upon a time. I could make out hints of a sink, stove, and general work area, but with the dirty crockery and empty cans piled all over them, along with sheets of some kind of metal, they were practically unusable. I’d offered to make lunch, but I suddenly found myself regretting it.

Heaving a sigh, I surveyed the room again and caught sight of a sturdy door. Tugging it open released a chill breeze into the room, and I’d cheered up before I even knew it. The place must have had its own generator; it had been quite a long time since I’d seen a fridge actually running.

The cold air rushing over my face made my skin tingle. The fridge's interior was about the size of a small room, and shelves lined both the walls and the walkways. Neatly arranged ingredients sat on top of every shelf. It did feel somewhat bland, but the phrase "a lifetime's supply" struck me as perfectly valid given how much there was.

I noticed a small lever on the right as I entered. Lifting it lit several lights in the ceiling, bathing the room in a soft yellow glow. Time to look over the shelves. There were huge jars of pickled vegetables—they'd take both arms to carry—piles of cans, bags of corn, and dried olives, along with wooden crates the contents of which were impossible to tell just by looking.

When I got farther in, I found another door. It took lifting a leather-wrapped lever to open it, and what I saw on the other side took my breath away.

"No way..." I managed, bringing my hand up over my mouth.

Is this... Is this even possible?

I couldn't believe it.

"It's meat! So much meat...!"

This area was the freezer. Cut-up joints of meat were crammed inside. For someone who hadn't had anything but canned food for months, it was a gloriously vivid sight. I swallowed. Now that I'd seen it, a temptation that had thus far been hidden welled up inside of me: a craving for meat.

I let the freezer door swing closed. An urge to sprint out rushed over me, but I kept it under control and walked through a corridor out of the kitchen, going right out of the house.

A large warehouse greeted me as I stepped out. It was made up of a towering frame of light-brown metal, with a huge crane and chains hanging down here and there. Several steam-powered vehicles littered the ground floor, and the doors to the warehouse looked like they belonged in a hangar bay. Those doors had been left open, giving me a clear view of the scenery outside. When he'd brought us here, the mechanic had called this his workshop: a steam workshop.

That wasn't important right at the moment though. I just ran up to the man, calling for him. He had been peering under the hood of the Kettle, but looked at

me with a resigned expression.

“What? I’m busy.”

“You know the stuff in the freezer? The meat?”

“What about the meat?”

“C-Can I use it?”

The man frowned at me.

“Do what you like. Keep out of my hair with that crap,” he said, shooing me off as he got back to work.

Harsh as he may have been, it didn’t bother me at all. After all, I had permission now. *Meat’s back on the menu!* I thought with a fist pump as I turned on my heel to leave.

The first item on the agenda once I’d skipped back to the kitchen was—of course—cleaning up. I stuffed all the trash into sacks and washed the piles of dishes. When the drainer filled up, I’d dry whatever was there and put it all away, then get back to washing the rest. Fortunately, there was no detritus from cooking either in the sink or on the stove, and there wasn’t food or oil all over the floors and walls, so a basic cleaning had me ready to start cooking.

I put a thick wooden chopping board onto the work surface and picked up a knife. While its blade was worn from long use, someone had kept the knife fastidiously sharpened. It probably wasn’t the mechanic; the kitchen was nothing to do with him, after all.

Still holding the knife, I looked around again. Now that it was back to rights, without the dirty things in the way, the kitchen had faintly recovered some of its usual atmosphere. There was a tall, narrow window to one side, and a blue lace curtain hung across it. Since I’d opened it, the window let in a breeze which made the curtain flutter and cast dappled shadows across the floor. Through the window, I could see the distant figure of the mechanic as he worked on the Kettle.

I turned back to look at the kitchen. A rack on the wall held little bottles of spices, each with a handwritten label on it. A vibrant tapestry hung to the side

of the rack, and faded clippings were stuck to the wall.

A moment ago it had all been meaningless—just random objects you'd never give a second glance—but now I could see vestiges of something more.

There had obviously been someone that used the room: the man's wife, his mother, or maybe even a daughter. It could have even been his father or son. Standing there as I was, I could understand whoever it had been, just a little. They had treated their knife well, labeled their spices to tell them apart, and made sure everything in the fridge had its place. They'd liked the color blue, and they had cooked each day while watching the mechanic work.

I put the knife down on the chopping board and left the kitchen. As I got closer to the Kettle, the man frowned at me again.

"What now?" he demanded.

"Sorry, I just need to get some tools to cook with."

"Huh? There's stuff in the kitchen."

"Familiar ones work best," I told him.

The man looked at the tool in his own hand and nodded.

"You ain't wrong there."

It wasn't intentional, but I suppose I'd managed to build a little understanding between us.

The cooking utensils were in a box on the back seat, and once I'd retrieved it I shouldered my backpack. I made sure not to forget the groundsheet either. I moved back to the front of the house and deposited my load, spreading the sheet out and sitting down cross-legged as I started to riffle through my things.

I was more at ease doing it like this. I'd just rely on him for the ingredients, and deal with the rest myself.

2

Location might well be important for drawing, but there must have been *somewhere* else she could have chosen.

Nito had vanished at some point after we'd first arrived. I finally found her by looking up. A staircase ran along the wall of the workshop, and she was pretty much at the top of it, her easel resting on a small landing as she painted.

It's way too scary to climb up there. Don't make me.

I yelled to get her attention. Then I did so a second time, and then a third before she finally seemed to notice me. It was hard to be sure; she was so high up I couldn't make out her expression, after all. I called up that the food was done, and she nodded. At least...she probably did.

When I went to tell the mechanic, the Kettle was in an awful state. Chains and pipes protruded from it, and he had the engine hoisted out from under the hood with the crane. Parts were lined up around the area. I started to worry whether it would ever run again.

No way. I shook my head. *It'll be fine. He's a pro. It'll be as good as new before long.*

"Huh? Food? Leave it there. I'll eat sooner or later," he said indifferently when I told him.

Apparently he either wasn't fussy about eating, or prioritized his work. Or both, maybe. I couldn't force it, so I headed back to the house and sat down waiting on the sheet I'd laid out. Eventually, Nito arrived.

"Did you finish your picture?" I asked her.

"Not yet. It's drying."

"Drying?"

"It's a watercolor."

Watercolors must need a drying step, then. I was pretty sure I'd used them in elementary school, but I didn't really remember too well.

Despite me tapping the sheet—or in other words, suggesting she sit next to me—Nito shook her head. She crouched in front and slightly to the side of me instead.

"Whoa," Nito marveled, her eyes going wide as she saw the mound of baguette sandwiches on the plate.

“He said I could do what I liked with the ingredients,” I told her.

“I’ll...thank him later,” she replied before taking one of the sandwiches.

An expression like a spy contemplating an impossible assignment settled on her face as she studied it. Suddenly, her eyes went wide and she frantically looked toward me. She must have noticed what was in the sandwiches.

“That’s right: meat,” I said, a grin on my face.

“I-It’s red.”

“This isn’t canned meat, it’s proper, *real* meat.”

“I-It’s so thick.”

“I cut it into steaks and fried it.”

“And the bread...?!”

“This is the king of sandwiches... It’s a bit wasteful though, and it’s the first time I’ve made one. People call them steak sandwiches.”

The steaks were thick enough to poke out from the bread, and it was extravagant enough that you almost wondered if the bread was even necessary.



She gulped as she looked at the sandwich. Juices, still tinged slightly red, dripped from the bread. She took a bite with a slight murmur of thanks.

“Mm... Mmh? Mmm?!”

It was the first time I’d heard simple “mmm” noises used three times in a row like that; she was honestly pretty expressive with them. As her cheeks bulged, her expression twisted gradually into a smile bigger than any I’d ever seen before.

“Mmmmh!” She struggled to swallow before finally letting out a faint sigh of satisfaction. “I never knew meat that wasn’t in a can tasted like this... It’s a shock.”

“Meat, you see, is a serious matter,” I told her with a nod.

“A serious matter,” she said, nodding back.

Neither of us knew what was serious about it as we sat and nodded to each other. We were just putting our feelings into words.

“What’s this bittersweet sauce?” she asked.

“I added pickled onions to the juices along with some red wine and butter.”

“Are you a genius?”

“It’s nothing special.”

Each time Nito took a bite, a smile lit up her face, and she really savored the meal. I ate too, of course, and it tasted good to be sure, but looking at Nito’s expression made me think that hers might be even tastier. That seemed impossible though.

“You might be a genius...” I told her.

“At what?”

If ever enjoying food had an art to it, she was a genius at that art. Once she’d filled her small frame with the sandwich, she rubbed her stomach in satisfaction. Her soft expression from a few moments ago had vanished, and she looked completely composed. I’d just need to give her more tasty food if I wanted to see that look again.

Suddenly I remembered the mechanic. Looking toward him, it seemed like he wasn't going to be over here any time soon. He was still working and wiping the sweat from his brow. I picked up the plate and took it over to him.

"It's lunchtime," I told him.

"Sure, leave it there, Ladi. I'll eat once I've cleaned up."

The moment the words left his mouth, the man scowled and clicked his tongue in irritation.

"My bad," he said after a moment. "Forget about it."

I put the plate down on a nearby bit of free space.

"That reminds me. I haven't introduced myself yet, have I? I'm Keisuke, and the girl over there is Nito. It might be a bit late to say so, but thank you for saving us."

"I ain't saved nothing. This is my job."

"Um, can I ask your name?"

The mechanic cast a dubious look at me.

"It's written up over there," he told me with a vague gesture in that direction.

"I can't read it. I'm not from this world."

"Oh, so you're a lost one, are ya?"

"That's another term for it?" I asked.

"Well, you're lost, ain't you?"

At length, I agreed. "You can say that again."

I was reluctant to accept the implication that I was a lost child, but realistically it was pretty on the mark, so I could only grimace. I didn't even know the route home, let alone how to travel it.

"Tough break. Can't imagine this empty place is much fun. Used to be packed like a scrap heap before."

The screech of something metallic breaking pierced the air.

"Um... Can you fix it?"

“‘Can you fix it,’ he asks,” the man grumbled, turning to me. “’Course I can, it’s my job. But it’s gonna be a mess if I ain’t got the parts, so that’s what I’m checking. Get your money ready though. It’s gonna be dear.”

“Money?”

“Ya didn’t think I was doing this for my health, did you?”

It was just the way of the world that you paid for things you got from people, and I was honestly surprised at myself for forgetting that.

“No, I know the deal,” I assured him.

“Fine then.”

This world had dulled my mind quite a bit. I hadn’t used money in a long while, after all. The mechanic returned to his work, and I put my mind to thinking about payment as I turned around.

“Vandyke.”

“Eh?” I asked, turning back again. He wasn’t even looking at me.

“That’s my name.”

He’d apparently remembered my question from earlier, and despite the brusqueness of his response, it had a hint of softness to it that brought a smile to my face.

“I’ll look forward to your repairs, Vandyke.”

“Sure.”

That exchange made me sure things would be all right if I left them to him.

3

I wonder what people did with themselves before there was real electricity. There was way too much free time and nothing to fill it with.

Personally, I was lounging in front of the house looking at my phone. I’d started a game, but it wouldn’t go past the title screen, obviously. Having a smartphone was all well and good, but it wasn’t particularly “smart” without an

internet connection. I tossed it on top of my backpack and took my watch off as well before lying down on the sheet.

Nito was still on top of the stairs painting, and Vandyke was busy fixing the vehicles. I was the only one lazing around like a panda in a zoo. Though visitors always adore pandas, so even they were probably worth more than me...

My wandering consciousness suddenly jerked back to full alertness to see that the evening light had started to tinge the sky outside of the workshop a faint red. I must have dozed off.

Right, I should get started on dinner, I thought.

There was a veritable mountain of ingredients waiting for me, along with wondrous chunks of meat. I even had permission to use it all however I liked. I could cook anything—anything at all. That was a real rarity in this world.

I didn't have any confidence I could put any of it to good use though. Making sense of this world's ingredients and seasonings was all a matter of taste testing. This was similar to that, and that was similar to this, and anything that just made me go "what the hell," I left aside entirely.

I wasn't a chef or anything, after all. My parents were hardly home, so I'd had to make my own meals, and now I could manage to do the bare minimum with what I'd learned back then. All I'd been doing was looking up recipes on my phone and then following the instructions, though, so I didn't know what proper cooking was like. Mixing cans and adding a bit of seasoning was hardly cooking, and frying meat before putting it onto bread wasn't much different.

"What to do for dinner..."

Actually, how did I even end up as the cook? I considered it briefly: Nito...didn't seem like she could cook, and Vandyke...didn't care much about food. *Argh, if I don't do it, we're not getting a proper meal.*

With no alternative, I pushed myself upright and then gradually got to my feet. There was nothing else for me to do, so I'd cook.

The first step was entering the fridge and surveying my ingredients. This was a good chance for me, so I took the opportunity to taste test some things like the pickled olives and some dried red fruit. The shelves were pretty packed, so

checking each item took a fair while in the end.

Once I'd gathered my ingredients, I stepped outside again and found Nito crouched in front of my backpack with her pencil moving across her sketchbook. I guessed she was doing a still-life of my phone and watch. When she noticed my return, she frantically flipped the book shut.

"I don't mind," I told her.

"No, I'm fine. Sorry."

Once I'd laid out my spoils on the sheet, her eyes went round in shock.

"Wow, there's so much," she said in wonder.

"There's plenty more where that came from. It's a treasure trove."

"Are you really allowed to use it? You're not just stealing it?"

"Do I look that untrustworthy?"

I sat down on the edge of the sheet and took out a small camping chopping board and a knife. Nito looked fixedly at my hands as I chopped the ingredients.

"Why not use the kitchen?" she asked.

"Ahh, you see, I couldn't use it."

"Did he say not to?"

"Nope, he actually said to do whatever I liked."

She tilted her head quizzically, her silver hair falling over her shoulder and catching the light from the setting sun. I watched it shift through a kaleidoscope of colors for a moment, then scratched at my cheek before finishing my thought.

"I can tell that whoever it belonged to, they used it lovingly. I couldn't step in there and just take over."

She looked blankly back at me.

"But..."

She didn't need to say any more for me to understand what she was thinking: *But they aren't here anymore.*

“The memories are still there though, right? If I used it, then it’d weaken them, and I don’t want that. I can’t really word it well, but I’d feel guilty.”

I trailed off, looking down at my work. It was hard to put into words. Vandyke had said I could use it, so there should have been no problem. It might just have been my own sentimentality making me see the traces of a family there. Either way, I had a clear sense that I shouldn’t be standing in that kitchen.

Then again, I was pretty sure she thought I was just rambling. Hell, *I* pretty much thought that myself.

“That’s a wonderful way of thinking,” she told me.

When I looked up, Nito was watching me with a mature expression on her face. Her deep-blue eyes shone with a soft light and I couldn’t hold her gaze, so I dropped my eyes back to the food in embarrassment.

“What are you making?” she asked after a while, steadily watching my hands.

“Meat-stuffed peppers.”

“Pep...purs...? What are those?” she asked. “Hang on, don’t just grin, tell me. Helloooo, anyone there?”

4

After I’d chopped the vegetables, I pounded the meat and minced it, before stuffing half of the mixture into something that looked like green peppers. I’d found a sweet and salty sauce, so I added some sugar and wine to bring out the flavor and cooked the meat-stuffed peppers in it. That was pretty much all I did. The only extra preparations were mixing onions with the rest of the minced meat, which I then shaped into dumplings to have in a soup, along with thawing some vegetables for a salad. The staple of the meal ended up being grilled bread.

The full spread was a banquet unlike anything else we’d had in our canned-food lifestyle thus far. Nito was silent, a shocked expression on her face, as she took a bite of the meat-stuffed peppers. She didn’t even blink, her entire being dedicated to chewing. Once she’d swallowed the mouthful she looked at me.

“I want to paint a picture.”

“Uh, what on Earth?” I asked.

After all, what was the connection she was seeing between eating and painting a picture? *I* didn’t have a clue, at least.

“I want to put this tastiness into a picture, so I never forget it.”

“That’s a bit over the top, isn’t it? I appreciate it though.”

Nito dithered, her body swaying. You could see the conflict in her. She wanted to paint, but she wanted to eat, but she still wanted to paint.

“It’ll go cold,” I warned her.

Her face crumpled into a frown as she gasped. The severe expression made it obvious that was something she couldn’t allow to happen, and she promptly set about eating again. It was the first time I’d ever seen someone eating with such a fierce look on their face. She drank the soup and took a tiny bite from the meat dumpling. Her eyes drifted closed as she swayed from side to side. *Guess she liked it.*

The sun had already set, but lights hanging from the workshop’s ceiling lit its interior. They didn’t reach all the way to the edges, and the shadows around the various steam vehicles made for a mysterious ambiance. The various wrecks sitting in shadow and the stairs climbing into the darkness made it feel like we were eating in some secret base.

I was sitting on the sheet and Nito was crouching as usual. Vandyke had let himself drop to sit on the floor and was wordlessly eating. I’d put out a bigger portion for him, but it was gone in no time.

“Um, did you not like it?” I asked hesitantly, seeing that his expression hadn’t changed in the slightest.

“Huh?”

It was only then that he seemed to realize he was eating and looked down at the stuffed pepper on his fork.

“’S fine. It ain’t bad at least.”

“It’s delicious,” Nito interjected sharply.

I looked at her in surprise; she had her lips pursed as she glared at Vandyke. As we both turned our eyes on her, Nito’s pale cheeks flushed red, and she swung her own gaze away to look at the floor. Vandyke let out a belly laugh.

“Right, glad you like it, little miss. I don’t care much about food. Never have. Couldn’t tell ya if it was good or bad, so I got yelled at a fair bit. Always ‘what was the point?!’”

Vandyke gave a “my bad” or two as he brought another bite up to his mouth. Nito just mumbled an “it’s fine.”

She didn’t deal well with him. I’d have bet that it was because she’d never dealt with anyone like him before and didn’t know *how* to. I had to admit that I was touched she’d actively spoken up against someone she was so uneasy around to defend my cooking. When her eyes met mine, she glared at me, her cheeks still red. This time, at least, I knew for sure it was her hiding her embarrassment.

Vandyke was the first to finish and had completely cleared his plate, making me smile in satisfaction. I was the next to finish, and then Nito hurriedly stuffed one huge last bite into her mouth and chewed like mad.

I poured water boiled on the Svea into a pot I’d placed tea leaves inside. The pot—porcelain, with leaf patterns painted onto it—along with the tea leaves and all of the crockery, was something I’d borrowed from Vandyke’s kitchen. The tea brewed for several minutes with the lid on, and then I poured it out into three cups. It was a dark brown in the cups; without drinking it I had no idea if it was black tea or oolong or what.

I offered a cup to Vandyke and he looked softly at it before taking it with one hand. I doubted that Nito had such thick skin, so I put hers on the floor in front of her. Once she’d finally finished her last bite, she reached out with both hands before pulling them back like a shocked hamster. It must have still been too hot for her, and she just glared warily at the cup.

I blew over my cup, enjoying the view, before taking a careful sip. The tea was hot enough to make me screw my face up, but the flavor was fresh and invigorating as it spread over my tongue. There was a sweetness to it that

reached all the way to my nose. It must have been some kind of herbal tea—perfect for after a meal.

After a while, Vandyke spoke.

“’Bout your cars.”

“Ah, right?”

Both of us put our cups down and sat up straight.

“Your auto-trike first, little miss. It’s done for, nothing I can do.”

“Wha?!” she managed, her eyes welling up.

“The fuel tank’s completely caked in mana stone ash. It hadn’t shifted for a while, had it? Also, you filled it with normal-grade mana stones, didn’t you, not fuel-grade?”

Nito’s eyes widened as she grasped what he was saying, then her gaze dropped and she bit her lip.

“Um, is there a difference?” I asked.

“They’re the same basic thing, just different qualities. The normal stuff’s got a bunch of crap added to it; fuel-grade’s pretty pure. Even the crud will heat the water in the boiler, but you can’t mix ’em. They’ve got different mana expansion rates and heat absorption coefficients. The pressure and temperature in the fuel tank’ll change all over the shop and you can get fluctuations of mana pressure in the fire pipes too.”

Right, so that was the problem.

At least, that’s what I wished I could have said. *Nope, didn’t get a thing.*

Vandyke’s lips twisted as he read my expression.

“Anyway, the fuel tank and the fire pipes in the boiler are both shot.”

“Can you change them?”

“I’d love to, but I ain’t got the parts,” he answered, folding his arms. “That auto-trike’s the newest model of compact steam vehicle. Production had only just started in the capital, even. Then the world ended up in this sorry state before they got this far. First time I’ve even seen one. Almost everything’s made

to new standards, so I can't even yank the stuff out of anything else."

This time, I got the problem: because of how new the thing was, there were no replacement parts on the market. *That's pretty amazing.* Nito hid her face behind her knees from where she was crouching with her arms around them, staring fixedly at the floor. I had no idea what to say to her.

"Lad, your car's salvageable," Vandyke said, regaining my attention. "It's new too, but not new-spec. I can make do with the stuff from the wrecks 'round the place. But..."

He stroked his chin before continuing.

"I don't have a replacement boiler or cylinders."

"That's all you don't have?"

"The cylinders in it went up the swanny before, and whoever had it replaced the whole lot. They're made to different standards than the boiler. They managed to marry 'em though. Pretty impressive."

The proud expression on that person's face when they'd given me the Kettle came to mind. They'd constantly messed with it, and I'd figured they were just playing mechanic, but apparently they were good enough to earn even Vandyke's praise.

"I'd normally switch either the boiler or the cylinders, but they're linked together all over the place. Switching either'll need a bunch of parts and fine-tuning. It'd take effort, time, and money."

"Urk."

The word "money" weighed heavily on my chest; I really didn't want to deal with that topic. There was a touch of hope in my eyes as I looked at him though.

"There's another option, right? If that was the only choice, you'd have said so from the start."

"It's doable if we strip the little lady's auto-trike for parts," he said, prompting a short exclamation from Nito. "Fortunately the new-spec stuff'd fit perfect. The linkages we'd need are fine, and it'd get it on the road right off."

Nito looked at me. Neither of us said anything, just silently stared at each

other with worry in our eyes.

“You pair decide what you’re doing. Stay the night, whatever room you like’s fine,” Vandyke told us, before getting up and entering the house.

5

The workshop’s lights had gone out earlier, leaving only the slight illumination of the moonlight coming in through the window. Further inside the room it grew darker, and only mana-stone lanterns flickered on the walls. Vandyke probably wouldn’t mind us having the lights on, but I still felt slightly hesitant about it and had only lit those nearest to me.

As I dried the crockery lined up in the draining basket, my thoughts turned to the car. It was completely logical that repairing it would cost money. Considering the almost complete lack of people in this world, it was a miracle that I could even get it repaired at all. The issue was that I had essentially no money.

I wondered what Nito would do. He’d told her that the auto-trike was beyond repair, so I guessed she’d have to buy a new vehicle. There were plenty of wrecks around, and a whole mountain of parts, so Vandyke could probably pull something together.

As I stacked the dry crockery back onto the shelves my body blocked the light, forming a silhouette of me inside the cupboard, and by standing at that angle I noticed there was a notebook on the lowest shelf. Unable to resist my curiosity, I picked it up. It was slightly bigger than my hand and rather thick, with a rigid cover that felt like leather. As I flipped through it, I found letters, numbers, and splashes of color all arranged neatly on its pages.

“A recipe book?” I asked myself.

While the words were beyond my understanding, I could tell from the pictures that it was about food. Many of the dishes were meat-based, and a very few were fish-based. The odd page was dog-eared or had a line drawn through the name of the dish with scribbled notes in the margin. When I’d taken the steak sandwich to him at lunch, he’d called me Ladi. This notebook

must have been theirs—somewhere they'd recorded recipes for Vandyke.

I spun on my heel, peering into the deep shadows the lanterns cast over the kitchen. Somehow I got the feeling that someone else I'd never seen before was standing in there with me. I closed the notebook and put it back on its shelf.

"Um..."

I turned in the direction of the voice to see Nito's face peeking in from the shadowed hallway, her ashen hair drooping toward the floor.

"Yeah, what's up?" I asked her.

I'd thought she was borrowing one of the rooms and sleeping. A glance at my watch showed that it was already past 9 p.m.

"I wondered what you were doing."

"Just tidying up. Finished a minute ago."

She came into the room with a murmur of understanding, stopping about as far away as she had the first time we'd met. Eventually, she resumed the conversation.

"What will you do? About the car."

"That's a good question. I was just thinking about that, actually."

"And your conclusion...?"

I raised my shoulders in a shrug.

"I've got no money, so I guess I'll ask if I can trade something for the repair."

Although, with that said, the only things of real value I had were my watch, my phone, and the camping equipment stuffed in my backpack. All of them were important to me and things I was loath to part with, but needs must.

"What about you?" I asked in return.

She shook her head.

"He said he couldn't fix it."

"Not going to buy another car? There's loads sitting around, so I bet he could get at least one of them running."

A sharp gasp made its way past her lips at the suggestion. Apparently she hadn't thought of that.

"Right, another car..."

"Looks like you'll manage something then, Nito. That's great."

From her wording, I assumed she had some money, so she would probably be fine. She looked up at me and hesitantly began to speak.

"Where are you headed?" she asked.

"That's a tough one," I mused. *Frankly, I'd love to know that myself.*

It was less that there was somewhere I wanted to be, and more that I didn't want to be *there*, that had always prompted me to shoulder my backpack and keep moving. Either way, that had nothing to do with her, and I knew she was asking about my future plans. That was why I forced myself to give her the reason I was traveling.

"I'm searching for someone. Hair and clothes all pitch black, and pretty big. Have you seen anyone like that?"

"No..."

The shake of her head was exactly what I'd expected, and nothing to get disheartened about.

"It's all at random," I continued. "I just head wherever, stop over if I find a town, and ask anyone I see if they know anything. That's pretty much it."

"A journey, then..." she said eventually.

"I guess so," I agreed, though I thought it was probably more accurate to call me a stray that was just wandering around. "What about you?"

"I'm..." she began, "searching for a place. I want to go there, no matter what."

"Is it far?"

"I don't know. It probably isn't close though."

"That's vague."

"It is. I can't even find it on maps."

That sounds awful, but it must be something really important then. A girl of her age would never have ventured out into this broken world alone without some pretty strong conviction driving her.

It was here that the silence crept in from the night and settled between us. Nothing was going on that would naturally start the conversation up again, and we both just stood there. I could tell Nito was looking for words from how her gaze roved around the room. The lantern light flickered, changing the expression Nito's shadow wore as it stretched across the floor.

"Would you...make a deal with me?"

"A deal?"

Her nerves were clear on her face. Her lips repeatedly tried to form words before she finally decided on what to say.

"The parts from my auto-trike will get your car fixed, won't they? I would pay for the repair as well."

"I'd love that, but I haven't got anything to give you in return."

"Help me with my search."

"How? I don't know anything about this world. Surely an atlas would be of more help."

Nito shook her head and, after making a small noise of disagreement, carried on.

"It hasn't been long since I set out. Still, I've had enough time to learn how difficult it is to live outside my home. I have the knowledge from my books, but that isn't enough."

I could remember the first night we'd known each other, and how she'd called that single can her meal. Such a diet definitely couldn't last for long.

"The auto-trike is broken because I was wrong about the mana stones as well. For a normal steam vehicle, you need to keep lots of water on hand, and they're harder to control... Honestly, I'm not sure I could drive one properly on my own."

She paused, looked straight up at me, and then finished her suggestion.

“So it only needs to be until you find what you’re looking for, or until you pay back the money. Until then, teach me how to make a journey.”

Her voice cracked on the last few words, hitting a shrill note. She pursed her lips. Her shoulders were shaking slightly, and I couldn’t imagine just how much courage it had taken for her to ask that of me so soon after we’d met. That just showed how much she wanted to find that place, how hot her emotions ran. They were blindingly fierce.

I thought back to the past, although it really hadn’t been too long ago. When I’d come to this world, the man in black had saved me. He’d then left me with the Kettle’s owner, and after a while, I had asked them to teach me how to travel so I could search for the man, just as Nito had asked me to do now. Maybe I’d had the same look in my eyes back then: frantic, a goal in mind, and willing to face untold difficulties to achieve it.

How did they answer when I asked the same?

Right, I know.

“There is one condition.”

“R-Right!”

“I’m not just ‘you.’ It’s ‘Keisuke.’ If we’re going to be traveling together, you can at least call me by name, right?”

Nito’s strained expression eased and she let out a breath.

“I can. I’m counting on you, Keisuke.”

I didn’t think she’d go straight to that so easily. I thought she’d be more reserved, maybe even call me “mister”... Eh, guess it doesn’t matter. I’m borrowing money from her, after all.

“Yeah, same to you.”

I held my hand out, which Nito looked at and then hesitantly reached toward with her own. There was a slight chill to her skin as our hands gripped each other in an awkward handshake.

When we'd finished breakfast and relayed our discussion from the previous night to Vandyke, he just gave a nod as a brief acknowledgment.

"That'll be less work. Should be able to get things sorted today then," he told us.

"Also, we've got a request."

"What? You want a high-pressure turbo add-on?"

What's that? One of those sounds awesome!

Wait, no.

"We want to attach Nito's auto-trike to the back of my car. Sort of connecting it, or just towing it."

"Takin' it with you then?"

"We are. We need the space for Nito's things. Can you do it?"

"Who do you think I am? It'll be harder to drive though."

"I'll do my best..." I said after a moment.

Vandyke gave me a nod before heading to the Kettle.

Sunlight streamed into the workshop, lighting up the whole area. Now that I had some sort of path to follow, my shoulders felt lighter than they had in a while. After a moment, I turned to head inside. If we were going to be leaving within the day, we'd need to get our things together.

When I got back into the house, I could hear water. I poked my head into the kitchen to see Nito washing what we'd used for breakfast. The sink was a little high for her and it looked like she was having trouble. I walked up to her and stopped next to the cupboard.

"Want me to dry the plates?"

"I'm fine."

After such a definitive statement, I couldn't just ignore her wishes and help anyway. I was stuck standing there like a lemon. Since I didn't particularly want to just stand and watch her, I looked for something to keep myself busy. Reaching for the bottom shelf, I pulled out the recipe book again and flipped

through it, thinking about all the things I could make if only I could read.

“What are you looking at?” Nito asked.

When I looked back up, she was giving me a curious look as she dried the plates with a cloth. I turned the book around to show her, still open to the page I’d been looking at, but before I could get out the word “recipes,” she cut me off with a curious question.

“For special days?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Nito and I stared at each other, having fumbled the hand off. Both of us were sure we’d communicated properly, but neither of us had understood the other.

“What do you mean, ‘for special days?’”

Nito let out a gasp of realization at my question.

“Oh, you can’t read. Sorry, that’s what’s written there, circled in the right corner.”

I took another look after her prompting, and sure enough there was a note in the corner of the page. It was practically scrawled in, contrasting with the neat, legible writing in the rest of the book.

“For special days?”

I wonder what they meant. The illustration alongside the recipe didn’t look like anything special—it was nothing flashy or lavish. Nito approached, still holding the plate.

“Mertaille... I’m sure that’s a famous dish from Marit. It comes up in novels a lot.”

“Is it something they eat on special days, then?”

“No, I think it’s a staple dish...” As she spoke, she leaned in closer to peer at the book. “I’ve read that every family’s mertaille is seasoned differently, and that it’s an amalgamation of that family’s history and memories. Maybe that’s why it’s special.”

Right. I nodded. *So, for special days, huh?*

Understanding what it said didn't give me the ability to read it; all it did was give the mess of lines on the page some meaning. Even so, I could practically feel the emotions that had filled the heart of whoever wrote it as they'd scrawled the letters onto the page. What I said next was just an idea, not a carefully considered arrangement of words, that popped out of my mouth all on its own.

"Hey, can you tell me the recipe?"

"Are you going to make it?"

"I thought it'd make a good lunch."

"Well, I don't mind," she said, her eyes darting away, "but this uses an oven."

She was probably taking my reluctance to use the kitchen into account.

Right, that is *a problem*, I thought, crossing my arms.

As I did so, a gust of wind blew in, making the blue curtains billow away from the window. I could see Vandyke in the workshop, working away on the car. He was lit up clearly, as if the sun were only shining on him. The wind stopped, and the curtain fell back over the window, the moment passing as if nothing had happened.

"What's wrong?" Nito asked quizzically after another moment had passed.

"That just then..." I began, before changing my mind. "No, never mind. It's fine. This is the last meal, so I'll borrow the kitchen."

She gave a sigh, directing a not entirely satisfied expression at me before saying, "If you say so, Keisuke."

I couldn't explain it to her though, and I didn't think that she'd understand even if I'd tried. It just felt almost spiritual, like I'd been given permission from the beyond.

"Anyway, could you tell me the ingredients and seasonings we need?" I asked as I led the way into the fridge.

She looked at the notebook and pointed out ingredients—this one was lesso,

and that one was carin, and so on—but I doubted I'd remember any of them. Also, each and every thing she pointed out was canned.

"They canned *ingredients*?" I asked.

"These are canned for cooking," she replied. "They're sealed to preserve them."

"I guess it's for convenience?"

Though personally I thought that the best thing about canned foods was that you could eat them right after opening.

"They were created once we knew that mana saturation would destroy the world. Some people gathered supplies and secluded themselves underground or on mountains, and they bought this kind of thing. It was because canned cooked food tastes bad."

I nodded in agreement. Saying that the cooked canned meals were inedible until you put some effort in was putting it mildly, so it was a logical development to can the ingredients and let the buyer cook whatever they wanted themselves.

Once I'd gathered the cans she indicated, we stepped back into the kitchen and I laid them out on the work surface. We went back to gather the seasonings, and then we were ready.

"Right then, where do we start?" I wondered aloud.

"It sounds like you need to preheat the oven."

"On it."

Of course, while I could open the oven that stood under the stove, I had no idea how to use any of this equipment. I glared at it for a while, until Nito's hand snaked in from the side and pumped a lever next to the oven door several times. A sound like pressurized air escaping hissed through the oven. When she swung the lever down for the last time, the oven let out a small bursting noise as heat started to issue forth from it.

"Looks like there's still fuel," she commented.

"Thanks," I managed eventually.

“You’re welcome. Next, let’s cut up the ingredients.”

We closed the oven door and I picked up a can. Once the lid was off, I found three plump, round cucumbers inside. They were a little limp as I removed them, but they were still fresh vegetables.

“Whoa, these are *canned*?”

“They mix in some powdered mana stone and the mana reacts to seal it completely.”

“Wow, what are you, Supercan...?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

I opened all the cans and sliced everything up as Nito directed.

“It says you need to sauté them once they’re cut.”

“Yes, chef!”

“I’m not a chef,” she insisted as I placed a frying pan on the stove and poured in some oil.

I didn’t know how to actually light it though; when I shifted out of the way, Nito did so wordlessly. After a while of this, the vegetables softened, the water seeping out of them.

“Next you need to add these,” Nito said, passing me what, after tasting them, I guessed to be vinegar and white wine.

“When that’s mixed through, spread the mixture across the bottom of a heat-resistant container.”

I looked through the shelves and found a thick, blackened, metal pan—something along the lines of a skillet. I also picked up a lid which fit snugly onto it. I poured some oil into the skillet to stop anything from sticking and then spread the softened vegetables out within it.

“Apparently you put more sliced-up vegetables on top of that.”

“Huh, putting vegetables on top of sautéed vegetables.”

“The first portion of vegetables is a piperade. It acts like a sauce.”

“Well, I’ve never heard of that before,” I mused.

There were four types of vegetables, all of them similar to things from Earth: cucumbers, eggplants, tomatoes, and daikon radishes. I laid the slices over the top of the sauce, alternating types in a random order, so that they overlapped each other in a circle around the edge of the skillet and then spiraled inward to the center.

“What next?”

“Add herbs, salt, and oil, then cover it with a lid and bake it.”

So the seasoning here was pretty simple: just some herbs and salt. The dish probably relied on drawing out the flavors of the vegetables. I opened the oven door and an immediate wave of heat greeted me. The skillet, with the lid on, went into the oven, and then I shut the door.

“Phew... How long do we leave it?”

“Apparently it becomes confit after an hour.”

“Confit?”

“Yes, confit.”

“Uh... What does that mean?”

She was silent for a moment.

“I don’t know.”

So that’s *what you don’t know?*

We stared at each other for a moment before breaking into wide smiles. Working together to cook something had let us grow a little closer, it seemed. I didn’t know exactly how long it would be for, but we would be traveling together for a while at least. It was far better for us to get along than not.

“I hope it tastes good,” Nito opined.

“It definitely will. We worked hard on it, after all.”

Well, sort of.

7

As always, we ate outside. I briefly thought that we may as well use the dining table if we'd already borrowed the kitchen, but I wasn't bold enough that I could make myself at home at someone else's dining table to eat.

Vandyke wordlessly dropped down to join us on the ground before simply saying, "It's done."

"You fixed it?" I asked.

"Yeah, plus linked them together. Don't open it up too far though. And stay on the road, away from the rock scree."

Relief filled my chest. I'd known he would manage it, but actually hearing that the car was fixed still took a huge weight off my shoulders.

"So, how're you paying?"

"Is this enough?" Nito asked.

Vandyke looked at her offering before raising his eyebrows and sending me a sidelong look. His gaze weighed heavily on my shoulders. I could almost hear him asking, "You're making the little miss pay?"

I'm sorry I'm so useless.

Nito's hands held a ring with a small red gem set into it. He took it and held it up to the light. As he looked at it, he seemed to make up his mind.

"Sure, it'll do."

Nito let out a breath. Was it precious to her maybe? I almost asked but clenched my fist and held in my question at the last moment. If she'd decided to pay with that then I couldn't gainsay her, and I had nothing to offer in its place. I truly felt pathetic.

"Umm, why do you ask for payment?" Nito asked hesitantly.

"You mean when there's no way to even use the money?" he asked in return.

Nito gave a timid nod in reply. It was something I'd wondered too. The whole reason that money and jewels could be used for payments was that many people collectively agreed on their value. However, there were no people

anymore, and no shops; there was a fundamental breakdown in value. That's why I'd thought such things would just be a burden and hadn't kept anything of value with me.

"'Cause this is my job. There's value in getting paid to work."

"Your job?" Nito asked.

"I fix cars, the customer pays for it, I give them the car. It's only my job 'cause I get paid. It's worth doing then, and it satisfies me. After I've got the payment, it don't matter. That's my life; that's what keeps me going. However the world changes, my life won't."

He seemed to shine as he gave his frank speech, and I couldn't help but look up to his stubborn, unyielding attitude. You could say that refusing to change your life even as the world fell apart was obstinate, but his refusal to change meant you could always rely on him, no matter what happened.

"That's right," I said in realization. "You work, so you get paid. It's only natural."

I'd completely and utterly forgotten even that.

"Well," he muttered after a pause, "'s been a while since I've done any work that was actually a 'job,' so I guess I should thank you too."

His gaze drifted away from us, showing his embarrassment, before he clapped his hands onto his knees and said, "Well, let's eat."

Nito and I exchanged smiles and removed the lid from the skillet. Steam billowed up from it, fading away to reveal that the vegetables had grown even more vividly colored after cooking. The heat had spread perfectly through the whole dish, and though it had scorched a few sections, seeing that only whet our appetites more. I used a round-tipped palette knife to dish out a portion for each of us and offered Vandyke his. He looked back at me in shock.

"Wait, this..."

"I found a notebook in the cupboard with a bunch of recipes in it, so I tried following one to make this."

He took the plate and stared at the food—the mertaille—for a long moment.

Eventually, he used his fork to scoop up a mouthful. He chewed it carefully, the movements of his jaw gradually slowing until they finally stopped, his eyes drifting closed in remembrance. It felt like the kind of moment that you could never dare to interrupt.



“That taste takes me back. It’s a bit different though.”

He smiled, opening his eyes. It was a warm smile, the kind that came to your lips as you recalled a treasured memory.

“I thought you didn’t care much about food?” I asked.

“This meal’s different,” he told me, picking up another forkful.

“The recipe had ‘for special days’ written next to it. What did that mean?”

Even now that we’d made it, it just felt like a family meal, and I couldn’t see why it had been singled out.

“It did?” He laughed, then told me, with his gaze resting on the skillet, “The first time I had it, I called it tasty. She was proper happy, and every day after that, out this came. Five days later, I’d gotten pretty bored of it. I couldn’t just say that straight up though, so I said what made it so tasty was that we ate it on special days.”

Then he muttered that he shouldn’t have said anything, and ought to have just eaten it more.

8

Once we’d gotten the tent, backpack, and other stuff back into the Kettle, I took a look at our overall setup. The metal fittings at the back of the Kettle attached to a thick pole about a meter long that connected it to Nito’s auto-trike.

“It’s a three-wheeler, so it ain’t great for towing,” Vandyke explained. “You don’t want to have to be steering it all the time, right?”

There was a metal framework on the front of the auto-trike with two wheels attached, likely to stop it from tipping when we turned. The bare metal, roughly welded together, made me feel rather manly. I glanced at Nito to see her eyebrows furrowed, a conflicted expression on her face. Perhaps, from a woman’s perspective, she’d have preferred something a bit more refined.

Once we’d loaded up, Vandyke supplied us with refills of water and fuel. That

was how the Vandyke Steam Factory did things—a fact I was considerably grateful for. After he'd told me the basics of towing, along with how to avoid stressing steam-powered vehicles and some basic maintenance tips, we were finally ready to set off.

"Are you sure we can take this much food though?" I asked what we were both wondering.

We had filled the spare space in Nito's auto-trike with cans of food and seasonings from the fridge, along with a mass of meat. Vandyke had brought it out and told us to take it.

"It'd just go to waste otherwise. I can't eat it all, or cook it even. Call it thanks for your cooking taking me back."

"Thank you, for everything. You've really saved us."

Vandyke clapped me on the shoulder.

"I just did what I could. Drive safe," he told me.

I nodded. I'd always intended to drive safely. Then, Nito—who had been half hiding behind me until now—stepped out and looked up at him.

"Thank you for the food," she said after a moment. "Also, thank you for lending me a bed and letting us use the bath. Um, fixing the cars is a real help too."

Her words were halting, but spoken firmly. Vandyke's eyebrows rose in slight surprise. Even so, he gave her a manly smile and ruffled her hair, prompting her to let out a slight cry.

"Take care," he told her.

"Ugh... My hair's a mess," she grumbled even as she haltingly brought out her hand, which she'd been hiding behind her, and held something out toward him.

"This, um, is to thank you. It's not much, but it's the best I can do."

She was holding a thick sheet of paper with vivid colors covering it: a watercolor painting. It was from a perspective looking down at the workshop. The Kettle and auto-trike were in frame with Vandyke working away at repairing them. That was probably me in front of the house. Objects littered the

workshop as well, all done in deep shades of brown and black, and yet somehow the image didn't appear dark in the slightest. Maybe that was because of the swathe of bright sunlight cutting in from outside.

Vandyke took the paper and looked closely at it. Then he gave Nito a polite bow, almost like a knight that had just been awarded a medal by their princess.

"I will treasure it," he told her.

"Eh, ah, um, i-it's not that impressive!" she stammered, panicked.

I laughed, and soon enough Vandyke joined in. Once she realized we were teasing her, she puffed up her cheeks and stomped off toward the Kettle's passenger seat. The driver's seat of the auto-trike was currently taken up by the meat, after all.

"She's a good girl," Vandyke said. "It's the first time I've been given a painting."

As he spoke, he kept his eyes on the painting with a smile on his face. He must have been somewhat embarrassed.

"We should head off," I told him. "Thanks for all your help."

Vandyke nodded and then looked at me again.

"I've got a request," he said.

"You do?" I asked, thrown by his sudden seriousness.

He put one hand behind him and took out a leather notebook—the recipe book we'd used earlier.

"You're off on a journey. Take her with you."

"If you call it 'her' it must be precious to you."

"It's all good. I've got this workshop, so I could never take her on a journey. It must have been boring, stuck in the house all the time. I want her to see some new sights. She might be mad it's so late though."

"You won't come too?" I asked.

"This is where I die. I can't leave the workshop empty, and I need to look after her grave. I know it's strange to leave this to you, but..."

My chest warmed as Vandyke faltered. *Yup, he's a clumsy, straightforward guy*, I thought.

"I understand. I'll look after her."

I took the notebook and Vandyke smiled boyishly.

"Cheers."

"You pay for work. We got lots of food, so now we have to work for it."

"Suppose you've got it down," he said, holding out a hand.

I grabbed hold of it. It was a big hand, solid and powerful, the kind you could feel his life and history through when you held it.

"See you."

"Right."

Once I got into the Kettle, I met Nito's gaze. Her cheeks were still puffed up and she glared unhappily at me. I couldn't help a rueful smile. The fuel was already lit and the engine was warmed up. The gauges all showed there were no problems. I opened the window. It might have been pointless, or something better not to mention, or maybe even just my own assumption, but I still wanted to say it.

"The kitchen and fridge were both kept in good order. The notebook was carefully put together too," I told Vandyke.

"And what of it?"

"I'm sure she enjoyed each and every day, and I think she was happy cooking for you too."

His mouth hung open for a moment. Then he spoke with a rueful smile of his own.

"Because the kitchen was in order? You're a strange one. Thanks, though. You pair tidied it up, and even I can wash up. She'd be mad if I let it get into that state again."

"I'm glad," I told him, smiling back as I opened up the throttle.

The steam gushed from the boiler into the pistons, venting with a hiss that

almost made me feel nostalgic. The Kettle showed no sign of its extra burden from the auto-trike as it smoothly shifted into motion. Nito waved toward Vandyke and, even as he frowned, he gave an awkward wave back. I could almost hear him scolding her for making him do things he wasn't used to.

As we left the eaves of the workshop's roof, sunlight fell on us from the blue sky. I had to squint slightly as the bright view of almost translucent grasslands and mounds of white sand spread out before us. The road made a lazy turn out of the yard. As we drove along it, I glanced at the mirror and saw that Vandyke had come out to see us off.

Nito leaned out of the window to look back at him. His figure grew smaller before eventually becoming a speck, and then even the workshop vanished from view. It was only then that Nito settled back into the passenger seat.

"He was a good man," I said.

Nito nodded and gave a soft noise of agreement.

"We should come see him again," I commented.

The same noise of agreement answered me, her voice quaking slightly.

I told her we'd definitely manage it.

Intermission — Beyond the Blue Light's Reach

1

I soon got used to driving while towing the auto-trike. Not only was this a sturdy public highway, but it was also straight and level, without any other cars on the road. All I needed to do was avoid sudden braking and keep the adjusted acceleration in mind. What I *wasn't* used to was sharing my silence with this girl I had only just met.

Several hours after our departure, we were grasping desperately for a conversation topic. We were fundamentally two travelers that had been thrown together by circumstance, and neither of us was used to people. So our conversation was halting, and we both fell regretfully into an awkward silence.

All I could do was hope that it would get better in the future. Until then, we took more breaks to get away from the suffocating feeling of being trapped together. I wasn't sure whether Nito picked up on my thought process, but I got the feeling she would probably have agreed if I'd said as much out loud.

Eventually, we came to a three-way fork in the road and I slowly brought the Kettle to a halt. A wooden stake stood in a small mound of stone in the middle of the fork with a metal sign attached to it, albeit listing to one side. It had a thick coat of rust though, so not even Nito could read it.

A glance at my watch showed it was nearly evening and the cloud cover over the mountains was tinged an orange-yellow on its underside. Rather than panic at the oncoming night, it was best to prepare for it: we needed to get our camp ready quickly. Fortunately, there was a flat space at the side of the road.

"Let's camp here for tonight," I suggested.

"All right."

I drove the car onto the flat area and stopped the engine before opening the door. A soft breeze was blowing that carried with it the lingering scent and chill

of spring along with a trace of warmth that hinted at summer's approach. Green hills undulated outward around us, their waves broken up by floating islands of tawny rocks and wide stretches of white sand. There were several dark green thickets of trees in the distance, but no houses or streetlights. Once night fell, the area would be pitch black.

I got down from the car and turned to speak to Nito. Both of her hands rested on the open door and her eyelids had drifted slightly downward as she gazed out at the scenery. I had never used the phrase "tender affection" before, but Nito was truly embodying it now. The faint smile on her lips was doubtlessly worthy of that description.

To me, the scenery in front of us was nothing. I hadn't even been in this world for a year and I was tired of it. The road stretched on, hills and mountains broke up the landscape, and the sun rose and fell, setting the sky ablaze with light. That was all though. Everything else was just changing into these crystals and forming plains of white sand.

"Do you see something unusual out there?" I asked her.

The soft expression remained on her face as she answered.

"I thought the coloring was pretty. So much so I can hardly believe the world has died."

I took Nito's wording of "coloring" on board and looked out again. I agreed that it was pretty, but I couldn't feel anything else. Maybe it was an intrinsic sense painters had, or a sensitivity only they possessed. It almost felt like she was seeing a different world than I was. I couldn't understand it, but it must have been a world full of beauty.

I was more concerned with making camp than watching the sunset. If I stood around until the red light faded then I'd be stuck in the darkness. I pulled out the wooden box of camping gear from the back seats along with my backpack and the groundsheet. A rough survey of the area revealed no signs of rocks or shrubbery. I decided to set the tent up right in front of the Kettle. If it came to it, we could use its headlights to see by.

"Um," Nito said, "let me do something too."

While I'd been setting up the tent, Nito had come over to help. I'd been alone the entire time I'd been traveling in this world, so making camp with help was a fresh new experience. We worked together quietly for a while until I spoke up.

"The tent's pretty small..." I said, prompting Nito to turn around from where she was crouching inside the dome tent to look back at me. "By the way, I've got a question."

"What is it?" she asked.

"How have you slept until now?"

"I laid the seat back and slept inside my car."

Right, that works since she's so small.

"I've only got the one tent, and your auto-trike's got the meat in its seat, so...where do you want to sleep?"

Her head poked out from inside the tent and she looked solemnly up at me.

"Is there...anywhere else?"

I pointed at the tent she was crouching in, and then at the Kettle. With the box and backpack out, the back seat was completely free of luggage, and it was fairly wide. I'd slept like that myself on particularly rainy days.

Nito looked around the inside of the tent, carefully checking the floor and the roof of it before speaking with a dark look on her face.

"This...is a dismal arrangement..."

"I'd like an apology for that, if you would?"

The way she'd said it sounded like she was blaming me for the state of things.

"It was a joke. The tent is scary, so I'd prefer the car," she said easily as she exited the tent.

The burning red sky began to fade to the indigo of night, several stars springing up across its expanse. She looked up and let out a soft cheer of delight.

The first thing out of my backpack was a hexagonal fire stand. Nito and I had gathered a bunch of twigs, and I lit those using a match. Once they were burning I added some mana stones. The jet-black stones—as gorgeous as gems—ordinarily went toward fueling the car. When added to a fire, though, they made a rather efficient charcoal substitute.

Suddenly, I noticed Nito looking curiously up at me.

“Keisuke, does everyone in your world live outside? Like nomads?”

“Uh, no, we don’t...?”

“Then why are your tools for it so advanced?” As she spoke, Nito pointed at the folding low table I’d put out. “It’s the first time I’ve ever seen a desk that can be stored in so small a space and carried so easily. I’ve never even read of one before.”

“Convenient, right?” I asked her.

“I don’t understand,” she admitted after a pause. “The uses for it are so limited, so why would someone bother to make something so costly?”

She gasped and then asked a follow-up: “Keisuke, are you rich in your world, perhaps?”

I smiled reluctantly, amazed that someone could see it like that.

“Not at all. I’m just a student. Plus, it’s not all that expensive.”

“Your world is amazing...” she said, poking at the stainless-steel table.

“Is it? I guess, when you think about it that way, it’s amazing we make stuff with limited uses that we can get hold of with pocket change,” I mused, then passed her a chopping board and collapsible knife. “Right then, you can give me a hand with cooking.”

She looked at the tools with deep interest as we got started. We ended up making a deeply tasty meal. For that, we mainly had the ingredients we’d received from Vandyke, along with Nito’s contributions to the process, to thank. Along with the raw meat, we’d also gotten canned demi-glace sauce. The only reason I found that out was because Nito read the label for me. Mixing vegetables with the meat and sauce gave us a beef stew, which Nito ate plenty

of with a smile on her face.

We used the drum of water to wash up and brush our teeth, then switched to a damp towel to wipe off our faces and bodies in place of a bath. Then, after we were done with tidying away, our night was suddenly completely free.

I added wood to the fire as Nito and I sat down facing each other across it. We didn't yet have the kind of relationship where we could joke and laugh with each other, and it was far too early to sleep. Thankfully, I found a way to break the silence before it became suffocating—the fork in the road ahead of us.

"Where shall we go from here?" I asked.

The two of us each had a final goal in mind. If we'd known which road led to our goal then we would have taken it without hesitation, but neither of us knew. We needed to decide what path to take day by day.

"Keisuke," she asked after a long pause, "do you have any ideas?"

I shook my head. After all, I'd been utterly lost until a few days ago.

"I do have a map though," I added.

"A map?"

The map had ended up jumbled together with everything else in the wooden box when I'd tidied up. I fetched it and offered it to Nito, spreading it out with both hands. The firelight danced on the back of the paper as she held it.

"Huh, it is a map of the area," Nito said, studying it intently. When she was finished, she turned to me with an awfully serious expression on her face. "If you don't have a problem with it, I'd like to go to Barcia."

"And Barcia is...?" I asked leadingly.

"It's the town just before this circled bridge. That's where I'd been aiming for to begin with."

I looked at the map when she passed it back. Sure enough, there were several small houses drawn downstream of the bridge, right where she'd said.

"I don't mind, but is there anything in particular there?"

"Barcia has a witch."

“A witch?”

Guess we’re in a fairytale now.

“I don’t know how your world considers witches, but here they are people who have inherited ancient magic. They often show up in children’s stories.”

“Do they really exist?”

“I think so. Everyone believes they do at least.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit vague?” I asked.

“Well... I’ve never met one...” she admitted with a rueful grin, leaving me unable to press further.

I looked back down at the map. I’d found it in that roadside truck, and the only road marked on it was the one that went past the station and over the mountains to the town and bridge. I considered whether the truck’s driver might have been going to see the witch but soon changed my mind. While their drawing of the town was a quick, almost afterthought-level sketch, they had drawn the bridge in careful, precise strokes and then circled it multiple times. There was a distinct difference in the importance they’d placed on each location.

“What happens when you meet the witch?” I asked as I folded the map.

Nito rested her chin on her knees and hunched over, looking down into the fire. The firewood crackled.

“The witch,” she said slowly, “will answer any question correctly. But only once.”

“Why?”

“Why what?” she asked back, her confused expression making me confused in turn.

“Why does the witch give you a correct answer? Actually, *how*?”

Nito paused.

“I wonder why,” she eventually said with a crease in her brow. “All I can tell you is that’s always been the case. Any witch in a story always answers her

guests' questions."

"Hmm. Well, if they're called witches, can they use witchcraft?"

"It's called magic, strictly speaking. It did exist until two hundred years ago. It had been in decline since the advancement of steam technology. Apparently, it's really difficult to learn."

Magic declined as science advanced... It was a saddening thought.

"I...would have loved to see magic," I admitted.

"So would I." Nito smiled wistfully. "So would everyone though. There are books upon books set in the era when it still existed that use it as a story element."

"I wonder if the witch will show us some magic if we ask?"

"I don't know. I've never heard of anyone trying that."

"Right, to Barcia then. I'll ask her."

"I'll ask too then!"

She was much more energetic now that we had a destination in mind. That kind of excitement was something I hadn't felt for quite some time.

"Do you have a question picked out to ask her?" I queried.

The question was a slip of the tongue, something I only asked because of the high spirits we were in. I cursed myself as soon as the words left my lips, worried that I shouldn't have asked anything personal. Nito considered her words for a while before nodding.

"I want to ask if the Golden Sea exists."

"Is that the place you said wasn't on any maps?"

I guessed it was probably the place she'd said she was searching for when we were at Vandyke's house. Nito pulled out a notebook that was roughly palm-sized and opened it to a specific page before offering it to me. I took it and looked at the page: the majority of the surface was covered in a striking picture all in shades of gold.

Our surroundings were relatively dark, with only the soft firelight to see by,

which meant that it was hard to make anything out in the picture. From what I could tell, it did seem to be a sea. The artist had drawn it from above, looking out from a small church-like building atop a cliff. The right-hand edge held a cursive signature.

“My mom always talked about it, saying it was the most beautiful place in the world.”

Well, that’s *an exaggeration.*

“Take a look through,” she told me.

I did as she asked and flicked through the pages. The notebook held a cornucopia of paintings: townscapes, landscapes, animals, clock towers... All of them were vivid watercolors. It was essentially a portfolio.

“She traveled and painted when she was young. There were loads of other notebooks. She found the Golden Sea when she was on her journey.”

“Oh, okay. So she traveled all over the world and thought that was the prettiest place. That’s more persuasive.”

As I spoke, I stopped flicking through the pages. One particular image was familiar. I shifted toward the fire to get closer to the light.

“Is this that station?”

The painting showed a white station building floating atop a pool of water. White clouds were floating in the clear blue sky, but only in its reflection. The actual sky had no color to it. The composition evoked and preserved the sensation you got from being at the station—the feeling of standing with the sky stretching out beneath your feet.

“It’s the same place,” she told me with a smile. “I’m looking for the places she painted, traveling to each one, and trying to recreate her pictures.”

A moment of silence stretched between us.

“You must have really loved her,” I said.

The wording wasn’t intentional; I just said the words as they came to mind. Maybe that was inconsiderate of me. Her face pulled into a sharply pained expression, but it was quickly replaced with a smile. It was the smile of

someone well used to bearing pain, one who'd known nothing else in life.

I didn't know whether I should apologize or probe further, so I decided to remain silent. Whatever I said would probably have been superfluous. I closed the notebook and returned it.

"Then let's head to Barcia for now. We'll meet the witch and ask our questions. We can start on that tomorrow."

Nito nodded. We had nothing else to talk about now, and the mood had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. We both stood. I took the lantern from my backpack and walked Nito to the Kettle. We packed all the luggage into the rear footwell and laid the seats back before spreading bedding out over them to make an impromptu bed. Nito kicked her shoes off and got up onto the seats, patting them to see how comfortable they would be to sleep on.

"Think you'll be okay?" I asked her.

"I should be."

"Night, then."

"Right, good night."

I closed the door and headed back to the campfire. I sat down on the sheeting and pulled my phone out from a pocket in my backpack. "October 17, 4:19"—time was definitely passing in the other world, but clearly at a different rate than here. I connected the charging cable to my phone and then to the lantern, before starting to crank the lantern's small handle. As I did, the charging symbol appeared on the phone.

Nito would be asking this witch who answered a single question correctly about the Golden Sea. *What do I ask? It looks like I only get one chance.* I racked my brains as power trickled into the phone, but I couldn't come up with a decent question. There was a veritable mountain of things I wanted to ask, but things I actually wanted *answered* were a different matter.

I stopped turning the handle, and then unlocked my phone and opened the call log. It was filled with calls that hadn't connected to anyone. I'd been out of service since I arrived here, so obviously no matter who I called, the line had never connected. Radio waves didn't reach between worlds, after all.

Even so, I reached out with a finger to tap an entry reading “Home.” Then I pulled my backpack into my lap and put my phone to my ear, closing my eyes. The afterimages of the flames flickered across my eyelids.

Chapter 3 — An Ivory Honeymoon

1

It amazed me how easily people could get used to terrifying experiences like a night in the mountains; by now, I could pass the whole night without even the slightest fear. I never wanted to continue traveling regardless. A precarious night's sleep was far better than trying to follow a mountain pass at night.

For her part, Nito was still unused to this, and had been frightened of the unlit dark in the mountains, without a single streetlight and with only unreliable moonlight. I wondered what kind of expression she'd make if we had to camp in the mountains again tonight.

Fortunately, the road had already started its descent: past the clearing on the mountain where we'd set up camp, the landscape opened up into wide plateaus and gentle slopes, and I could make out a road cutting through the area beneath us. We were bound to be back on level ground by the evening.

I sat cross-legged on the sheeting and opened up the map I'd found in the truck. With the stops at the station on the water and Vandyke's workshop, we'd been roughly following the road drawn on the map, albeit with detours. The final stop on the map was the bridge upstream of us. That wasn't our destination though. Our business lay in the town before it. Checking the map was reassuring; as long as I kept an eye on my destination and stayed updated on the distance remaining, I wasn't lost. That alone was a significant relief, mentally speaking.

As I folded the map and placed it to the side, a gust of wind came through a nearby grove of trees. The breeze nearly took the map with it and I frantically pinned it down with my cup of coffee.

This wide, flat clearing in the mountains must have once been a rest stop for those crossing them, or maybe some kind of campground. Little signs of people maintaining the space stood out here and there: black soot marks on a stove

someone had made from rocks, a table and bench created from joined-together logs, and other such things. There was also a brook flowing nearby and so water was no concern. The environment was ideal for camping.

I refilled the Kettle's water tank, along with the drums in the roof carrier, and brewed some more coffee with my Svea. Nito hadn't returned even after I'd drunk three cups of it. She had probably found somewhere to paint and then lost track of time, as usual. At first, I'd been impatient when that happened and wanted to just get going again instead of waiting around. After a few days, though, I was used to it. I'd realized there was no reason to rush.

I got tired of sitting and let myself fall onto my back. The sheeting was thin so I was well aware of how hard the ground was beneath me. Oh, how I longed for the softness of a bed. I hadn't even borrowed one the night we'd stayed with Vandyke, just pitched my tent in the workshop to sleep. Now I regretted having held back.

The sun rose steadily, bathing the clearing in white light. It was probably close to summer. I had a feeling that the scenery was getting more vivid each day. Stretching out where I lay, I felt the chill of the breeze on my skin as I listened to the leaves rustling and gazed at the green patterns formed by the swaying shadows under the trees. Naturally, my eyes grew heavier. In my half-daydreaming state, it took a while for me to realize that the sound I was hearing was real. Far off in the distance, I could hear a whistle. It was distorted by its echoes, but I made out five short blasts, followed by one long blast.

My sleepiness vanished in an instant and I leaped up. I strained my ears. Silence reigned for a long moment. Then, the whistle—five short blasts, one long blast.

I didn't know what it was for, but *someone* was sounding a whistle. Now wasn't the time to be lazing around. I tossed out the remnants of my coffee and crammed all the luggage that was laying out into my box before rolling up the sheeting. As I finished loading everything into the Kettle, Nito came back down the river path carrying her easel.

"Did you hear that?" I asked.

"I did." She nodded. "I think it's a distress whistle."

“A distress whistle?”

That was a disturbing phrase. Nito put her easel onto her auto-trike’s luggage rack as she answered me.

“It’s a whistle signal that trains and boats once used. Five short blasts followed by one long blast means they have an emergency and need help.”

“Impressive detail. What are you, a sailor?”

I was genuinely impressed as I spoke, but her cheeks reddened for some reason and she looked away.

Eventually, she answered, “When I was young, there was a period when I was really into sailing novels.”

Can you even use that phrase at your age?

“Anyway,” I said instead of voicing that question, “someone is looking for help?”

“That’s right,” she replied, resting her chin in her hand and thinking. “I’m not entirely happy to just go look into it though. I’ve read about people who set off those signals and then attack the people that come to help. You can’t tell whether they’re good people or not from the whistle.”

“I get it. Scammers, huh?”

It seemed all too likely, which worried me a little.

“Okay. Let’s get in the car and take a closer look first,” I decided.

“Are you sure?” Nito asked after a pause.

“I wouldn’t want to ignore people if they really are in trouble. Vandyke helped us, after all.”

The phrase “paying it forward” felt a little excessive here, but in any case I was sure that it would bother me all week if we just moved on and ignored the signal. I’d end up thinking, “Maybe they really were in trouble,” or “I wonder what happened to them,” or even “Was there anyone other than us that could have helped?” I would lose a lot of sleep if I had those concerns running through my head each night.

I always kept the Kettle's boiler hot until we decided where we'd camp for the night, so now we were able to get going as soon as we got in. As we descended the curving mountain pass, I noticed that Nito was looking at me out of the corner of her eye.

"What's up?"

"Just... Should we get the gun ready?"

"For self-defense?"

"Yes."

"We won't need it. Probably. Plus, if we showed up holding a gun then it'd look like we were going to attack them even if we offered help."

Nito nodded with an "I see" before turning her gaze back out front.

The whistle sounded several more times as we descended the mountain. It seemed to grow louder each time we heard it. *They must be somewhere up the road.* In that case, we had no choice; we would come across them along our route whether we liked it or not. The trees thinned as we went. We were almost out of the mountains, and the sunlight was starting to cast our surroundings in a red glow, when we saw it up ahead.

"It's an elephant," I let out.

"An elephant?"

"Huh, you don't have them? They're animals with big ears and a long nose."

"I've never heard of one. An animal that looks like that thing exists in your world?"

"Well, the ears and nose are the same, and I guess the size..."

It was a large, boxy steam-powered vehicle. I don't know exactly what determines if something's an SUV or a minivan, but it was in that range. Instead of plain side mirrors, it had big protruding ones that looked just like an elephant's ears, and its "nose" curved outward as it stretched up from under the windshield. Those were the only two decorations it had.

A tall, thin man was standing next to it waving a hunting cap at us. A woman

wearing a light pink dress stepped out from the shadow of the vehicle and mimicked him, timidly waving a hand. I glanced toward the passenger seat and Nito nodded. She must have thought there wouldn't be an issue with stopping, and I agreed. The man and woman both had completely white hair and looked for all the world like an elderly couple.

I pulled to a stop next to the elephant car and rolled my window down. The slender old man approached with a bright smile on his face.

"Oh, to think that we would find other travelers in a place like this!" he exclaimed. "This must be the Crimson Saint's guidance. If you can spare it, we would greatly appreciate your aid."

"What's the problem?" I asked, not moving my hand from the throttle.

I was ready to flee at a moment's notice. The man stooped forward toward me and noticed Nito in the passenger seat. His eyes widened and he gave a considerate nod.

"I wouldn't blame you for passing us by with the world as it is. I have to thank you for even stopping. As you can see, we are old and weak and in no position to do you harm, rest assured."

He must have sensed our wariness. His tone was gentle and I felt somewhat guilty for doubting him. Even so, I hesitated to pull my hand off the throttle. If I'd been alone then I might not have minded, but Nito was with me now. I wanted to prioritize safety over politeness.

I silently bid him speak, and the old man smiled. A strange understanding passed between us; I could tell that he'd comprehended my thought process and agreed as a matter of course.

"It seems that we have lost a case of mana stones during our journey. We'd run out of fuel by the time we noticed and now my wife and I are stranded here."

"That definitely is a disaster," I agreed.

"I suppose we should have stored the fuel inside. Cutting corners to save a bit of effort in the short term never pays off," he mused, then continued, "If you have sufficient supplies then it would be stupendously helpful if you would be

willing to exchange some of your fuel for our goods.”

The old man bowed deeply, practically folding himself in half. The woman followed suit behind him. With both of them going that far, I felt almost obliged. Then, something tugged at my sleeve to pull my hand away from the throttle. I looked toward Nito and she nodded—shallowly, but several times.

“Okay then. We have a bit of a glut ourselves,” I answered, letting go of the throttle.

2

I pulled a wooden crate of mana stones from the Kettle and transferred it to the elephant car. The old couple gave their names as Ned and Julie. We introduced ourselves as well, and while they were politely thanking us the sun sank completely behind the horizon. As we worried over whether to set out before night fell, Julie gave a gentle suggestion.

“If you aren’t in a hurry, would you like to eat dinner with us?”

Neither Nito nor I could refuse her offer or the soft smile that came with it. After all, we had nothing but time.

Since there wouldn’t be any cars traveling, we laid out the groundsheet right in the middle of the road. Then we quickly collected firewood before the sunlight vanished entirely. Ned had a fire stand with legs and he lit a fire in it with practiced movements. As twilight fell, we all sat around the campfire eating.

“To think the day would come when we could eat meat that wasn’t out of a can! I apologize for my rudeness but I just can’t resist!”

“Ned!” scolded Julie.

I shook my head with a grin.

“We appreciate it actually. I wasn’t sure we could eat all of this with just the two of us.”

I’d been overjoyed when Vandyke had given us the mass of meat—until I’d realized the simple fact that we had no fridge. Nito and I both had average

appetites, so the meat would have gone off before we could eat it all. Sharing it with everyone like this was far better. Besides, they had contributed the cooking gear and seasoning, and even taken on the cooking itself. We just sat on folding chairs they'd provided as they took care of everything.

They put a grill over the fire and skewered some meat before laying it on the grill to cook. Then they put that meat and some vegetables into a heavy pot and boiled them to make a soup. Cooking over an open fire had a different knack to it than cooking in a kitchen, but Julie carried everything out without hesitation.

"You seem comfortable at this," I remarked.

"I used to cook over a wood-burning stove, so I'm used to working around a bit of inconvenience."

"Was each meal a lot of effort back then?" Ned asked.

That reaction seemed out of balance considering their relationship, and the whole moment just had a sense of strangeness to it. Julie poured the soup out into wooden bowls and passed them to Nito and me. The scent grabbed my attention, and the sense of strangeness vanished before I could grasp it fully. The bowl had large morsels of meat and cut-up leaves that looked something like spinach floating in it. I took a mouthful and then started in surprise.

"I hope the taste suits you younger kids," she said. "Does it taste too thin?"

"Not at all. It's great," I answered, and Nito nodded along from next to me.

The meat wasn't the only flavor in the dish. Despite the soup itself being almost transparent, it was thick and slightly sweet. Like clear-broth soups, it also had a mild aftertaste. I could probably have kept drinking it forever.

"What is this flavor?"

"It's made from a wild plant called cresso. The leaves are good as a solid ingredient while the roots make a great soup stock if you boil them."

While we were gorging on the soup, Ned had set about cooking some more chunks of meat. He pulled out a dried red fruit from his can case and put it on a chopping board. Then he took the knife hanging from his waist and used the end of the handle to crush it. He took the powdered fruit and rubbed it into the

meat. Then Julie took over, taking the meat and wrapping it in a thin skin-like covering before putting it into the fire.

“Will it be okay right in the flames?” I asked.

I couldn’t shake the thought of the meat scorching. Nito even leaned forward, looking worriedly at it. Ned just laughed as he picked up his blow poke from where it stood off to the side. It was a thin metal pipe with an ivory-colored handle, and must have been something he was proud of. A tiny claw curled up from its tip, so it would work as a plain fire poker as well.

“There’s a type of deer that lives in volcanic belts that’s called deadera,” he told us. “This skin is from one of them. It stands up well to flames and heat, so this little campfire is nothing. Roasting meat in deadera skin is a wonderful cooking technique.”

He angled the blow poke at the fire stand and used the claw to cover the meat with firewood. Then he put his lips to the ivory handle and puffed up his cheeks. Immediately, the fire flared up, the flames rippling. He took his mouth away and heaved a few breaths before he got himself under control. Julie reached out and patted him on the back.

“Are you all right? You always get too excited.”

“I’d love to say I could still keep up with the youngsters, but that’s not going to happen,” he said, a rueful smile on his face as he pressed a hand to his chest.

“Do you want to switch?” I asked him.

“If you don’t mind,” he said, then wiped the opening carefully with a cloth. “The temperature is important for this, so the fire needs to be stronger.”

I took the pipe as he offered it to me, and was surprised at the handle’s smoothness. It fit well in my hand, almost like it was conforming to my grip.

“Brilliant, right?” Ned asked with a grin.

“It is,” I answered, grinning back.

“This is made from the first tusk of a huge herbivore called a fout. If you treat it to enhance its smoothness, it’s said to be almost as smooth as a woman’s—”

“Ned! You’re in front of a lady,” Julie scolded him.

Ned cleared his throat exaggeratedly before saying, “Pardon me.”

I glanced at Nito to see her looking blankly back at me. I realized it might be better to take extra care with our words in front of a pure and innocent girl like her.

Following Ned’s example, I readied the blow poke and put my lips to the opening. Despite how hard the material surely was, it felt soft against my lips, probably due to the heat from the fire. It was almost warm even. *A woman’s... Right then...*

Carefully hidden so Julie wouldn’t see it, Ned gave me a thumbs up. His eyes sparkled with laughter and seemed to ask, “Good, right?” I held in my own laughter and blew down the pipe.

All the air compressed inside it before bursting out of the end. Flames flared out and the red and yellow glow at the center of the piled logs burned more vividly in the night’s darkness. As I stopped blowing, the fire practically bounced back up to full strength. Nito let out a murmur of wonder from beside me.

“It’s good to be young,” Ned said wistfully.

“It sure is,” Julie agreed.

I was a little embarrassed by their praise; all I’d done was blow down a pipe after all. Glancing to the side, I saw Nito was gazing at the blow poke.

“Want to try?” I asked her.

She worried over it for a bit, and then just as I thought she was about to nod, she hurriedly shook her head. *Make up your mind.*

“Oh my! Well, you are a girl,” Julie said, chuckling elegantly.

What was that supposed to mean? Maybe she just didn’t want me to see her with her cheeks all puffed up.

“Forget about it, Keisuke,” Ned told me. “A woman’s heart is forged iron: no matter how much a man may try, he’ll never fathom it. All we can do is offer our praise to their beauty.”

He threw another log on the fire as he finished his life lesson and returned to the fire-blowing lessons.

“Right, right,” he directed me. “Get the wood with the end. That’s it, gather it on top of the meat... You’re doing great. You’ve got a knack for this.”

“You can have a knack for it?”

“Of course, and yours is real indeed.”

“You’ll make me blush.”

Huh, so that’s how it works? I’ll do my best then, I thought as I put more force behind the blowing.

“Ever heard of the word ‘modesty’?” Nito interjected from the sidelines.

“It’s just the truth. I’ve got a knack, apparently.”

“He’s just being polite.”

“You just don’t get it. Look, look at these flames. Aren’t they burning beautifully? That’s my knack.”

“They’d be just as pretty without you.”

“Don’t you think there’s a better gloss to them now?”

“What gloss?”

“Here. Right here, this area.”

“I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

Laughter came from in front of us. We both looked toward it at the same time and saw Ned and Julie laughing happily. It was a cheerful sound. I looked back at Nito and she looked away in embarrassment. The red tint on her pale cheeks wasn’t just a reflection from the flames.

“You two seem close,” Julie said.

“We are indeed. The best of friends, in fact,” I said, nodding, at the exact same time that Nito answered with a wave of her hand: “Not particularly. We’ve only just met.”

What she’d said was completely true, of course.



“Oh my, only just met and you’re traveling together?” Ned asked, only to get a smack to his knee from Julie.

“Don’t be rude. Everyone has their reasons.”

I chatted about my circumstances, and what had happened since we’d met. The two of them responded appropriately, nodding along and giving impressed murmurs. It almost felt like I was a professional storyteller. There are fewer people passionate about listening than people passionate about talking, so it was a rare experience for me.

“Well, isn’t that just a quirk of fate,” Ned marveled. “And that little quirk saved us too.”

“It must have been quite difficult coming here from another world. There aren’t even countries anymore,” Julie sympathized earnestly, and I was honestly grateful for it.

“I wish we had better sights to show you,” she continued wistfully. “If Coven were still around, they would have probably been helpful for you.”

“Coven?” I asked her.

“It was a research institute formed when the country still had several large labyrinths. I’ve heard they used to offer patronage for those from other worlds who were lost here.”

“Well, I’d have loved to take them up on the offer. It’s no use now though,” I said with a laugh, blowing into the pipe and setting our shadows swaying as the flames rippled.

“True, it’s not...” she mused. “It’s probably been around three years since the mana collapse.”

“The mana collapse?”

The question didn’t come from me but from Ned. He asked it with curious eyes, like a child that had just heard a new word. Nito looked at him with confusion. It must have been common knowledge; while I was from another world and obviously didn’t know, Ned definitely should have.

“It was when the world suddenly started overflowing with mana and lots of

people turned into crystals," Julie explained kindly.

Ned's eyes went wide.

"That happened? That's terrifying. So are you here to escape that mana collapse?"

"You're traveling with me too, Ned."

"Ah, I am?" he asked, pausing briefly before continuing, "Right, traveling. Where's dad?"

"Bartley passed away forty years ago."

"He what? Dad died? That's awful," Ned exclaimed, putting his hand to his forehead. "That's why I told him to ease off the drink. I'll need to disembark and take over for him. Wait a minute, I'll go talk to the captain."

He suddenly stood and walked briskly off toward their vehicle. There'd been a clear mismatch in the conversation, and Ned was acting strangely. All Nito and I could do was watch blankly.

"Sorry, that must have been a shock," Julie said to us. "Things like that have been happening more often these past five years. The doctor said that it's an illness affecting his memory. He forgets lots of things, and then suddenly remembers them, and sometimes he even has fits where it's like he's gone back to the past. He was a sailor on a big steamship when he was young. He gave it up to take on the family business when his father died though. It looks like he's gone back to that part of his life."

I'd heard of similar illnesses and disorders, like amnesia, before. While this obviously wasn't quite the same thing, I could understand the idea of memories disappearing from someone's mind, so I was able to accept her explanation easily enough.

"Um, does he forget you too?" Nito asked.

Julie's eyebrows lowered slightly, showing her conflicted emotions, before she answered.

"It seems that he often forgets the part of his life after we married. He normally sees me as a friend he's traveling with, I suppose. There are times like

just now where he completely forgets me as well.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I wasn’t sure that I could sum it up with “that’s awful.” While I wanted to say something to comfort her, everything I could think of felt like trite sympathy and so I kept silent. Julie seemed to pick up on my inner conflict, and she just shook her head and told me not to worry.

“I’m used to it,” she went on. “Besides, it can be surprisingly fun. It’s like I’ve become young again along with him.”

I could feel the deep affection that only comes after years as a couple. It would have been rude for outsiders like us to offer our tawdry sympathies in the face of feelings built up over a lifetime spent with him.

“You’re not...lonely?” Nito asked.

“Sometimes. It’s a bit of a shame we can’t talk about our memories together. We can’t commiserate about the times when things got difficult,” Julie said, then smiled and carried on. “Sitting around reminiscing about the old days isn’t all that fun though. It’s much more fun for us to act far less than our age and go on a journey to make new memories. So I’m fine, Nito, but thank you for worrying.”

Nito looked away in embarrassment at being treated with such care when she’d been trying to do the caring. Footsteps came from the direction of their vehicle, and when we looked, it was Ned returning.

“Ah, sorry about that. What’d I go to the car for?” he asked, a somewhat uneasy expression on his face.

“Oh, weren’t you fetching tableware? So we can dish up the meat,” Julie spoke kindly, prompting Ned’s face to brighten.

“Right, that was it. Yup, tableware,” he said, immediately turning back around.

Julie excused herself and followed after him. Before long, we could hear clear laughter in their voices as they chatted. Nito and I looked at each other and we couldn’t help but share a smile.

3

My watch had four buttons. I felt around for the top-right one and pressed it, lighting up the dial and revealing the hands' positions. It was around eleven at night. I turned over and gazed at the dim glow of moonlight showing through the tent's fabric.

Our meal with Ned and Julie had lasted until around nine, ending when Nito's eyelids grew heavy and she started nodding off. The two of them had returned to their vehicle, Nito to the Kettle, and I'd gotten inside my tent as ever. I'd thought I would drop off as soon as I lay down, but I'd been lying awake for over an hour now and sleep was still nowhere to be found. There was nothing to do and so I just lay there at a loss.

Considering all the driving I'd have to do in the morning, I wanted to get plenty of sleep. Even with that in mind, whenever I tried closing my eyes, thoughts would just run all around my head until I'd eventually give up and open them again. I'd had many sleepless nights like this, only able to drift off as the day dawned.

Not that thinking things over all night was something I particularly enjoyed. Even with the delicious food and pleasant chat—or possibly even *because* of the excitement of the evening—lying alone and worrying lowered my spirits. I had a goal, and I was headed toward it. I didn't need to think about anything else.

My words rang hollow even to me.

A witch...

The word had an unreliable feel to it, like soft cotton candy spun from a fairytale. This witch would answer any question correctly. Did such a person really exist? Maybe she did. After all, this was another world. I couldn't assume that it would follow my idea of common sense.

We'd go to see the witch. And then what? Where would we go after that? And then after that? And then...

Was there an end goal for us? Or would we just wander the world until our time limit was up—perhaps when the overflowing mana of this world swallowed up one of our bodies and converted us into crystals?

The memory of the mound of crystals in the driver's seat of that truck passed through my mind. There had been a mass of food and daily essentials in the cargo area, along with a folded-up, hand-drawn map. He'd prepared meticulously and had been headed for an objective. Just having a goal and a route to get there didn't necessarily mean you'd arrive. So was there even any point in trying?

I lifted myself up and pulled over the wooden box I'd brought inside the tent. It held the Svea—unused tonight—and the other cooking utensils. I sifted through all of that and pulled out a certain case. Sitting cross-legged, I put it on my lap and opened the metal clasp. The black gun gleamed in the faint moonlight filtering through the tent. I stretched out a finger and ran it along the barrel. The sensation of chilled metal felt like the one unshakable foundation of reality, the one thing I could rely on.

The crunch of a footstep on the sand came from in front of the tent. I quickly shut the case and strained my ears for any sound. Someone was approaching slowly, careful to not make any loud noises. The footsteps stopped at the tent's entrance, and a shadow fell across the fabric. There was a long pause.

"I wonder if he's awake?"

It was Ned's voice.

Getting a visitor so late at night was awful for my heart. I let out the breath I'd been holding and put the case back in the wooden box.

"What is it?" I asked, sliding the zipper open.

Ned stood there in front of me, a surprised expression on his face.

"Sorry, you were probably asleep," he apologized.

"Nah, I was just lying down. Couldn't get to sleep."

"I see. That's good then."

Judging from his somewhat hesitant speech, he must have wanted to talk to me about something. It must have been fairly important for him to come over in the middle of the night.

"Want to come inside?" I asked eventually. "There's not very much room

though.”

“I’d... Actually, would you mind?”

I wordlessly withdrew, switching on the lantern I’d left sitting to the side. Ned stooped over, folding his tall frame into the tent and squinting at the bright white light from the battery-powered lamp.

“That’s astounding. From your world?”

“It is. It’s not the prettiest, but it’s convenient.”

Ned hesitantly sat himself down. Our shadows stretched across the sloping ceiling of the tent.

“I...have a request,” Ned began eventually, looking at me. “I’d like you to let me ride with you two.”

I couldn’t even formulate a response; I just looked back at him, agape.

“It wouldn’t be permanent, just until you get to a village or town,” he continued.

I thought for a moment that it might be a joke, but he looked serious. He was truly trying to part with Julie. I didn’t understand why he’d say such a thing when they’d seemed to have such a good relationship.

“Why?” I managed to ask, unable to verbalize anything more than that simple question.

He gave an awkward smile before knocking his fist against his temple twice.

“Julie’s told you, right? About my issues, I mean.”

I hesitated for a moment. He might not have appreciated us being told without his knowing. Lying wouldn’t do me any good though.

“She did, yes.”

“It started with just forgetting where I’d put things and leaving things half-done... I figured that that happens to everyone as they get older. Dad had been the same as he aged, so I didn’t worry about it. As time went on, though, I noticed I was forgetting more and more things. Things like what happened in a book I’d read yesterday, or even the names of friends I’d worked with for years.

Eventually, I got to the point where I didn't know what I was doing at work, and so I retired."

Ned spoke matter-of-factly, as if discussing someone else.

"I started keeping a diary around then. If I read it back then I can remember a lot of it. That's how I'm able to discuss it with you like this. If I didn't have that then I'd forget what I'd forgotten and end up an empty shell."

He paused for a moment, then spoke again in a rueful tone.

"I'm a bad person, Keisuke," he told me. "I was happy when the world fell apart."

The smile on his face wasn't happy in the slightest.

"The diary said I'd succeeded," he explained. "I'd pulled the wine-making business I inherited from dad out of debt. I had lots of employees and sold wine all over the world. I'd even been given the honor of presenting some to the royal family. I didn't remember any of that though. I just knew it intellectually, from reading this diary that looked like it was in my handwriting. I knew I'd probably forget how to read eventually, be left behind by the passing of time and pitied for becoming someone I'm not by everyone around me until I eventually died—I just couldn't bear that. Do you understand? Everyone kept looking at me and saying it was such a shame, but I didn't even understand *why* they were saying that."

His voice dropped slightly.

"And so I was *relieved* when normal life crumbled away with the mana collapse. Now the people that had pitied me would be gone, and 'poor old Ned' with them. I could die with my memories still in my head. That was what I thought, but look at me now."

He spread his arms, grinning like a clown on stage.

"The whole world and his grandma has vanished into beautiful white crystals and yet I'm still here, even with nothing to lose from dying. I barely even know Julie anymore. I used to love her so much; she was the most precious person in the world to me. All that love that I must have had, though? It's all just words written on a page."

He ran out of steam there, and silence fell between us. Ned took deep, slow breaths, his shoulders rising and falling with each one. I just sat there in silence. I couldn't even imagine his pain and the burdens he carried. It was all too much for me.

"Sorry about unloading like that. It's a bad habit I've gotten in my old age," he apologized.

"It's fine," I managed after a while.

"Anyway, I can't be with her anymore. There's no point in me being there with my memories of her just slipping away. That's why I want you to take me with you."

He finished with a deep bow of his head. I'd never been given a request this serious by someone so much older than me before. He had so much more experience than I did. He'd worked for decades, and I had no idea how many tough decisions he'd had to make.

Maybe I shouldn't have answered him with such self-importance. This was a conclusion he'd agonized over all on his own for so long, and maybe the only thing I should have done was to respect that decision. However, honestly speaking, I didn't think I could shoulder that responsibility. Whatever his reasoning, following his request would mean their lives parting.

The sight of Julie during our meal passed through my mind. I could see the look on her face as she'd been talking about Ned. It was far from the face of someone who was suffering in their current situation.

"Have you said any of that to Julie?"

Ned shook his head, a dull half smile making its way to his lips. It was the smile of a man who had given up on everything.

"She wouldn't let me go. She's kind. Kind enough to stay with me, a half-witted forgetful old man."

I wasn't sure if I should be saying any of this. It was probably rude. And yet I decided to say it, not only to protect myself but also because of the expression Julie had worn sticking firmly in my mind.

“Ned, you should talk to Julie about this. You’re playing a fool’s game here.”

Perhaps I shouldn’t have called him a fool. The moment the words passed my lips it felt like I’d done something that couldn’t be *un*done. Even so, the words reached him, and he looked back at me with wide eyes.

“You might have lost those memories, and maybe your emotions have gone back to those of your youth, but that’s no excuse. You’re acting like some self-righteous scholar convinced he has all the answers. Think about how Julie feels rather than your own sentimentality. What will happen to her if you’re not there?”

The expression on his face made him look awfully young. He looked more like a clumsy student, ignorant of society, than the adult with a wealth of experience that he was—almost like a friend the same age as me.

“I can’t take you with us. I think you and Julie are both good people. I can’t do something that would hurt one of you...or even both of you.”

My blood was rushing in my ears as I finished. A strange sense of elevation settled over me, like standing on a precipice, and I almost felt like I was going to throw up from the nerves.

Ned gave a single word of understanding and then fell silent for quite a while.

“I don’t know whether thinking so selfishly is how I’ve always been, or a trait I picked up because of losing my memories,” he said eventually.

“A self-righteous scholar, huh?” he continued, letting out a clipped laugh. “You might be right there.”

I didn’t know what to say for a moment, but eventually I muddled my way through an apology.

“Um, sorry, I went too far there.”

He waved me off, then turned to me looking invigorated for some odd reason.

“I’ll always be grateful for someone telling me how it is like that,” he said. “You’re right, Keisuke. I’ve been thinking too much about myself. I’d been worried she’d eventually abandon me. Still, I should have spoken to her first before I asked you something like this.”

“I really am a fool,” he added with a laugh. “It’s been a while since someone called me one.”

I hunched over in apology as his joyous laughter continued, but he just told me not to worry about it.

“It’s bizarre,” he said, getting up. “I’d worried about it so much, but now I feel free. I’ll go talk to Julie before I forget how I feel.”

His attitude had changed like the sky clearing of clouds after a sudden rain shower. He put his arm back out of the tent, standing half-stooped at the entrance.

“Sorry for bothering you so late. Thanks for the talk. Have a good night,” he gabbled out and then left, the faint sound of his running footsteps trailing in his wake.

I could only watch the change in him and then his departure, left behind and at a loss. Then all at once a heavy fatigue settled on my shoulders. I didn’t know if his sudden brightening was due to his personality, or maybe something he’d gained in exchange for those memories. Either way, I was jealous.

Yet I regretted what I’d said to him. It hadn’t been real advice, and there were probably other things I could have said. Even so, I could only pray that things went well for him.

I turned off the lantern and lay back down. Strangely, I felt sleep approach within moments.

4

Breakfast was ready by the time I woke up. I’d completely overslept.

Ned and Julie were acting the same as before, but Nito was looking at me with disappointment. We enjoyed the breakfast they’d made for us before we set about getting ready to leave.

“Follow this road, and when you cross the mountains there’s a crossroads. There’s a steam workshop around here,” I told them as we stood gathered around the map. “There’s a man named Vandyke that lives there, so you should

be able to get your car checked and resupplied.”

“Is he mist or fog?” Ned asked.

“What do you mean?”

Julie gave a slight smile as she wrote things down in a notebook.

“It’s an old idiom,” she told me. “There used to be a big difference in engineers’ skills. If they were skilled then the steam would come out as a mist, while if they were bad you’d get a blast of fog and the engine’d never be right again.”

If that was what they wanted to know then I could answer with confidence.

“You’ll get the best mist ever.”

“I see, I see.” Ned nodded. “I’ll rest easy having heard that from you.”

As I folded the map, I surveyed Ned surreptitiously. Last night almost felt like a dream, but it couldn’t have been. I wanted to ask what had happened afterward, but I was also a little scared to do so.

Ned noticed my look while I was warring with myself and gave me a wink. Then he did something a little strange—he got down on one knee, taking Julie’s hand. She looked back at him in confusion.

“Julie, I’ve never met such a wonderful person as you, either before I lost my memories or now. I’ll love you forever, even if I forget everything. Would you marry me...again?”

I heard a sharp gasp from my side. Nito was standing there covering her mouth with both hands, her ears reddening. I felt just how she looked. His proposal was full of emotion and I was embarrassed just hearing it. Julie’s face wrinkled into a smile, but it was the smile of a lovely young girl.

“I will, I will. Of course I will. I’d love to. It’s funny though, Ned. I never imagined I’d be getting a proposal at this age back when I was younger.”

Ned stood back up and moved closer to her. The gray-haired couple each wore identical smiles on their faces.

“That’s what makes life enjoyable, right? We’re not done yet either. We’ve

still got traveling to do. Let's see the world!"

Julie joyfully took Ned's hand.

"That sounds wonderful," she said.

Nito's hands came together in energetic applause. I soon joined in.

"Oh, I'm so embarrassed," Julie said. "We're really not acting our age."

Nito shook her head wildly, whipping her hair into my arm several times.

"That's not true. It's wonderful!" she insisted.

"My, my. It warms my heart to hear that from you, Nito," Julie replied, leaning down to grab Nito's hand. "You enjoy your journey too. The world has grown much quieter, but it's still beautiful."

"Right," Nito answered after a short pause.

While the two of them were talking, Ned moved stealthily over to his vehicle and beckoned me to follow.

Huh, what does he want?

I walked over to him. When I arrived, he passed me a long and thin cloth bag. I accepted it, bemused, and looked up at him. Ned smiled as he spoke.

"It's the blow poke. I want you to have it."

The moment I processed what he'd said, I tried to hand it back.

"I-I can't take this. It's amazing."

"Right, right, it's definitely amazing." He nodded in satisfaction.

No, that's not what I meant.

I'd understood all too well when I held it last night. The handle fit in Ned's hands perfectly. It was a tool he'd had for years upon years, which added to its value. No matter how much money you had, you couldn't buy time and care in the same way as some precious gem. Regardless, Ned curled my hands around the blow poke.

"You know," he said, "I've met another otherworlder before."

Suddenly, I was lost for words.

“It’s strange. I’ve forgotten so many things and yet I still remember that vividly. When my dad was still around, he brought a man home with him once. The man called himself Albert; he lived with us for a summer and helped with the wine, painted pictures, and rode horses. He was a cheerful man, with all sorts of weird stories. One day, he told me—no one else—that he came from another world. Then, not long after, he vanished.”

“I... Why?”

Ned shook his head.

“I don’t know. Back then, though, every country in the world wanted otherworlders. I think he’d escaped some country or other, and he left so he wouldn’t cause us any problems.”

He’d escaped? Why? Why had he run? Wouldn’t the country have been protecting him?

“He was the one that gave me that handle. I shaped it and have had it with me ever since. The horn was originally from a fout, a creature that lives deep in the forest and can apparently only be hunted by the elves. I still don’t know how he got hold of it...”

Ned trailed off, looking toward the bag in my hands—and the tool inside it.

“When you told me you were an otherworlder,” he continued, “I knew that I’d made it this far so I could give it to you. That which was received from an otherworlder should be left to an otherworlder. Passing it on to you feels meaningful to me.”

With my hands curled around it where he’d left them, I couldn’t push it back.

“Are you sure? It’s precious to you, right?”

“That’s exactly why I want you to have it. I’ll be gone before too long, and then what’ll become of it? It’d be a plain old blow poke. Well, it wouldn’t get any blowing so it’d just be a poke. If you use it, though, you can carry my thoughts and memories with it and so it’ll remain what it is now. Isn’t that wonderful? Would you do that for me?”

I nodded in answer to his question.

“Great. Now then, let’s talk about the payment for those mana stones you shared with us.”

Ned opened the vehicle’s side door to reveal where the back seats would usually be. They’d been removed, and the area housed things like wooden crates and cases instead. A mattress lay off to the side as well, probably serving as their bed when night fell. Clothes and various other bits and bobs hung from the interior walls, making a calm space that was almost like a bedroom. Ned lifted up the lid of a small case that sat right at the front.

“I’d recommend this,” he said.

Lined up inside were wine bottles. The black and dark-green bottles all had faded labels attached to them.

“I made all of these,” he told me.

“You know I can’t drink, right?”

“The drinking age is fifteen here. Wine’s the best medicine you can ask for, too, so you’d get away with drinking it from about ten, even. Besides, what purpose do they have if no one drinks them?”

Ned fished out a bottle and rubbed his thumb over the label.

“This one’s a forty-three-year-old vintage. We had an awful harvest that year and got very little wine out of it. The flavor of what we did get was exceptional though. This one’s from when I first got Le Touant.”

“Huh?”

Bottle by bottle, he discussed each of them in turn. I wasn’t really familiar with wines, but they all sounded amazing from his descriptions. Eventually Ned calmed down and scratched his head slightly in embarrassment.

“Ah, sorry about that. It’s been a while since I’ve had a chance to talk about my wines, so I got a little carried away. Anyway, I made them all and I’m sure anyone you met that had a thing for wines would be able to tell.”

“It sounds more and more like I shouldn’t take them, then. I don’t even know what makes a good wine.”

“You might not, but someone you meet may well. What’d you do if they had

something you wanted to trade for?”

I gasped in understanding.

“You can scavenge towns for money and jewels. So the only things that really have value anymore are ones that you can trade for items of the same value. Someone that knows their wines would consider these a treasure, so they might prove useful eventually,” Ned added with a teasing wink.

I hesitated for a moment before giving my answer.

“I’ll take your recommendation then.”

“All right. Go with this one.”

I accepted the black bottle of wine that he’d chosen. He then plucked out and offered me another bottle.

“And this is for your wonderful advice. Thanks to you, I got through this without losing something even more precious than my memories.”

5

Once the boiler heated up, they boarded their vehicle and we prepared to see them off.

“You really helped us,” Ned told us. “Who knows what would have happened if you hadn’t been there? We enjoyed meeting you too.”

“Likewise. Thank you for everything too,” I answered.

“If you follow this road for around two days, you’ll find the town of Barcia. If there’s anything you need, gather it there.”

“We will. I miss having a bed,” I admitted.

“Me too,” Nito chimed in.

We all laughed together. I could feel the farewells approaching. Before that, there was something I wanted to ask.

“Um, it’s just a little thing, but why did you decorate your car like an elephant?”

Ned's face brightened like a child's.

"You know elephants too! So I got it right. That's great! He told me about them too. He said that steam houses needed to be elephants. Then he painted a picture and showed me."

I felt kind of awkward about it considering his repeated cheerful exclamations, but I had no idea what any of that was supposed to mean. I had enough good sense not to ask though.

"It's time for us to head off. You both take care," he said eventually.

"Right. You two be well."

Ned stuck his hand out from the window and I grabbed hold of it, giving it a shake. Julie leaned forward from the passenger seat and waved with a smile. Nito returned the wave. The dull roar of steam echoed around us as the pistons started moving, giving off even more of a racket than the Kettle. Their vehicle lumbered off and began climbing the mountain we'd descended the day before. Its figure was soon completely hidden by the trees.

Once they'd left, the only sound was the rustling of leaves. The silence made the isolation even more pronounced. I climbed aboard the Kettle, but Nito remained rooted to the spot, looking after the couple. Suddenly she gasped as a whistle sounded through the mountains. We didn't even need to think about who it was.

Two short blasts. One long blast.

One short blast. Two long blasts.

"What does that mean?" I asked after a pause.

Nito turned back to me with a bright smile.

"It's another ship's signal, one praying for a safe voyage. Um, can I reply?"

I nodded, of course, and surrendered the driver's seat to her. She bounded over and settled her small frame into the seat.

"This is the whistle," I told her, indicating a small knob at the far right of the gauges. "Turn it to the right to sound it."

Nito nodded and hesitantly twisted it, her face slightly reddened with nerves. It let out a blast of sound.

“Wah!”

The volume made her jump and pull her hands in tight, clasped in front of her chest. Slowly, she stretched her hand out again and sounded the horn once more, this time with surer movements. The blasts echoed several times through the mountains before fading. Nito took her hand from the knob, and the whistle once more fell silent.

“And what about that one?” I asked.

She paused for a moment before answering.

“It means ‘thank you, and you have a safe trip too.’” Then her voice dropped to a mumble. “I hope they heard us.”

“They did, don’t worry,” I told her; I was sure they’d have understood her feelings.

Wind blew through the area, setting the trees swaying. The sunlight streaming over the mountains scattered through the leaves, dancing around us like a thousand beads of light.

We were sending our prayers for a safe journey via whistle as we parted, a consideration for people we might never meet again as we watched them leave and prepared to continue our own journey. The idea tickled at my mind. There was a saying I’d seen in a book somewhere. The words had stuck with me, and I’d read them over and over. The memories had faded, but I eventually found the phrase I was looking for.

“Parting is such sweet sorrow.”

Nito looked back at me.

“It’s a saying from my world.”

Nito repeated the words as if tasting them before she turned her gaze back to the mountain pass. She seemed to be searching for the form of the couple’s vehicle, which was no longer visible.

“It’s a lonely saying,” she said.

“But we’ll see them off with a smile, right? After all, they’re going on their honeymoon.”



[Keisuke’s Notes] Mana Collapse

It’s something I still don’t understand. One day, mana overflowed in this world and started turning people and things into crystals. It was the beginning of the end. I wonder what caused it. The whole thing must have been chaos.

Intermission — Scarlet for the Bonfire

Ned had told us that we'd arrive in Barcia in around two days. *That should make it tomorrow, then.*

Dusk had approached while Nito was doing her usual painting, so we'd decided to camp by a small brook nearby. I picked out the smallish twigs from the wood we'd gathered and used a knife to shave them down into chips. I added thin twigs on top of the pile of shavings, followed by fallen leaves and completely dry chunks of wood, before putting a lit match to it all. Getting a fire going had a trick to it, but I was more than used to the process by now. I moved the fire to a makeshift kiln made of a circle of rocks. That would be my kitchen for the night.

I laid out the groundsheet and sat down cross-legged before opening a long, thin cloth bag. Inside was a blow poke, separated into two pieces. There was a screw thread in the middle which I used to join them back together. The handle was smooth and adhered slightly to my hand—a fascinating sensation that I could have enjoyed all night. This was the blow poke Ned had given me.

"All that grinning is creeping me out, Keisuke," Nito said, breaking the silence.

She was crouching in front of me and giving me a steady glare. *Whoops, guess my feelings showed on my face.* Clearing my throat with an "ahem" to distract from the awkwardness, I moved the tip into the bonfire. Blowing air through it made the flames flare up.

The veil of night was slowly drawing in over our surroundings. Pretty soon this bonfire would be finished. We needed to get some more firewood ready before that happened. I put the blow poke to the side and pulled a log of driftwood closer instead. I'd found it on the riverbank, so it had probably either rotted away from a big branch or was just a much thinner one that had broken off entirely. The wood had dried completely, making it the best thing for a bonfire.

I pulled a hatchet from my backpack. I put on leather gloves and removed the covering over the blade. Getting up on my knees, I grabbed the haft with both

hands and took several practice swings. *It'll probably split right in two if I hit a crack*, I thought. Nito steadily watched the tip of the axe as it moved through my swings. The utter seriousness on her face made *me* feel nervous.

This is weird. Why does it feel like I'm not allowed to mess up?

I carefully checked over the path the blade would take, took a deep breath, and then brought the blade down in a single motion. The blade bit into the wood right where I'd aimed and pretty much split the entire log in two; only a small portion on the front had held together.

"Whoa..."

Nito's impressed gasp filled me with a simultaneous rush of relief and accomplishment. Well, it was only splitting some wood, but men have a habit of getting too into things when there's a girl around. I whacked the driftwood against the ground several times until it fully split apart. Laying it back down, I hefted the hatchet up and swung it once again—hit, break. I did the same thing over and over until the log became a bundle of firewood.

As I pulled the spice case out of the wooden box, I started thinking about what to cook for dinner. The meat was probably getting toward being unusable now. It'd be best to finish it off tonight. We'd eaten nothing but meat for the past few days, and the thought of doing so yet again gave me pause. Despite how much I'd longed for it while I'd been stuck with canned food, it was wearing on me pretty quickly. *My stomach is apparently fussier than I gave it credit for*, I thought sarcastically.

I was pondering using the cans to pull something together when I had a sudden thought. I pulled a notebook from my bag.

"Nito, would you do me a favor?" I asked, offering it to her.

She soon understood.

"You want me to find a recipe?"

"Right. I'm stumped."

The notebook was the handwritten recipe book Vandyke had entrusted me with. All the recipes were in this world's writing, so obviously I couldn't read it.

“Something with meat, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

She flipped through the book looking at recipes. Every so often, she suggested one and read out the salient points. I passed on a lot of them because we didn’t have the ingredients, or the tools, or they were too difficult for me. Eventually, she found something that would work and I set about cooking.

“I’m sorry. You’re always the one cooking,” Nito mumbled a few minutes later as I was cutting up the canned ingredients.

“What brought this on?”

“You do basically everything: cooking, driving, even lighting fires and gathering water. It feels like I’m not pulling my weight.”

I was about to laugh it off and tease her for being overly formal until I looked at her. There was a serious look in her eyes that made me stifle my laughter. I at least knew how to tell when you could or couldn’t brush something off with a joke.

“Well, it’s because you’re here that I bother to make proper meals. Plus, with you reading the recipes I can make new meals as well.”

“That doesn’t feel like something you need me for.”

“It really is. I’m not all that fussy when I’m on my own.”

With Nito here, though, I felt responsible. I couldn’t just revert to my old pathetic lifestyle, so I’d grown into a relatively upstanding person. Above all else, though, I was grateful not to be alone anymore. She probably wouldn’t understand just how much that meant to me.

“Besides, it’s thanks to you that the car even runs. You’re like an investor, and you’ve been a massive help.”

“I did pay for it,” she admitted. “But you’ll be able to find lots of money and jewels in the town, right?”

“Hmm...”

She was right; there would be banks, shops, and houses in a town. I could

gather them up and pay off my debt.

“There will be cars too,” she added.

We’d met in an abandoned station on the water, and circumstance had pulled us both to Vandyke’s workshop. Then we’d agreed to carry on our journeys together for a time because our interests had been aligned. Once we arrived at the town, though, that would no longer be the case. At the very least, I would be able to get money and Nito to get a car. There would be no more reason for us to travel together.

The thought left me reeling. That hadn’t even occurred to me. At some point, I’d come to see traveling with her as a fact of life. Though we had only met a short time ago, it felt like we’d spent months together.

“Guess so,” was all I could wring out of my throat; I didn’t know what else to say.

Nito read out the recipe and I followed her instructions. There was no other conversation. We ate together in the firelight, the sound of cutlery standing in for words. After a quick cleanup, all that was left for the night was to sleep. I would be in the tent and Nito would be in the back of the Kettle. One of us would leave for bed first.

I sat in front of the fire and sipped at some water. Occasionally I’d tend to the fire by using the blow poke to shift the wood around. Nito sat next to me with her hands wrapped around her cup, gazing into the fire.

The nights in this world were absolute, with no artificial illumination around. The soft moonlight cast over the area and the dim glow of the firelight were all we had to rely on. If I didn’t tend the fire and keep it fed with firewood, it would soon go out, as simple as that. The difficulty lay in not letting it go out. It was much like my own feelings.

“Say, Nito,” I heard—my own voice, the words falling from my own lips—and then felt her stir next to me. “Why are you looking for the Golden Sea?”

We’d spoken about the place in her mother’s painting, the one she’d called the most beautiful place in the world, several times. I wasn’t sure whether she’d set out on a journey just to chase a memory.

No reply was forthcoming. Eventually, as a small twig in the fire burnt scarlet and fell to the ground, she spoke.

“She often talked about her journeys. She’d gone here and there, painting countless pictures. She had lots of notebooks back then and used to tell me about all of her memories from traveling, like they were stories, because I couldn’t leave my room.” She seemed to intuit the question I wanted to ask and she gave me an empty smile. “Until recently, I was an invalid.”

“You don’t seem like one. ’Specially considering the mouth you’ve got on you.”

“That’s got nothing to do with it. I’d say I was born with this personality,” she told me, glaring harshly.

It was just a joke...

“It’s called mana deficiency syndrome. Have you heard of it?”

“Nope, first time I’ve heard the phrase.”

Nito puffed up as she spoke somewhat proudly.

“There wasn’t a single doctor that could tell why, but ever since I was born, unless there was plenty of mana in the area, I couldn’t move. They filled my room with mana stones and that finally allowed me to survive. I’m essentially a steam vehicle.”

Nito laughed at her self-directed joke, but I couldn’t do the same. I could tell just from the description that it was a life-threatening condition.

“You seem fine now though,” I prompted.

“The mana collapse was essentially the world filling entirely with excess mana. I was nearly dead because of a lack of mana.”

I gasped in realization and Nito nodded to confirm my thinking.

“It’s thanks to how dense the mana is that I can walk around like this. Ironic, isn’t it? Thanks to the world’s destruction, I’m free.”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that, but Nito carried on regardless.

“Anyway, we’re off topic. In the past, I had to stay in my room, so all I did was

read and learn painting from my mother. I loved the tales about the pictures in her notebooks more than anything. I'd ask about them each and every day because she was always so happy when she talked about them. But..."

It took a long time before she continued. Hugging her knees, she looked steadily into the flames.

"They were probably all lies," she finished. "I never saw her paint."

"Didn't she teach you how, though?"

"She just coached me. She'd look at my paintings and say, 'You need to do it more like this,' or things like that. In retrospect, it all sounded like tips written in books, and I've never seen anything she's painted outside of those notebooks."

Several counterarguments came to mind. For example, that she used to paint but didn't anymore. All of those arguments were things Nito would have easily thought of herself though, especially when she must have wanted a reason to believe far more than I did.

"When she died, dad got rid of all the notebooks and said he'd never seen her draw. He said she'd probably picked them up at some antique store and made up stories around them. I argued against it lots back then. But I'm not sure anymore... Maybe they were made up. So..." Here she turned her gaze on me, her eyes looking far too grown up for her age as they narrowed slightly. "I want to know if she really did make it up. I don't mind if she did; it was all for my sake, after all. But I don't want to die still not knowing whether to believe her or not. I want the truth to be clear."

I'd never had words stab so sharply into my chest as when she said that she didn't want to die not knowing. I'd never thought I'd hear those words come so easily from someone younger than me—she'd fully accepted her death. She didn't want to have regrets when that unavoidable day eventually came. It reminded me of terminal patients writing down lists of things they wanted to do before they died. Her words brought home the current state of this world and, at the same time, the fact that I was now part of it.

"I'm sure it exists," I said eventually. "The Golden Sea isn't something your mother made up."

“You think so?”

“I do,” I insisted.

I had no foundation for my insistence. I knew myself that it was just a temporary comfort, so all I could do was make sure I said it with conviction. Even if my words held no real meaning at all, they were all I could offer.

A smile appeared on Nito’s lips as she nodded in agreement. I looked for something else to say. I was sure there was more I should add, but everything I came up with felt empty. Words with no thought behind them were just sound waves, vibrating the eardrums without reaching the heart. That was all the more true if you didn’t believe them yourself when you said them.

The world was vast, and people were vanishing faster and faster as the world moved slowly but inexorably toward its destruction. What point was there in journeying in this situation? What would come of searching or hoping for something? After all, at some point you’d vanish too, dying as a pile of those white crystals.

I was traveling in search of that black-garbed man. I didn’t honestly think that I’d find him though. I just had nothing else: no reason to live, no reason to stay in this world. This journey was like a worthless voyage of self-discovery, just me averting my eyes from reality and running away. There was no point in living in this world anymore.

“Let’s head off to bed,” I said.

“Right,” she answered after a pause.

Even so, I hoped she would find what she was looking for—the Golden Sea, the most beautiful place in the world. The place that her mother might have made up.

If that place existed somewhere in this world, then I could still believe.

[Keisuke’s Notes] Crystallization

Why do things and even people turn into crystals? The ground, plants, and even buildings are all turning into white sand. The sight’s strangely surreal, and even a little beautiful. It makes me shudder to think that even though people have died, all that’s left are those mounds of crystal.

Chapter 4 — A Hazy Phantom Gray in the Distance

1

A town stood up ahead. Stacks of vivid orange roofs piled together as the buildings stretched in clumps along the foothills of a mountain. The road we'd been on was just compressed dirt, unmaintained and littered with potholes. The tires sank fairly easily into them, and if we had sped up, it would've been a bumpy ride. As we approached the town, though, it turned into a paved path and the Kettle became much more comfortable to ride in.

The town had no fence or wall surrounding it, no clear demarcation between inside and outside. A handful of houses and old-looking huts just sort of gradually started lining up along the road, and then all of a sudden the scenery changed to crowded buildings like we'd crossed some invisible threshold.

"There's...no one here," Nito murmured, her forehead pressed against the window.

The homes on either side of us were mostly boarded up. The odd one or two had windows or doors broken in, revealing their interiors, but they were all dark. Despite all that, remnants of the lives once lived inside them clung to the homes. Even with no people around, the city had a certain—almost unpleasant—air to it of a place that people had recently lived. The buildings hadn't yet fallen to the wind and rain, and it was too clean to call a ruin.

I pulled back on the throttle and dropped our speed, the Kettle slowing to almost a crawl. Looking out of the windows was almost like looking into a movie. The absence of all the people that you'd expect to be around in a town like this made the sight lose all sense of reality. I'd felt this same sense of unease multiple times before. It was a bizarre sensation of floating around off the ground, almost like vertigo. My head always went fuzzy when I saw this kind of thing; I could never fully accept what I was seeing.

I looked carefully around as if trying to find my bearings until my gaze

suddenly stopped on a two-story building. It had a big pair of double doors, one of which had been knocked over. As we passed in front of it, the midday sun had illuminated the interior, showing that it had racks of clothes inside.

I stopped the car and pulled the reverse lever. The Kettle began to back up.

“Did you see something?”

“I’ve been wanting some more clothes. A nice shirt if I can find one.”

“The shirt you’ve got is great. It’s lived in.”

“Thanks for that.”

I kept my eyes on the mirror as I steered the car back and finally to a stop right in front of the store. I grabbed hold of the crank handle on the door and spun it to roll the window down.

“You’re not getting out?” Nito asked after a puzzled pause.

“Something seems odd.”

Though I hadn’t come across any yet, that didn’t mean this world had no people in it that would do us ill. The possibility remained that survivors would be lying in wait somewhere, particularly in a town like this. I wanted to avoid the risk of the Kettle being stolen, or of Nito being harmed.

I strained my ears but could hear nothing. A cautious survey of our surroundings also revealed no signs of anyone. Finally, I opened the door and got out. Craning my neck to look inside the building, I could see things like a thick coat and work wear on display.

“That’s probably not cashmere. You coming, Nito?”

“No,” she decided eventually. “Just bring me back something nice.”

“Keep watch then, if you would. Blast the whistle if anything happens.”

There were two steps leading up into the store. As I climbed them, the stairs creaked under my feet. Once I’d gotten over the broken door, I was inside. Racks of clothing formed narrow walkways. Wooden poles mounted above, just within reach, also carried clothing. The dim store was full of the scent of dust and musty cloth.

I picked up a nearby piece of clothing and found that it looked well worn. That wasn't just from the passage of time—someone had worn the clothing before. I supposed this must have been a secondhand shop. It had a plethora of clothes. Finding stuff I wanted would probably be a big ask. I didn't think I'd enjoy window shopping after too long.

Further inside I found a counter. It held a lantern, a metal box, and a huge tabletop sewing machine. There was cloth lined up on the machine and the needle was piercing through it, like whoever owned this place had just been sewing. The corridor going even further back past the counter probably led toward where they'd lived.

I circled around the counter, taking a deep breath.

A small stool stood in front of the machine. Sitting atop it was a mound of white crystals, and a yellow dress had fallen down to twine around its legs. Round-tipped shoes poked out from underneath the hem. The clothing lying there told me nothing about the person. There were no memories here, just a pile of broken crystal. No one was even left to grieve for them.

How on earth had these people's lives just stopped one day?

I felt like a spike was driving itself through my temple and I suddenly lost the strength in my legs. Staggering, I put out my hand onto the counter. The crash of something falling rang out. When the almost anemic feeling had passed, I opened my eyes. The metal box had fallen onto the floor and its lid had burst off, sending coins and notes scattering out.

Right, money. Yeah, I need to pay Nito back... I thought vaguely. As I crouched and reached out for it, I heard a whistle from outside. In a flash, it sounded again and my hazy mind suddenly cleared.

I burst up, my legs holding my weight this time, and sidled quickly through the clothes, shoving my way through the last row of hangers as I sprinted out of the door. The sunlight stabbed into my eyes now that they'd become used to the dingy interior and I couldn't keep them open, even in a squint. Shielding my eyes with my hand, I raced over to the Kettle.

"Nito!" I called, putting my other hand on the open window frame.

She was half-sprawled across the driver's seat, gripping the whistle's control knob. She stayed in that position as she looked up at me.

"Keisuke, look," she said, pointing out of the windshield at the road stretching away in front of the Kettle.

The bright light reflected off the flagstones, washing everything in white and making even outlines hard to distinguish, but I could still see a person standing there. Eventually, I got used to the amount of light and could make out that the person was wearing a green dress that pooled on the ground. It was a woman.

"The witch?" I asked.

The figure standing there seemed so divorced from reality that it was all I could think of. It felt like she would vanish with the next gust of wind, standing as she was in the center of an utterly deserted town. Her long hair suddenly seemed to sway as she moved off to cross the road.

"Keisuke, let's follow her!"

Nito's yell brought me back down to earth. If that woman was the witch, then we had reached our goal. Even if she wasn't, we could ask her for clues.

I pulled myself back into the Kettle and lifted the throttle.

2

We roved around the town searching, but—almost as if it really had been a dream— we couldn't find the woman. The sun had finally begun to set and the shadows of the houses around us were lengthening. With no streetlights or house lighting, the town began to fall into complete darkness. There weren't any trees or plants around either, so it was even more desolate than the nights in the forest. Everything just felt cold and lifeless.

I pulled up alongside a row of traffic bollards. There were no lights in the town, but the headlights of the Kettle revealed dirty flagstones and reddish-brown brickwork.

"I wonder where she went," I mused.

"I think she'd have gone home," was Nito's eventual answer.

“Did she even exist in the first place?”

“Don’t say such scary things,” she admonished, glaring unhappily at me while wrapping her arms around herself in a hug. “She should be somewhere in the town. I don’t know if she’s the witch, but...”

If the woman we’d seen was indeed real, then Nito was right that she’d probably be in the town. However, we’d found no sign of her. The town was too big to just search at random by driving around it in a single car.

“Well, let’s look for somewhere to stop for the night.”

The sun was already well on its way down, and there wasn’t much time before it would be fully night. It was too late to properly set up camp; we’d gotten too caught up in our search. There were no rules on where we could camp, and we could have just set up the tent right where we were, but Nito didn’t look too happy about that prospect.

“We’re stopping in the town?”

“We can use the beds in some house, maybe? Though it might also be nice if we found an inn or something.”

Nito put her face against the window’s glass and looked up at the three-story apartment building next to us. When she looked back at me, there was a definite frown on her face.

“It’s...a little...scary,” she said, the words leaving her mouth slowly, one at a time.

“You slept in the mountains just fine though?”

“That was a different fear, or maybe just unpleasantness.”

I looked out of the window myself. I could understand how, with no lights or signs of life, it felt peculiar to be surrounded by so many man-made structures. Windows and doors lined the road in regular rows, but they were all pitch dark.

Back when I was a kid staying at my grandparents’ for the summer, I’d been terrified of the storeroom at the end of the second floor and of the looming closet. It had always felt like something was lurking inside of them. The actuality of whether something would come out or not hadn’t really mattered; even

though I'd known that it was impossible, I still hadn't been able to calm down.

I'd slept in plenty of abandoned villages and towns since then, but I still sometimes woke up in the dead of night, utterly convinced I'd felt someone going past the room I was staying in. Whether that was just the eerie environment getting to me or just me imagining things or what, it still meant I couldn't get a good night's sleep afterward. Nito was both unused to this and young, so she'd obviously be more sensitive than me.

I grabbed hold of the wheel again and put my other hand on the throttle.

"We'll keep looking for the witch tomorrow. Let's leave the town for tonight."

"I'm sorry," she spoke up after a few moments.

"I was a little scared too," I admitted.

I sped up, holding the wheel, and started driving down the middle of the road. Abandoned vehicles stood cluttered along the roads, making them much narrower and in some places even impassable. I kept us to a moderate speed and progressed slowly, keeping a close eye on the road in front of us. We'd gone all over the town looking for the dress-clad woman, so I had absolutely no idea where we were right now, but I knew if I followed the road, we'd get out eventually.

The road narrowed abruptly and we came to a T-junction. Two potential paths stretched out to the left and right. Without any real thought, I pulled the wheel over to the left.

In the next moment, there was a huge crashing noise and the Kettle shook. For a second, it felt like we were floating, and then a hard shock of impact traveled up through our backsides. Panicked, I stepped on the brake while pulling back on the throttle. A drum of water fell from the roof past the windshield, hitting the ground with a thunk. Then everything went quiet; utter silence filled the car, except for the ringing echo in my ears that might well have been my imagination.

"Are you okay?" I asked finally.

Nito looked back at me with wide eyes.

“Just shocked.”

“Me too.”

The car had pitched forward, and about half of the windshield was now looking out directly over the ground. The flagstones were broken, revealing the dirt underneath. I must have just gotten the front wheels stuck in some kind of sinkhole without noticing. The Kettle’s headlights barely lit up the sight in front of us, but I could still make out a few other details: several of the drums of water had fallen from the roof carrier, and there was a drop of about half a meter from the car to the ground. The Kettle was sort of bowed forward, but I could feel that its back wheels were still on the ground.

I pulled the reverse lever and slowly lifted the throttle. The Kettle began to move back ponderously, but then I heard another crunching impact and hurriedly stopped it once more.

“Um,” Nito spoke, looking at me.

“Yeah...” I answered, looking fixedly out of the windshield with my hands still on the wheel.

“You heard that sound?”

“I did...”

“Was that... Just maybe...”

“You don’t need to say it. I’m thinking the same thing.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever wanted something to be my imagination this badly.”

I stayed still for a while, my hands remaining on the wheel as an uneasy silence filled the cab. Sitting there motionless wouldn’t change reality though, so I knew I’d have to make a decision and act. I twisted around and stretched to reach the back seat, fetching the lantern before opening the door.

“If I don’t come back, call the police.”

“What are the poleese?”

I didn’t answer, just took the slight hop down out of the listing car and stood

for a moment on the ground. A warm wind was blowing through the twilit town. I closed the door and crouched, lighting the lantern, then stood again, lofting it into the air.

The Kettle was well and truly stuck. There was pretty much a vertical drop in the road, and the Kettle had grounded itself across it. If we didn't shove something into the gap to make a slope, we'd never be able to get up out of the hole.

The connection between the Kettle and the auto-trike had taken the difference in level. The sudden drop had lifted the rear of the Kettle, which had broken the metal fittings between the two vehicles. The pole attaching them had warped, and me trying to force the Kettle back might have even been the cause of that.

I sat down and just gazed at the metal fixture. It was obvious at a glance that it wasn't fixable. I'd quite clearly done something which could not be *un*done. The blood drained from my face as I rubbed at my temples. I heard a door open and close, and then timid footsteps coming toward me.

"Shall I call the poleese?"

I gave a rueful laugh at Nito's question.

"I'd love to, even if I *would* get arrested for driving without a license."

Even without the metal frame, I could probably use some rope to tow the auto-trike. It was precious to Nito, and full of her luggage, so I had to do *something*.

"Sorry," I told her. "I should have been more careful."

Nito was crouched across from me, her hands resting on her knees. She peered at me from within the ring of lantern light, on the opposite side of the metal fixture.

"You couldn't have known the road had gotten this bad. I don't think it's your fault."

Still, I should have paid attention to more than just the steering wheel. I'd let myself get too relaxed on the deserted roads. I couldn't help but sigh. As things

were, we couldn't even leave this spot, let alone look for the witch.

I scrubbed at my face. What to do? I had never had this happen before. I'd never learned or been taught the way out of this kind of situation, so I didn't know what to do. The world had already fallen; I wouldn't be able to find someone to help, so I'd just have to think it through myself. The answer wasn't just going to be lying around.

My head felt numb, and my mind was overcome by a strange swirling sensation. It would have been better if I were alone. If no one was with me then what I did wouldn't affect anyone else. My failures wouldn't matter, and I could choose when everything ended. Nito was here now, though, and I had a responsibility for her life. I hadn't realized how simple, or how heavy, such a thing could be.

"Keisuke."

The voice was right in my ear, and I shot up in shock. At some point, she'd come around and crouched next to me.

"Are you...okay? Are the poleese that scary?"

She was utterly serious as she spoke, and I couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"Why are you laughing? How rude."

She pouted and frowned at me. It must have worried her to see me slumped over and covering my face at a time like this. I couldn't let myself go in front of her like that. I slapped my cheeks to get myself thinking straight again and then put on a smile.

"Of course I'm okay," I said, before searching for what to say next and deciding on: "Let's have dinner."

I couldn't think of a solution, and just sitting around like this would worry her. I wanted to take my mind off things and calm down a bit. While I wasn't actually hungry, the actions of cooking were familiar and comfortable, so it would make me feel much better about things.

Nito looked lost for a reply at first, but eventually nodded. I moved toward

the Kettle's rear doors, which were near the ledge. The car was at an angle, but it wasn't difficult to get things out. The crash into the sinkhole had scattered things all over the place though; after a bit of a tidy-up, I pulled out the box of cooking utensils and my backpack.

This situation was familiar to Nito, and she'd laid out the round groundsheet. Our surroundings were completely covered in a blanket of darkness, but the Kettle's headlights lit up the area ahead of us and the lantern sufficed for the space directly around us. I poked my head back into the rear of the vehicle and dug around for some cans from the box stuck between the seats.

As I did that, Nito had gone down into the hole. Her shadow stretched out across the pool of light from the Kettle's headlights. She approached a drum and checked whether it was empty. The first one apparently was and she carried it easily, putting it at the side of the Kettle. The second she heaved heavily up on, trying to lift it into the air with two hands but unable to move it.

"I'll take over."

"Sorry..."

"You'll get back at this thing someday."

I moved the drum over near the ground sheet and took my shoes off before stepping onto it, sitting cross-legged and getting out the Svea from the box. I lit it and put a frying pan on top, drizzling in some oil to warm. When I opened the round can I'd gotten from the Kettle, I found thick slices of fish that looked somewhat like mackerel inside. I put two of them into the frying pan and loosened them with a tap of my wooden spatula. They soon started to cook, a delicious smell wafting up off of them.

The tall, cylindrical can had whole tomatoes inside. I turned down the Svea a little and mixed them in with the mackerel before letting everything simmer. I opened the seasoning case and added some sugar along with a pinch of salt and a good helping of powdered stock. Once I'd roughly measured those three spices in by eye, I mixed them through the dish.

The juice from the mackerel and the tomatoes thickened eventually into a sauce and began to bubble. I retrieved some water from the drum with a pot and swapped that with the frying pan, turning the heat up. Light leaked out

from underneath the pot and made the area much brighter.

A glance up revealed Nito was crouched with her arms around her knees, watching the water within the pot. I had no idea what the expression on her face meant. She might have been angry, or even depressed. I couldn't blame her for either. I still wished I'd been able to do things better. I knew that regretting things *now* wouldn't help in the slightest, but I still couldn't shake the feeling.

Before long, bubbles floated up from the bottom of the pot, steadily increasing in number. I added a pinch of salt to the water before opening an oblong can. Inside was dried yellow pasta. One handful was a serving, so two handfuls would do for both of us. I lifted out that amount and broke the pasta in half—the noodles were too long to fit in the pot otherwise—then added it a bit at a time to the water.

There was no cooking time listed on the packaging like back home, so I had to decide how long and gauge the time on my own. I pressed the button on my watch to switch it into stopwatch mode. The pasta sank slowly to the bottom of the pot and the seething water calmed. As I watched, the bubbles started getting stronger once again.

"When I paint," Nito suddenly said, "it never goes like I wanted it to."

The topic was out of nowhere, but I guess Nito must have been sick of the silence.

"But you're so good at it."

"I'm just a beginner. I've painted enough that I know what to do to make them *look* good to other people, that's all."

Don't put it so deeply, I thought with a twisted smile. I didn't get what she was trying to say. Her paintings were utter works of art; they probably would look right at home in a museum. I supposed what she'd mentioned must be something only people involved with the art itself would understand.

"With oil painting, you paint over it from the top, and you can shave off the paint if you want. With watercolors, though, the more you paint over them, the dirtier the color gets. You can't get the white of the paper back. Once you paint

it, you're stuck with it."

"Sounds difficult."

She nodded.

"When I was learning with mom, I did nothing but screw up. I sulked that I couldn't do it right and threw things away before I'd finished them. When that happened, she used to tell me 'there are no mistakes in painting, just surprises.' I never used to understand what she meant by that."

Nito paused and glanced up at me, frowning.

"It's incredible when things go the way you want," she continued. "But then you're limited to your own imagination, and nothing unexpected will appear as you paint. You can make beautiful paintings, but that's all they'll be—just beautiful... I'm sorry, I can't put it into words, but... They're not mistakes, they're surprises. And that goes for you too."

That was when I finally realized that she was trying to make me feel better. She was using a somewhat roundabout example, like an adult might, and it just came out clumsy and indirect, but her kindness shined through all the same. I could tell how hard she was trying, even though she'd never done this before, and I couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"You're awkwardly kind, huh?"

"Is that supposed to be praise or criticism?" she asked, frowning more and glaring at me with a red tinge on her cheeks. "You only get one chance to answer."

"Praise, of course."

I was happy for her concern but also felt pathetic for making her worry about me. I imagined smacking myself on the back and saying that I couldn't keep fretting in front of her. It had nothing to do with being older than her or acting as her guardian. No, it was the simple male instinct to look cool in front of a girl. Even that trifling thing showed its worth, making my heart feel shockingly lighter.

I mixed the pasta around in the pot with a fork. It had gone completely limp,

taking on the water to grow heavy and glossy. I checked my watch and noted that it had been about the right amount of time. When I took one of the strands to taste test, it had a good bite to it.

I brought the frying pan with the sauce over and used the fork to scoop up the pasta from the pot into the pan. Once the pot only had water left in it, I put it onto the ground and set the frying pan back over the heat. I mixed it to cover the pasta entirely with the sauce. Once it had warmed up a bit, I took the pan off the heat and handed Nito a fork and bowl from the box.

“There we go, done. Pasta special with mackerel and tomato sauce.”

“I see. It seems tasty.”

She was still sulking like a kid as she took the utensils from me and almost stabbed the pan to dish the pasta up into her bowl. After a brief word of thanks for the meal, she rolled some pasta onto the fork and filled her mouth. Immediately, her eyebrows rose and her eyes went wide before closing in bliss. She let out an almost pained groan, her puffed-up cheeks moving as she chewed and swallowed. Then, she wordlessly let the fork clatter against the bottom of the bowl.

“Was it good?” I asked.

“It’s incredible,” she answered honestly, despite her anger, which made me laugh again.

I took some pasta for myself and ate a big forkful with plenty of sauce. The sharp spice and scent were ameliorated by the acidity and sweetness of the tomatoes. All together, it brought a new depth of flavor to the light taste of the canned mackerel. The pasta in this world tasted strongly of flour and wheat, so I wasn’t a huge fan, but in this case it went perfectly with the sauce. The more I put in my mouth, the richer the flavor became.

We ate, utterly focused on the pasta. To think that dinner could taste so good even with the world in ruins, sitting in a pitch-black and deserted town, our car having plunged into a hole next to us. It was such a simple truth, but I only realized it there in that moment.

Even when we’d finished, we hadn’t had quite enough. Nito was looking

longingly at the pan, and there was still sauce inside it. I stood up and put my shoes back on, going over to the back seat of the Kettle. I searched through the cans and eventually found what I was looking for. When Nito saw the cans I'd brought back, her face brightened.

After lighting the Svea again and putting the sauce on to warm, I opened the smallish, rectangular can I'd just brought over. The food inside had a rather strong scent that prickled at my nose, and a deep yellow color—it was cheese. I put it on the chopping board and used a knife to cut it in half. The one piece went into the pan, and as I stirred it through with the spatula, it started to melt into strings.

Next, I opened a cylindrical can and took out what was practically a log of bread. I divvied it up into four pieces and cut about halfway through each piece before cutting up the cheese that was left and putting a bit of it inside each piece of bread, making tiny sandwiches. I took the pan off the heat and used the Svea directly on one sandwich. It would start to burn fairly quickly, so I went in bursts, moving the bread toward the heat and quickly away again. As I did, the bread gradually heated up.

Once both sides had browned, I opened it up and saw that the cheese had started to melt and spread across the warm and fluffy bed of bread around it. A skin had formed on its surface, and when I poked at it molten cheese gushed forth like magma. I used a fork to scoop up the tomato and cheese sauce with shreds of mackerel and slathered that generously onto the bread. I offered the sandwich to Nito and she took it with sparkling eyes. Even as I moved to start on my own portion, Nito just stayed there, holding it in both hands, waiting.

"You can start," I told her.

"No... I'll wait," she said, biting at her lip to hold back.

By the time I'd finally finished making mine, I was worried she might just start drooling. As I bit into my own sandwich, Nito opened her small mouth as wide as she could. The crunches of us each taking a bite merged into one. Our gasps of surprise, the exhalations out of our noses, and even our sighs of contentment were all in sync as well.

Ah, cheese. The big cheese had arrived. What a thing—cheese the almighty.

I nodded contentedly several times. The canned cheese was a priceless treasure, rarely seen. Maybe they just hadn't made much of it, but either way I was sure everyone would have used up what they had before long.

When we'd had the sauce with pasta, the tomatoes' invigorating acidity and sweetness had enveloped everything. Now, the cheese brought all the elements together and gave the dish a strong savory flavor. It was rich even in texture and went utterly perfectly with the bread. The only other ingredients were tomato and shreds of mackerel, and those were leftovers at that. There wouldn't have been enough for a full hamburger or sandwich with just the leftover sauce, but melting in the cheese had stretched it to a full-fledged meal. The combination of the sauce dollops and the crispness of the bread was to die for.

I took a glance at Nito to see her small frame swaying from side to side. Her eyes were screwed shut and there was a grin on her lips. Just seeing her expression was making me happy as well.

Oh, so that's what it is, I realized. *This is happiness.*

It was such a simple thing. I was full of emotion, and yet all we were doing was eating delicious food. Could I even call that happiness? Was it even right to feel happiness in this world, what with the fact it was in ruins and scores upon scores of people had just vanished into nothing?

As I watched Nito munching cheerfully away at her sandwich, though, those worries floated away. The moon had appeared in the sky at some point, along with the stars, and it felt almost like the sky here was the same as the one from my world. The town was pitch-black, the Kettle had fallen into a hole, and the auto-trike was no longer connected to it. These were irreversible failures, but perhaps you could indeed just call them surprises. If we hadn't hit that hole, we wouldn't have had this meal here.

"Nito," I called.

She looked up at me with utter innocence, her cheeks still stuffed and a smudge of sauce at the edge of her mouth. Her rounded cheeks reflected the flickering flame from the Svea. She tilted her head in question, and I suddenly became all embarrassed and shook my head.

“Nah, never mind.”

I didn’t yet have the courage to honestly tell her “thank you.”

3

The pasta and bread ended up being rather filling, and strangely calming as well, so we’d gone to sleep pretty quickly afterward. Nito had slept in her auto-trike, while I’d set up my tent next to it. She was still scared of the darkness-shrouded town, but we’d covered the windshield with a sheet and then she’d managed to calm down and sleep. Personally, I’d meant to think over how we’d get out of this until I drifted off, but I’d fallen asleep the moment I’d lain down, and the tent was already bright when I came to.

In the end, our rescue mission began with me running my fingers through my bedhead to get my hair back in order and looking things over with a sleepy gaze.

“Let’s get the luggage down first,” I decided.

“The luggage?”

The Kettle had a roof rack atop it made of metal poles. Tied down to it with rope were drums of water and boxes of mana stones and cans, along with things like pots and pans that would be fine even if they got wet. The impact of falling down into the hole had sent the load askew, but the majority of it was still up there.

“Whether we go forward or back, I think it’ll be easier if we’re carrying less.”

“I see. I’ll do my best!”

“I hate to tell you when you’re all fired up like that,” I said, looking at her clenching her fist, “but you’re doing the stuff in the car.”

She deflated a bit, pausing for a long moment.

“Is there something wrong with me?” she asked eventually.

“No, it’s just the weight.”

“I have weight,” she insisted.

“It’s a matter of scale.”

“I can’t believe this,” she grumbled, before setting about sorting the luggage in the car.

“Get the fragile stuff out of the way, like the wine we got from Ned.”

“Right.”

I untied the rope from the roof rack and got each drum and box down one by one. I took breaks as I worked, but I was still done in by the time I’d gotten them all down.

“What next?” Nito asked.

“Hmm, what indeed?”

She looked at me silently.

“Quit looking at me like you’re thinking, ‘You have no idea? Unbelievable.’”

The bright sunlight now illuminating our surroundings made the situation clearer. The hole took up most of the width of the road with a circular collapse. Reddish earth was visible at the bottom of it, and it was about as deep as my knees.

“I guess we were lucky. We’d have been done for if it were deeper,” Nito opined.

I nodded back. Not only would we not have been able to escape, the Kettle would have ended up abandoned. I noticed that several flagstones had dropped inside the hole, probably from the original road surface.

“Say, you see those stones?” I asked, crouching at the edge and pointing.

“I do,” Nito answered, crouching next to me.

“If we piled them up by the tires, do you think that might work?”

Nito put her finger to her chin and made a thoughtful noise before looking at me with an inscrutable expression.

“It is worth the attempt.”

“Don’t you think you’re getting a little too into things?”

“Just a bit,” she answered after a pause. “I mean, it’s like an adventure novel. Working your way out of danger is exciting.”

“Ah, right.”

There was a slight flush to her cheeks, and her nose was twitching restlessly. This was a different reaction than I’d expected from her. It struck me that she was actually rather bold...

Well, it’s hardly any surprise. She did *set off on a journey on her own...* This was way better than her crying or being angry, in any case.

“Let’s get started then.”

“Let’s!”

Seeing her move away and hop down the drop made all the strain from yesterday just drain away.

“I really thought I’d screwed up. Look at her enjoying herself though,” I muttered to myself.

There was no doubt in my mind that her brightness was what had saved me.

She’d immediately picked up an armful of stones and tottered back. She put them behind the front wheels of the Kettle and then let out a sigh.

“Why are you just sitting there watching?” she demanded.

“I was just thinking the weather was nice.”

“You can sunbathe later.”

“Actually,” I told her, “I’m solar powered.”

“Then get up and work while the sun’s still up.”

She chivvied me along and down I went into the hole. It was hard work shifting the stones, but we realized that we only needed to fill in the two front tires’ worth of space, so we managed to finish before noon.

“I wonder if this’ll work,” I said.

“Why would it not?”

The slope of broken stones was rather uneven, and it looked like a good kick

would collapse it.

“Well, I guess we only need to use it once,” I decided.

“Either way, it’s not me driving at least.”

“Hey, I can hear that smugness,” I said, glaring at Nito as she whistled tunelessly and turned her face completely away from me.

That was the truth of the matter though: unless I could drive it well, the Kettle would lose its balance again. I crouched down in front of the fruit of our efforts and gazed at the slope, still somewhat uneasy.

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Yeah, looks like it’ll fall pretty easily,” I said, looking up at Nito.

She shook her head at me, looking around in a panic.

“Up,” she said. “Look up.”

I did as she said and soon saw a man half hanging out of the window of a three-story apartment building. He took out the cigarette from his mouth and breathed out a plume of white smoke before smiling at us.

“How about it? Fancy a trade?” he called down.

It was a complete bolt from the blue, and I couldn’t muster a single word. Nito rushed behind me to hide. The man didn’t wait for a reply, just cheerfully yelled an “I’ll be right down” before vanishing from the window.

Is he shady? I thought, my mind racing. *Uh, right, a weapon. I need a stick or something. Ah, I’ve got the gun. Maybe I should get that out.*

Even as I had the thought, I didn’t move. Eventually, the door to the first floor opened and the man came out wearing a huge backpack. He came over, pausing by the auto-trike to set his bag down before walking the rest of the way to us. I could feel Nito pulling on the back of my shirt.

“You don’t need to be so nervous. I’m Jack, a traveler.”

“I’m Keisuke. A-A traveler,” I imitated in a tiny voice, unable to think of anything else to say.

I heard a slight sigh of wonder from behind me.

“I’m Nito. Also a traveler.”

“Well, aren’t you happy about that,” I chuckled.

She was looking smugly back at me, apparently pleased by the appellation. The man calling himself Jack bent at the waist and gave her a cheery greeting. He gave off the air of a cheerful older fellow, and he didn’t seem to be a bad person, at least at a glance.

“You’re in a tough spot though, huh?” he said. “You’re better off not driving in the town at night. You never know where you’re gonna fall.”

“Did you...see?” I asked hesitantly.

“Sure did. I was sleeping up there,” he told us, pointing up at the window from earlier. “It was a right racket, so I wondered what’d happened.”

It was embarrassing to think he’d seen our failure. I wanted the earth to just swallow me up. Well, come to think of it, there was a convenient hole that’d do well enough right in front of me...

“You could have *said* something,” I protested.

“You wouldn’t have wanted an old guy like me coming up to you at night, would you? Plus, there’s a kid with you. I didn’t want to deal with all that wariness.”

Nito seemed to realize that he meant her by “kid” and poked unhappily at my arm. That must have really irritated her.

“Why turn up now, then...?”

“I just got up and when I took a look I saw you were gonna try that unstable slope,” he said, dropping down into the hole and scrutinizing our work. “I don’t think it’ll take the weight.”

“Ugh.”

Considering I’d driven it into the hole in the first place, I didn’t have much confidence in my driving, frankly. Plus, I’d already thought that it looked like a good kick would take out the slope.

“So, about that trade.”

“What is it you want?” I asked cautiously, deciding to hear him out.

“It’s nothing massive,” he insisted, waving a hand. “I just want you to take me to the bridge.”

“To the bridge?”

“It’s a little past the town. It’s called the Soralt Bridge. I was going to walk to it, but a working car would be heaps better.”

Nito and I exchanged glances, holding a silent debate.

“You just want a ride?” I asked.

“Right. I don’t mind the back seat, or the roof even.”

After a brief moment of worry, I quickly came to a conclusion.

“Okay then, sure.”

I still wasn’t entirely convinced he was on the level, but that was inevitable with us not knowing each other. Taking him to the bridge was no big deal. The important thing now was to get the Kettle to safety, as unharmed as possible.

“Great, thanks!”

Jack looked up from inspecting the hole and held his hand out toward me. Cautiously, I gripped it and gave him a handshake. He was so relaxed I almost felt stupid for my reticence. It must have been the composure that comes with age.

Jack rolled his sleeves up and hoisted a fist-sized rock off the ground near his feet, then started digging at the exposed dirt.

“Um, what are you doing?”

“We’re on the clay stratum here,” he said as if it was obvious.

Sure, the clay stratum... So what?

Nito and I could only watch wordlessly as Jack gathered the reddish-brown earth together into a mound. Then he gathered up smallish rocks and fragments of flagstones and put them on top of it. When he didn’t have anything suitable, he broke apart the flagstones.

“This is water, right? I need some.”

He took one of the drums we’d removed from the Kettle and poured the water onto the pile of clay and stone fragments before mixing it all together by hand. Eventually, it started to harden until it looked like a massive, sopping-wet lump of bread dough. He picked up a handful of the mixture and slapped it onto the back of some larger flagstones, laying them along the top. There was no hesitation to his movements, and soon he had the drop buried in rubble and formed into a smooth slope. He then did the same on the other side before using the water drum to wash his hands. Then he rolled his sleeves back down.

“It’s pretty rough and ready, but it should stand up to a single climb.”

“Um...is this your job?” I asked.

He laughed shyly.

“Nah, I’m just copying.”

I didn’t think simple copying went that far. The ramps were still fairly damp, but they looked sturdy even at a glance. I wasn’t worried about driving up them.

“Whoops, hang on. They’re not dry yet, so you’ll need to give it four hours,” he warned.

That was going to be a fairly long wait. I folded my arms, wondering what to do with our sudden surfeit of free time. Nito, on the other hand, immediately went for her rucksack of painting materials. Jack looked at us both and laughed.

“Didn’t you come to see the witch?” he asked.

4

Rumor of this town had spread far and wide—the vast majority of its visitors came specifically to meet with the witch. Likewise, Jack had already gone to see her and knew the procedure.

“You *do* need to give her something precious to you in exchange for her answering your question though,” he’d advised before guiding us through the town.

That had given me pause. “Not like money or anything?” I’d asked.

“Nope. I don’t exactly get the metrics, but I’ve heard one person gave a pricey ring set with a sunset gray stone, and another person offered a beaten-up cloth marionette.”

So it isn’t about how precious the item is monetarily, but how much it matters to the person that owns it, I guess.

Knowing that we were after the witch, Jack had offered to guide us. Apparently, the witch had a house and it was within walking distance.

“Can this witch really be trusted?” I questioned, only to get a quizzical look from him; guessing that the witch’s reputation must have been common knowledge, I added an explanation. “I’m an otherworlder.”

“You are, huh? That’s new. Guess you wouldn’t know, then.”

His reaction was less dramatic than I’d expected, which felt like a bit of an anticlimax given how much importance I placed on the fact I’d just shared with him.

“Long ago, witches were commonplace in this world,” he explained. “There were also mages and training establishments for them. Nobles used to go about the whole business with sticks up their asses. Then steam technology powered by mana stones came about, noble society collapsed, and mages started to fade away. Magic’s out of fashion these days; steam’s more convenient. Anyone can use it, plus it’s cheap.”

“Huh... I guess it’s a tough world.”

“Not like you’re uninvolved,” he added.

“Wait, me?”

“The whole idea of steam technology came from one of you otherworlders,” Jack said with a broad grin. “Back then, mana stones were mana *gems*. They stored mana from the labyrinths, and people used them to have a fairly comfortable life. Plus, mages prized pure mana gems above all else. They were a symbol of magic itself.”

At some point, I’d gotten completely lost in the man’s voice. Jack was like a

professional storyteller, speaking clearly and with no hesitation.

“Then, one day, along comes an otherworlder. ‘Let’s burn those,’ he says. Do you understand what utter blasphemy that was? It was crazier than burning money to bake your bread. Either way, though, those precious mana gems gained the new name of mana stones, and burned away as mere fuel, without leaving a trace.”

“I suppose it’s what you’d call a revolutionary idea, or maybe a reversal of values.”

As soon as those words left my mouth, he pointed at me.

“There! That kind of thinking is what makes an otherworlder. Back then, magic was the cornerstone of civilization. People burning mana gems was tantamount to denying their whole lives, culture, and history. That otherworlder’s suggestion spread through the world and transformed it into something unrecognizable. Just because it was ‘efficient,’ we trampled over our past culture to reach prosperity.”

I understood what he was trying to say, but it was difficult to really put myself in their shoes. As far as I was concerned, people had been burning coal for generations for its energy—the concept was pretty mundane. I was sure the person that had thought up burning these mana gems and creating steam technology hadn’t thought too deeply about it either.

“*I* didn’t do any of that,” I stressed.

“True. Even if an otherworlder thought it up, it was us that accepted the idea and ran wild with it. Anyway, what I was trying to say is that even now that we’re at the height of the steam age, there are still people that have quietly inherited magic, and they’re called witches.”

“So they can use magic still?” I checked.

“Apparently. It’s rare you get to actually meet one, but they’re an old legend, and the legend says if you bargain with a witch, she’ll answer your question—any question—correctly.”

I looked at Nito and she nodded back. She’d told me so, but apparently witches were indeed a commonly known thing in this world.

“You could hear the stories from anyone back when I was a kid. The hero would strike a bargain with a witch, or the witch would trick a greedy merchant, stuff like that. It’s not like anyone knows how magic really works though, so people believe it’s probably possible.”

I suppose it’s like an urban legend. Those tales felt a little different than the whole pumpkin turning into a carriage thing or the princess being fed a poisoned apple though.

“You said you’d met her. Did she answer your question?”

Jack looked back over his shoulder and gave a somewhat exaggerated smile, the corners of his lips moving high up his face.

“Of course.”

Before I could ask what his smile was supposed to mean, he pointed forward and said we would be able to see the place now. I craned my neck and looked in the direction he’d pointed. Up ahead stood a two-story mansion with radiantly white walls. Spires rose up from the roof, like on a castle, and latticed windows lined each floor in a symmetrical array. A short stone wall surrounded the building, but the gate was open.

The closer we got, the more details were visible. As we finally arrived at the gate, Jack strode through without pause. More cautiously, Nito and I followed. A stone path led straight from the gate toward the mansion. In a rounded space about halfway along it stood a dried-up fountain with a statue of a lion-like creature atop it, roaring defiantly at us. All of the windows were closed, except one on the right-hand side of the first floor. Its curtain swayed in the breeze and loud singing issued out through it. It was opera, maybe—the clear soprano voice seemed to stretch out endlessly in beautiful song. Still, maybe the player was broken, or just simply old, as the sound wavered in volume and even occasionally cut out.

Jack climbed the three steps up to the main entrance and pushed the door open. He made no move to enter and just indicated the path.

“She’s in a room on the right. That’s where the singing’s coming from.”

“You’re not coming?” I asked.

“She’s got nothing for me now,” he answered with a shrug.

I looked at Nito to see her staring inside with a stiff look on her face. More than fear of the witch, it seemed to come from being nervous about finally getting her question answered. This was it. She was about to learn whether the Golden Sea existed—or rather, whether her mother had lied.

A dusty red carpet greeted us as we entered the mansion. A sweeping staircase stood in front of us, winding upward, and a large landscape painting dominated the hall. Corridors stretched out beyond open doors to the left and right, but even then the house didn’t look quite vast or maze-like enough to get lost in.

We followed Jack’s instructions and headed down the corridor on the right. Tall windows lined the high-ceilinged corridor, letting enough light in that it was almost strangely bright. The singing grew louder as we progressed until eventually it was clearly audible. Ahead of us was a fluttering curtain, the only one filled by the wind. The door to the room across from the curtain was wide open, and once we drew close enough, I poked my head through it.

The room itself had no window and was fairly small. The lack of natural light made it somewhat gloomy despite the full daylight outside; only a single lantern lit the room’s interior. A pair of sofas stood between us and the far wall, facing each other across a long coffee table, but no one was sitting on them. A single cabinet stood on the side of the room, and next to it a woman was perched on a thin-legged chair, languidly resting her cheek on the cabinet. On a small table in front of her sat a gramophone—a black box topped with a horn that spread open and drooped outward, almost like a lily—playing music that gave me shivers.

I wasn’t sure whether I should call out to her. There was a particular atmosphere to the room. Perhaps it came from the music, perhaps from the woman, or perhaps a combination of the two. Whatever it was, it made me hesitant to disrupt the scene.

The wind blowing in from the window in the corridor strengthened and the curtain rustled behind me. The woman suddenly raised her head and saw us. She straightened her back and stood up from the chair, eyes still sleepy. Her

dark-green dress billowed in the wind. This was definitely the same woman we'd seen in front of the secondhand shop.

"The witch?" Nito murmured, but it was less of an actual question and more of a confirmation to herself.

The woman's eyes softened slightly, and her painted red lips alone seemed to come into sharp relief against the rest of the room.

"You have something you are searching for, don't you?"

Nito's shoulders trembled.

"Come inside," the witch said, seating herself on the small sofa on the far side of the table.

Nito and I were both bewildered, but we couldn't just stand in place forever. Carefully, we entered the room and sat across from her. The witch sat elegantly straight-backed, her long legs pressed together and angled off to one side. Even her fingers on her lap were completely gorgeous. I straightened without meaning to.

"I will answer," the witch began, "a single question. The answer will be either an affirmative or a negative, and you only get one chance to ask. Very well?"

She wasn't speaking to me, but to Nito. Somehow or other, she knew that it was Nito that wanted to ask something. Nito was still tense with nerves as she gave a halting nod, her head moving like a rusted hinge.

"Also, as payment, I will take something that is precious to you. Have you brought such a thing with you?"

Nito nodded again, looking down at the item she had been holding all this time. The thing she had pulled from the Kettle when Jack had told her of the witch's conditions was her mother's notebook.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

It was, without a doubt, the thing most precious to her in the world. Her whole journey had started because of it. She looked up at me and nodded. I had no doubt she would have agonized over it far more than I was, but there was no hint of hesitation in her eyes.

“I don’t have anything else irreplaceable,” she told me. “Besides, I know all the pictures by heart.”

Nito leaned forward and held out the notebook. The witch also moved slightly forward and stretched out her hand to take it. She caressed the old cover and looked once again at Nito.

“This is bursting with your memories of a certain important place,” she said. “I can see several vivid images. This was your father’s...no, your late mother’s notebook, which you inherited. I see. That will be sufficient.”

Nito’s eyes were wide.

“H-How could you tell?”

The woman didn’t give her an answer.

“Now, ask your question. Consider it carefully, though, as you do not get a second chance.”

Nito’s fists clenched in her lap, creasing her dress. I remembered our conversation around the campfire. She had never been able to leave her room, and the pictures her mother had showed her from that notebook, along with the stories about them, had been the only beauty in the world for her. But then her mother had died and she’d realized she didn’t know whether those stories were the truth or not.

Nito was searching for the Golden Sea, but I was sure that what she was actually searching for was the truth. She wanted to know whether her mother’s tales—which had supported her mind and soul for so long—were actually true. That was without a doubt the reason she had traveled across this dead world. If she could confirm that the places within her mother’s notebook were real, then she could believe that the tales she had been told of the most beautiful place in the world—the Golden Sea—were also true.

But, I thought, *what if they’re not?*

“Does the place called the Golden Sea exist?” Nito finally asked.

She waited intently for the reply, her eyelashes quivering with the effort to not blink, refusing to miss even the slightest shift in the witch’s expression. The

witch took her gaze directly. Time seemed to stretch out, and I stopped breathing. As a smile made its way onto her lips, the witch spoke.



“It does not.”

I was certain I heard Nito gasp.

“Unfortunately, there is no place called the Golden Sea in this world.”

Silence settled over the three of us. The gramophone in the corner echoed, and then the beautiful, but painfully out-of-place, soprano voice suddenly vanished as even the music fell silent.

“I...see,” Nito answered, her gaze falling.

The sunlight streaming in through the open door lit up the back of her head in silver as her hair fell in a shadow over her face. I heard her murmur another soft “I see.” I thought she might be crying, but when she raised her head, there was a smile on her face.

“That’s a relief. Thank you.”

Then, seeming to realize I wanted to say something, she preempted me, adding brightly, “I’ll go out ahead. You should ask whatever you want to. You don’t often get the chance to meet a witch.”

She stood up and left the room, and I followed suit immediately.

“You don’t have a question to ask?” the witch queried.

I stopped and looked back.

“Maybe some other time,” I said, bowing at the bemused woman before leaving.

5

After we left the witch’s mansion, I’d eaten wordlessly with Jack and Nito. By the time we’d tidied up, the slope had dried and we’d managed to get the Kettle out of the sinkhole safely. Obviously, though, we hadn’t been able to get the fastenings for the auto-trike back into shape.

We’d been driving in the Kettle a while before a bridge started coming into sight. Jack, who was sitting next to me, murmured nostalgically.

“Was the little lady’s answer not great either?” Jack asked casually.

“So you also didn’t get a good answer?”

“Any answer someone else gives you won’t be one you’d like to hear,” Jack replied, winding the window down.

He took out a cigarette from his pocket, lighting it with a match. After taking a pull, he blew the smoke out of the window.

“She seemed beat up about it though,” he added.

“You’re right...” I agreed reluctantly.

We’d gotten the Kettle out, so now I was taking Jack to the bridge to hold up my end of our bargain. Nito wasn’t with us, though, as she’d stayed behind with her auto-trike. She’d claimed it was to make things easier: that way we could just leave the luggage we’d removed from the Kettle there, and she’d keep watch and guard the things. I couldn’t exactly force her to come along with us.

“I can sympathize,” he added softly. “The more precious what you’re looking for is, the more disappointed you get.”

He took another pull. The smoke smelled really sweet.

I could imagine how it felt too. If I’d learned that the one chance I thought I had—that man in black—wasn’t part of the world anymore, then I’d probably be just as depressed. Finding him was the whole reason for my journey. That’s why, even after hearing about a witch that would answer any question, I couldn’t muster up the courage to ask one myself. If she told me there was no chance of finding the man in black, there would be no more reason for me to travel, and no reason for me to be here. If there was no reason, there’d be no point to anything either.

Eventually, we got to the bridge, and I stopped just before the crossing. Several abandoned steam vehicles that had rusted away in the rain and wind cluttered the bank. They were blatantly empty as well.

“It’s a big bridge,” I commented.

The structure was imposing, made of a mix of stone and metal. It stretched out completely straight to the opposite side of the gorge that lay below it,

supported by several arches cresting up from its foundations. It felt strong, as if declaring that it wouldn't waver with the ages, but also intensely lonely. The same sentiment struck me every time I saw man-made structures in this desolate world.

"Pops made that," Jack said.

I whirled around in surprise to see him smiling proudly.

"He was an architect that specialized in bridges. He made bridges all over the country, and he was the best at it. See, even without the inspectors to keep up on maintenance, it's standing strong."

He opened the door and got out of the Kettle, stretching his hips. The afternoon sky was a light blue, with thick, fluffy clouds flowing languidly across it. Water thundered through the wide river beneath the bridge, but there was nothing on the other side, just the road and the rolling plains of greenery and white sand.

"I'm finally here," he commented. "Man, it took a while."

"There's nothing but the bridge here."

"It's fine," he told me.

He smiled as he pulled his rucksack from the back seat and put it at his feet. Then he put his hands on his hips and stared up at the bridge, cigarette still between his lips. His expression was that of someone looking back into the past, toward nostalgia.

When his cigarette had burned down, he flicked it to the ground, stepped on the butt to extinguish it, and spoke.

"I crossed the continent to get here."

"That's incredible," I marveled.

I didn't know how big the continent was, but I knew it wouldn't have been some simple day trip. I'd been traveling in the Kettle for ages and hadn't exactly gone far. Jack took out a metal tin from his pocket—so scuffed up it shimmered as if coated in mist—and withdrew another cigarette from it, sticking it between his lips.

“Sorry for dragging you way out here. Thanks for the help.”

“It’s fine,” I told him.

“Make sure to cheer up your girlfriend.”

“Seriously, she’s not my girlfriend.”

“She’s not? Well, I guess she *is* a bit young.”

I knew these were the phrases leading up to a goodbye. Still, I didn’t move. Despite knowing that he probably wouldn’t appreciate my comment, I couldn’t just say nothing.

“You know nothing good’ll come from dying, right?”

His eyebrows rose, and he returned the cigarette to its case with a bitter smile.

“You’re a sharp one,” he said eventually.

“No.” I shook my head. “You just looked similar.”

“To who?”

“Me, a while ago.”

He laughed.

“Yeah, I suppose you’d get it,” he muttered.

“Besides, asking me to leave you somewhere like this is just bizarre. There’s nothing around.”

“Nothing around, huh? Yeah, guess not.” He nodded to himself, then mused, “But don’t you know, otherworlder? The world’s ended. This ain’t the only place; there’s nothing left anywhere.”

I couldn’t give a reply, but he wasn’t looking for one.

“I had things too,” he added. “I earned money at work, even if there wasn’t a point to doing it. I went out to drink on sleepless nights. I had a whole bunch of stupid pals, and we’d go out betting it all and then losing it all on cards. I even had a woman I fell for. But they’re all gone now, just piles of those shitty crystals.”

He turned back to me to make sure I was listening, knocking on the hood of the Kettle twice.

“This world’s culture, its people—it’s all over. It’s warped. Whatever caused it and whoever’s fault it is aren’t important now. The sun’s set, and here’s the night. The age of magic faded away, and this time it’s the age of steam’s turn. We reap what we sow, burning away those mana stones like there’s no tomorrow. The only thing left is to have a drink and go to bed. If you have to sleep at some point, you can at least choose for yourself when to do it. Don’t you think that’s our final right as the lingering remnants of this world?”

I had no words to refute him. I’d thought much the same, after all.

I’d been dragged to this world somehow or other and found it in ruins. All I’d been doing was wandering the place at random trying to survive. I had no place to return to, and no place to go, so I just clung to the idea of searching for that man in black. He was the first person I’d met in this world and he had treated me like a friend, explaining the situation to me. If I hadn’t had the goal of finding him, I wouldn’t have been a traveler—I’d have just been lost.

“When you lose your objectives, hopes, destination, and home, living becomes tiring,” Jack added. “You should understand that well enough.”

I nodded in agreement.

“The only escape from this abandonment is death. No one *wants* to die, it’s just an option they choose because they see no other answer.”

I’d brought that gun to my head countless times in front of the campfire at night. I’d thought I might wake up if I pulled the trigger. Perhaps being in this world was a dream, and I’d wake up once I died. Being in this world not knowing the path I should take, or even what I should do, fumbling through the blackness without even any moonlight, was just— “Say, did you know?” Jack interrupted in an excessively bright voice. “When they make huge bridges like this, a small town gets built around it. The craftsmen and their families move in entirely and live there for years as they build it.”

He looked around the area.

“Sure, there’s nothing around now, but there used to be houses upon houses.

I was brought up here. Strange, ain't it, to think my hometown's a bridge. The house itself's gone, but I grew up watching him build that bridge. Pops's head was full of nothing but bridges, though, so I rebelled. Didn't want my life decided for me. I'd have ended up a bridge builder too, at that rate."

"I left twenty years ago," he continued. "I was living it up and then the world fell apart like this. It was too late, but I sent off a letter anyway. I figured I'd meet up with Pops here one more time, square things up before the world ended."

He looked at me and laughed bitterly.

"The witch told me that Pops died before he read my letter. He probably wouldn't have come either way, though. He'd have forgotten his worthless son by now."

"That's...not true."

"It's fine, don't let it bother you."

He looked up at the bridge steadily for a moment, then murmured just loudly enough for me to catch that he'd wanted to build bridges when he was a kid.

"Did the witch actually say that he died without reading your letter?"

Jack didn't answer, just shrugged. Something tugged at me, like I knew the piece that fit into this gap.

Suddenly, as if someone had clapped me on the back, the sense of unreality lifted and the world solidified in front of me, along with a strong conviction. The feeling might just have been because I wasn't from this world, or maybe someone had preordained this moment long in advance. Perhaps it was all just some strange coincidence. I didn't know the truth, but there was one thing I did know. I knew that someone else had been headed to this deserted place with nothing else around.

I raced for the door like something was pushing me forward, scrabbling for the back door of the Kettle and fumbling with the handle before finally managing to open it. Nito had taken out most of the luggage, but the box of unbreakables was still in there, with my clothes and other sundries and...a piece of folded paper.

I yanked that out and offered it to Jack, who had come to inspect my craziness in puzzlement.

“What’s that?”

I didn’t answer. It might have just been my own delusion, but my hands still shook at the premonition I’d had.

Jack frowned and took the paper, then unfolded it. He looked down at it wordlessly, falling to a seated position and covering his mouth. Eventually, I heard him weeping, unable to keep himself under control.

It was the map. The map that I’d found in that truck at the side of the road. The map that had the station on it, the town, and then the neatly drawn picture of this bridge, circled several times to mark it as a destination.

The truck’s driver had been coming here. *Here*, not to the town based on some rumors of a witch, but past that town to the bridge itself. I didn’t know what exactly he’d been heading here for, but I knew there were two people in this world that this bridge had been more than a bridge to. For them, it was a source of precious memories and a place to call home.

I looked away from Jack to the bridge itself.

Yeah, it’s a pointless world, I thought. Each and every person had lost something. Still, there were people living their lives as best they could. How strong were they that they could keep going like that, despite the pain of having lost what should have always been there for them? I stood there for a while, vacantly watching the clouds drift by.

The sobbing eventually stopped and Jack stood up, wiping at his reddened eyes.

“That picture is definitely Pops’s. Where’d you find it?”

I looked at the map he was holding and pointed to the area where I thought I’d found the truck. He mumbled in acknowledgment before looking up at me.

“Say, I’ve got a request,” he told me. “Let’s make a trade.”

He took out the scuffed metal cigarette case from his breast pocket and offered it to me.

“Would you take me back to that town? Looks like I’ve got somewhere to go.”

I nodded and took the case from him. Jack clapped me on the shoulder.

“You’re a lifesaver, peddler.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“They were people that went to remote villages in the past, trading for necessities. And, well, you’ve given me something I needed.”

There was far less hidden behind his smile than before.

Peddler, huh? That didn’t sound so bad. It felt better than just considering it as having been given something, or having taken it for myself. Instead, I was only taking care of it, looking for someone else somewhere that needed it before handing it over. That fit much more nicely, somehow.

“I actually took some of the water and fuel from the truck I found the map in. I’ll give it to you. You’ll need it if you’re journeying again.”

“That’d be great,” he answered after a pause. “Are you sure, though?”

“Yeah, I was just taking care of it for a while.”

Sure, I’d used some of it, but I could cover the difference with what I had from Vandyke.

“Let’s head back to town, then,” I suggested.

“Ah, would you mind waiting? I want to look at the bridge a bit more... Don’t look at me like that, I ain’t gonna jump. I gotta go meet Pops, so I need something to tell him about, that’s all.”

I watched him head off toward the bridge. He was walking steadily, so I figured he’d be fine. I got back in the driver’s seat to wait. There was something I had to do when I got back to the town. The song and the witch’s words spiraled around my head.

“You don’t have a question to ask?”

Chapter 5 — Olympia Green Awaits

1

The sun was starting to sink below the horizon, setting the clouds ablaze with yellow light, as we arrived back at Nito's auto-trike. A mound of water drums and boxes stood in front of the pit, and we still had no way to get the auto-trike moving. Nito was sitting atop one of the boxes, hugging her legs to her body. She didn't raise her head from her knees even as we came to a stop.

"I dunno what the witch told her, but you go cheer her up, boyo. I'm heading off for a walk," Jack told me, before putting his words into action and heading off up the road, away from us.

Cheer her up how? I wondered.

It was a bit of a point of pride, but I'd never had to cheer a girl up before. I'd have preferred the older man with all his life experience to not casually tell me what to do, just assuming I had the same value system as him. Either way, though, I couldn't just sit there for eternity, so I got out of the car and walked to her side.

Her silver hair fell in a cascade around her shoulders and almost seemed to blend in with the light of the setting sun. She wasn't taking any notice of even that, though, and was just sitting motionless, curled in on herself. I crouched down in front of her, opened my mouth...failed to think of anything to say, and softly closed it again.

The witch's words had completely stripped her of her aspirations. The Golden Sea...didn't exist. She had given up her precious notebook in exchange for finding out that the whole reason for her journey, the place from her mother's memories, didn't actually exist in this world. She had taken the revelation as utter fact.

"Nito," I said.

It was the first time in my life that I had ever spoken so softly to someone else. I didn't know whether it would work, but I wanted to get at least some of my feelings across to her. Nito's head rose slowly, as if weighed down. The setting sun cast its light across her face, which just made her reddened eyes more obvious.

"Keisuke, welcome back," she said and smiled at me—a weak smile that just showed her pain all the more.

I felt the urge to tell her not to force herself to smile. The only thing that held my tongue was that I knew, without even having to think about it, that she didn't want to worry me.

"Yeah, we're back..." I managed eventually.

"Where's Jack?"

"He went on a walk."

"Why did he want to go to the bridge?"

"Well, that's an interesting story, actually. I'll tell you the whole thing later."

"Oh? I'll look forward to it."

She didn't look even slightly like she really felt that way as she brushed her hair from her cheek and back over her ear, exposing its pointed tip. I remembered her telling me she was a half-elf, and her anger when I'd stared at her ears rather rudely on the day we met in the train station.

"Keisuke," she spoke again, her beautiful cobalt eyes looking at me. "Did you ask the witch anything?"

I simply shook my head.

"Shouldn't you?" she asked after a pause. "You might be able to find the person you're looking for."

While the way she'd worded it was slightly careless, there was no falsehood in her words. She really did hope that I could find him. At the same time, though, her voice held an undertone that made it clear that it was too late for her.

"Have you given up on the Golden Sea?"

“I haven’t given up on anything,” she answered. “It doesn’t exist. It’s not a real place, just something my mother made up for me. Don’t let it worry you. I’m okay. I’d thought it was a lie from the start.”

“Even though you were searching for it?”

“I mean, I was stuck in my room, wasn’t I? I couldn’t believe in a place that beautiful,” she said with a weak smile. “Mom told me that it was a secret place she’d never told anyone else about. She said that I was the only one she’d ever take there, that we’d go together once I got better. I knew that was never going to happen. After all, I was going to die stuck in my room.”

She looked up at the sky, her face twisting like she was holding down her gorge, gritting her teeth so much that *I* could feel her pain.

“But then, all of a sudden, the mana collapse happened.” Her voice was strangled with her emotions as well. “My mother, father, aunt, uncle...each and every one of them vanished. They all went away, and...then all that was left was me, the only one of us whose death wouldn’t have even mattered.”

Her head dropped again and I heard her nails dig into the edge of the wooden box, her fingertips going paper white. All I could do was give a brief hum of acknowledgment; it probably held no empathy, no consolation for her. I doubted I could truly comprehend her pain and sadness. I could *imagine* it, but I wasn’t so self-centered that I would try and use that pretense to console her.

“Everyone had gone, and I was all alone in the house. I couldn’t even die right. It was painful just staying there, so I decided to leave. I decided that I’d rely on that notebook and go on a journey—I’d go to the Golden Sea and keep our promise. That was the only reason I had left to live. My father had told me it was a lie, and I thought it was too, but I still wondered ‘what if’...”

Honestly, her world might have ended long before it fell apart as it had now. All through her childhood, she couldn’t leave her room and live like the other kids; she could only watch from the window and let her imagination run with make-believe stories and the tales of her mother’s travels. Living like that, day in and day out, couldn’t have been truly fulfilling. But then suddenly the world had changed, and she could live like a regular person.

Except that now the *world* was dying. I bit my lip. She’d had it way tougher

than I had.

“The most beautiful place in the world was something my mother made for me, a dream. *That’s* why it can be the most beautiful place,” she said, a carefree smile on her face as she bowed her head at me. “Thank you for everything up until now. It wasn’t for long, but traveling with you really saved me. We met so many people and saw so many sights, I drew so many things... It was the most fun I’ve ever had in my life.”

I couldn’t mistake the meaning behind her words.

“Your journey’s...over?”

“It is. After all, the place I wanted to go doesn’t exist.”

On her face was...

“So I’m fine here,” she continued.

...a beautiful smile.

She’d given her all, tried her best, and gotten results. This was the tired smile of someone satisfied with the effort they’d put in, and coming to terms with where they’d ended up.

“But I owe you money.”

“There’s lots of money in the town,” she answered.

“Your auto-trike’s broken still.”

“It’s fine. The fastenings are all broken anyway, and I don’t need it anymore.”

“I haven’t taught you everything about camping yet.”

“That’s okay. I won’t be camping.”

“I haven’t paid you back.”

“Paid me back? I already said, the mon—”

“Not that.” It wasn’t that, not at all. “I just...”

I scratched a hand through my hair.

Seriously, just...

I put my hand to my forehead and screwed my eyes shut.

“I owe you.”

“But I haven’t done anything?”

“You didn’t need to!”

You saved my life.

I’d been completely alone. No one had ever been at home, and things had just gotten cold and dark. There’d been no warmth in that house, no conversation. I didn’t remember ever going out with my parents. My family was just an empty vessel—it looked right, but there was nothing inside. The house was just a collection of walls and a roof to keep out the wind and rain, nothing more. That’s why I’d run away.

“I like seeing you eat my food.”

She looked blankly back at me.

“I can wake up and tell you good morning. We can eat together, clean up, and watch the world go by as we drive. When we take a break, you get out your easel and start painting with such a serious look on your face. I can get the food ready while you paint, and enjoy the breeze, and bask in the sun through the trees. Once the sun sets we can eat dinner and just chat around the bonfire. Then I can say ‘see you tomorrow’ and get in the tent. It feels amazing—like the world hasn’t even ended. Honestly, I’ve been surprised at how much I enjoy having you there.”

I knew why I hadn’t asked the witch anything: I didn’t want to go back.

The world was rotting. Sooner or later, I might also turn into crystals and die. I *knew* that. Even so, I didn’t want to give up my time with Nito. It felt like I’d found the family I’d craved for so long.

I stretched out a hand to her.

“Let’s make a deal.”

“What good will that...”

Even as she looked back at me in confusion, I smiled at her.

“I’ll give you back your dreams, so stay with me.”

“Hwhaaah?”

After a moment, she parsed what I’d said, and the tip of the ear poking out from her hair went bright red as her eyes widened. The reaction felt a little over the top, prompting me to quickly take a look at myself. I was on one knee, holding out my hand toward Nito. Somehow, I’d gotten into the same pose Ned had taken to propose to Julie.



I wondered for a second whether I should correct the misunderstanding, but I decided it didn't matter. It changed nothing about my wanting to stay with her, and I hadn't spoken a lie. Her face was still red as she looked at me and managed to gulp.

"Wh-What romance novel are you supposed to be from?!"

"Huh, so you read romances too. Guess that tracks."

"I don't want to hear it," she said, jerking her head to the side and puffing up her cheeks. "I don't know how you can say such embarrassing things with a straight face. You must have been dropped on your head as a baby to be so strange."

"I think you might be even better at chewing me out than at painting, huh?" I answered with a rueful smile. "So, your answer?"

A crease deepened between her eyebrows as she grumbled, glancing at me.

"What do you mean about my dreams anyway? What are you going to do?" she asked eventually.

"I'm going to go see the witch."

"And then...?"

"You'll just have to wait and see. It'll definitely be a surprise."

She glared doubtfully at me, while I just stayed there with my hand held out to her. Gradually, her right hand reached out and gripped mine, timidly—just by my fingertips. It was a clumsy and reserved handshake.

"It's a deal, then. Let's go. I'll show you what procrastination can achieve. Or maybe it's more like waiting for the right moment? Whatever."

"Are you supposed to be a philosopher or something?"

I pulled her up with an "it doesn't matter," and she stumbled forward off the box. I led us toward the Kettle, still holding her smaller hand in mine. Once Nito was in the passenger seat and I'd shut the door, I settled into the driver's seat and put my hand on the throttle.

"Um," she spoke. "What will you do when we get there?"

I pushed the lever up, letting the pressurized steam flow through the pistons and start shifting the Kettle forward. Then, gripping the steering wheel, I answered.

“Naturally, I’ll ask the *right* question.”

2

The door to the mansion was still open, the same song was playing, and the witch was even still leaning on the cabinet. Nothing inside had changed since the morning, except that the room was now much darker since the sun had dropped in the sky.

Upon noticing our arrival, the witch said nothing, simply standing and lighting a lantern on the wall. I sat down on the sofa, and Nito followed suit, still confused. The witch sat opposite us and looked at us with a gentle expression. She didn’t ask us why we were there.

I rubbed at my left wrist, thinking of the watch I always wore as a faint connection to my original world. It was certainly a precious item. I unfastened it and placed it on the table. The witch looked down at it and broke out in a smile.

“A tool from another world? It must be very precious to you.”

“It is. I inherited it from my grandpa.”

“He must have been a good grandfather.”

“The best,” I answered, looking back at the witch, trying to confirm whether my assumption was correct.

“Very well, I will answer any question for you. However, the answer will only be either an affirmative or a negative, and you only get one question. What is it that you want to know?”

“Well, there’s a *mountain* of things I want to know.”

I’d been thinking about what to ask the whole time. However, I was sure that whatever question I chose, it would have been pointless. There was only ever one question worth asking.

“Are you...a real witch?”

Nito let out a gasp—almost a scream, in fact. The woman and I merely held each other’s gaze, saying nothing.

My palms were sweaty with nerves. Maybe I’d been wrong. If I had, then I’d wasted such a precious thing and such an important chance in one go, all on a worthless question. *Still, though.* I clenched my fist. This was the right question.

The woman smiled at me like a teacher praising her student.

“That is the best question I’ve ever been asked,” she told me. “You’re quite right. I’m not a witch.”

I let out a deep breath and wiped my hand on my leg. I glanced at Nito to see her with her mouth agape, looking between the two of us. Her face certainly was a picture.

“You see?” I asked.

“See? See...what?”

“She’s not a witch, just pretending.”

As Nito closed her mouth and searched for a response, the woman interjected.

“How did you know?”

The inscrutable expression she’d worn until now had vanished as she looked at me with interest.

“The first thing that bothered me was how you’d acted when you took Nito’s notebook.”

“Her notebook?”

“You said that there were pictures inside, and that it had been her mother’s... She was surprised you got it right.”

“Th-That’s right,” Nito exclaimed. “I didn’t say anything, but she still knew that it had pictures and that it was mom’s!”

“It’s a common technique among fake soothsayers and stuff.”

I'd seen it on TV, and I was pretty sure I'd read about it too. That's how common it was. Even so, I hadn't picked up on it at all when it was being done right in front of me.

"That notebook's fairly heavy, and the cover's stiff. The paper itself is pretty thick, so you can guess that it's not just a normal notebook, but one for art. Also, watercolors use a lot of water, right? The paper distorts when it absorbs the water, so you might even be able to see the edges of the color."

I'd thought of this on the trip to and from the bridge with Jack. Driving was more time than I knew what to do with, so I'd had plenty of opportunity to think. Still, I wasn't *sure* that I was right, and the woman's expression was just a faint smile on her lips as she watched me.

"Then how did she know it was my mom's?"

"It looks fairly old, and there aren't many people who'd offer their own paintings as something precious to them. Besides, think back: you told her."

"I did?"

"She said that it was your father's first, but then noticed that was wrong from your expression and corrected herself."

Nito didn't respond. I continued anyway, wanting to get everything out at once.

"Jack asked her a question too, and she told him that his father had died without reading the letter he'd sent. That was wrong, though. He'd read it, drawn a map, and been heading to that bridge."

That was what had cemented it. The people of this world believed in witches, but they weren't something I'd come across before, so I could doubt them more easily. I'd started to wonder if she really was a witch.

"This watch," I added, looking at the woman, "is something I bought myself. You used the past tense to talk about my grandpa, but he's still alive."

"So you set a trap?"

"I did, and it confirmed my guess. You just pretend to have some mysterious power, but you aren't a real witch."

I was done. I'd spewed out all the words that had crowded up inside of me, and felt an almost physical weight of exhaustion settle onto my shoulders. The woman raised her hands from where they'd been resting on her lap and clapped.

"You're right about me just being a soothsayer. I'm not quite so happy about the 'fake' part though."

"Why pretend...?" I asked.

"I never called myself a witch. People just started doing so themselves," she admitted with a reluctant smile. "I started off as just a soothsayer. What I did didn't change—the world did. Soothsaying is just providing a little push, showing someone the way when they're lost or worried. That little push can show people what they're really looking for."

"That...sounds complicated."

"Essentially, they can decide what to do with what they hear. If they don't like it, they can just ignore it," she said, then laughed. "But, once they knew the world was falling apart, people started searching for salvation outside of themselves. Giving someone an answer that comes from outside their own heart can set them at ease."

I'd never understand that logic. When I'd arrived here, the world had already ended, and everyone I'd met had accepted that.

"I just kept up my soothsaying for anyone that arrived. The people that come to me don't want to hear what *I* have to say. They already know the answer they want, even as they ask someone else for it, so I just infer that answer and give it to them. It puts them at ease, and they leave happy."

"But...isn't that..." I said before trailing off.

"Fraud?" she asked with amusement. "People will believe what they want to believe. That's always been the case. That's why people started calling me a witch—after all, isn't a witch more trustworthy than a soothsayer? I didn't deny it, just played the role for as long as there were people that needed me to."

"Then why?" Nito asked, finally opening her mouth and breaking her silence.

I'd thought she might be angry because of being fooled, but her voice was the same as always.

"Why what?"

"Why did you tell me that the Golden Sea doesn't exist?"

"Do you think you actually wanted it to?"

Nito's breath caught.

"You were traveling in search of it, but the question you asked wouldn't have told you anything about where it was or how to get there. You couldn't simply believe it existed. If you'd wanted it to, then you wouldn't have asked, you'd have kept your belief and just searched, right?"

The woman smiled.

"Even as you asked whether it existed, you didn't think it did. That was the answer you wanted, from the absolute authority a witch represented to you. Then you could stop clinging to your mirage of hope and escape the fear of betrayal. That's why I gave you the answer I did," she finished with a helpless shrug.

I'd ruined that.

A shudder ran down my spine at her words. It was from shock both that she'd read so deeply into Nito in that single instant, and that I didn't understand Nito in the slightest. I bit my lip. I'd screwed up. Maybe it had been a bad idea to just drag her along and unveil the witch's tricks. I'd just assumed that I could play detective for my own satisfaction, flush with the triumph of my deduction.

I was wrong, though.

Nito hadn't wanted the truth, she'd wanted an answer. Whether the answer was correct didn't matter, it just needed to be one that she could accept. The correct answer wouldn't necessarily help the person that had asked for it.

"You...might be right," Nito said. "I wanted to come here as soon as I heard the rumors. Then I'd know. I was devastated when you said that it didn't exist...but I was also relieved. I didn't have to worry about hating myself for doubting and believing her in turns."

She cast her gaze down. The room was silent. Still, her eyes were alight as she raised her head again to look at the woman.

“But now that I know that what you said was a lie, I’m even happier, even more relieved. It might still exist.” For some reason, she paused to look at me there before continuing. “I can still travel with Keisuke.”

Searching for the Golden Sea was her goal, her reason to travel.

“I guess that deal’s on, then?” I smiled. “I don’t want to travel alone, so I’m really glad you’ll be coming with me.”

“I’ve got no real choice, especially if you’re going to go this far.”

Slow applause broke across us like a wave. I looked to see the woman clapping with a bemused expression.

“I couldn’t read that at least. Right, it’s my loss,” she said, standing and walking over to the cabinet.

She opened the door and removed something before placing it on the table.

“I’m returning this, and yours as well.”

I took the watch back off the table and refastened it around my wrist, nodding. Nito reached out hesitantly, picking up her notebook and clutching it to her chest.

“Um...” she said eventually, looking up at the woman. “Can I ask a question?”

The woman looked slightly puzzled before smiling.

“You still have one? Sure, I’ll even answer it for free.”

Nito’s gaze wandered for a moment before she spoke.

“Please would you tell me your name? I can’t call you ‘the witch’ anymore.”

The woman’s eyebrows rose before she suddenly gave a languid smile. I wondered if the loneliness in her expression was my imagination or not.

“I’m Olympia. It’s been quite a while since I’ve introduced myself like that,” she answered. “Perhaps that’s the question that I was waiting for.”

As she spoke, Olympia offered her hand to Nito.

“Nice to meet you.”

[Keisuke’s Notes] Witch

I doubt they’re the kind going around giving out poisoned apples, but apparently the people in this world believe in witches. Witches, dragons, things like that—they all show up in stories, but they just don’t feel real without having seen them myself. Magic used to exist in the past, but was it anything more than what you can do with science and engineering?

Curtain Call — An Aurelion Dawn

Night had fully fallen by the time we got back to the sinkhole from the mansion. Jack was waiting for us by the auto-trike. We were too exhausted to bother with a big production for dinner, so we just took a handful of the cans and made a simple meal. Afterward, Jack quickly returned to his lodging—the apartment on the third floor he'd first called out to us from. We each gave a "see you tomorrow, then" as he went. It felt like the return of a lifetime ago.

I brewed some coffee over the Svea as Nito gazed at her notebook with a conflicted expression. An unpleasant darkness wreathed the town as it stood around us, but it also felt at peace. I poured the field coffee from the kettle into a metal cup, and then added sugar and two heaped spoonfuls of powdered milk. Once I'd stirred it through, I offered it to Nito.

"Didn't you say that stuff didn't taste nice?" she asked.

"You'll be able to drink this. Don't look so doubtful."

She hesitantly took the cup and brought it up to her nose to take a sniff. Then, warily, she took a sip. Her eyes widened.

"It's delicious."

"Right?"

"Why don't you normally drink it like this?"

"Because it's cooler to take it black."

She paused, considering me.

"Are you an idiot?"

It was a merciless indictment, but I made no rebuttal. It was true, after all. I'd left my own portion black, and the harsh, astringent, *bitter* taste prickled over my tongue as I drank it. My jaw tightened and I quickly regretted trying to play it cool in front of her.

"I can't get enough of that flavor."

“I don’t really get what you mean,” Nito admitted.

“You’re just too young to understand.”

“Then I’ll stay young forever.”

It...somewhat felt like she wasn’t pulling any punches. I was happy about that, though. We sipped our coffees in wordless silence, and the Svea’s flame cast flickering light across the nearby buildings. When Nito had finished looking through the notebook and closed it, I spoke.

“Can I have a look?” I asked.

“Sure...” she answered, albeit hesitantly, before handing it over to me.

I opened it up. It held a plethora of paintings. Supposedly, each one was a sight from somewhere in the world. I felt like going around and searching for these places might be fun, almost like a treasure hunt. Eventually, I arrived at the page depicting the Golden Sea. It was a gorgeous sight, full of amber tones, with a signature in the corn— I almost kicked my cup over as I scrambled to my feet and looked for the lantern in my bag. Once I’d gotten the lantern switched on, I brought it up to the notebook.

“K-Keisuke? What’s wrong?”

I couldn’t reply. I just couldn’t formulate the words.

This was the second time I’d seen the signature. The first time had been in the dark, and I hadn’t been able to see clearly. I hadn’t thought anything of it at the time. With the lantern light, though, I could read it.

That’s right, *I* could read it.

For whatever reason, the people of this world and I could understand each other’s speech, but I couldn’t read their writing. The instructions on the canned food were meaningless to me, and I’d just skimmed past the signature, assuming I wouldn’t be able to read it. Yet, as I traced my finger along the scribbled letters now, I could tell it was written in cursive English. I went over each letter carefully, making sure I’d read it right. I could only decipher the unfamiliar cursive script because the word was both short and a person’s name.

“Almeria.”

I raised my head and met Nito's gaze. Her expression wasn't what I had expected. Though she must have known how shocking it was for me to be able to read this, she had a small, gentle smile on her face.

"That's my mom's name," she told me after a moment.

There were two names in the corner: Almeria and Albert. Slowly reading the letters to myself, I felt something strange. I'd heard a name like that, and recently too.

I didn't need to ponder for long. Like a flash of lightning coursing through my mind, the memory came into sharp, vivid relief. It was Ned's voice.

"You know, I've met another otherworlder before."

And then...

"When my dad was still around, he brought a man home with him once. The man called himself Albert."

A chill went down my back. It couldn't be.

"Nito, was your dad's name Albert?"

My mouth felt irritatingly slow as my mind rushed frantically to ask her the question.

"No, that's the first time I've heard the name."

That name was in the notebook though, along with her mother's. She'd purposefully held her tongue, keeping it a secret even from her daughter.

What was it Ned had said about that "Albert"? I pressed on my temples and screwed my eyes shut, looking for the memory.

Think, think! He said something else.

"He lived with us for a summer."

Right, that was part of it.

"Helped with the wine."

Then there was more...

“Painted pictures, and rode horses.”

“Painted pictures.”

“—suke.”

I raised my head.

“Are you okay, Keisuke?”

While I was thinking, she’d moved closer. She was kneeling and had her hand on my shoulder. The blue of her eyes, shining in the lantern light, suddenly stuck out to me, even after all this time.

“Your eyes.”

“Huh?”

“Are they the same color as your mom’s?”

Said eyes drifted slightly closed as she shook her head.

“They’re different from both of my parents. I’m the only one with this eye color in my family. The doctors said it was probably due to my mana deficiency syndrome.”

Mana deficiency syndrome—wasn’t that a disease that Nito was the only person in the world to have had? Could a disease like that be because of a difference in the fundamental building blocks of a person, in their genes? I couldn’t just laugh off the thought like some bad joke. After all, if it was true, that would mean— “So I was right?” she asked, looking me in the eye.

“Right?” I parroted.

“My real dad came from the same world as you?”

“How—” I started, before covering my mouth; this was serious, perhaps the most important factor in her upbringing.

She shook her head though, telling me it was fine.

“I think that my dad realized it too. He knew I wasn’t his real daughter.”

“Realized... Huh?”

“Their marriage was one of those political ones. They wanted a connection between their families more than love.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, but before I could even try to reply, Nito continued.

“I asked my mom about the signature lots of times. She would always look conflicted and not answer though. I never understood why, but when I saw that small clock on your wrist, I had an idea.”

“This?” I asked, looking down at my wrist.

It was just a standard watch from a common brand. I remembered that she’d sketched it while we were at Vandyke’s workshop, as well as doing her painting.

“The letters on it are from your world, right?”

Her question made me take notice: the brand name and the functions of the buttons were all written in the English alphabet.

“I got a strange feeling when I saw them, like I’d seen them somewhere before. Your tent, camping stuff, and rucksack had the same kind of letters as well.”

All of my things had brands and logos. She’d noticed those and realized they were written in the same alphabet as the signature in her notebook.

“I finally know why she kept it a secret. My real dad was an otherworlder.”

She paused for a moment, her gaze drifting down to the signature.

“Albert,” she said, looking steadily at it and then smiling. “That’s my dad’s name then. Thank you. I finally know because of you.”

“I didn’t do any—”

She shook her head.

“I could never believe her stories. After all, she wouldn’t tell me about my dad. The paintings weren’t by her, but by my real dad. I just didn’t know what to believe.”

Her expression slowly morphed. Her lips curved down into a fainter smile, her eyes drifted slightly closed, and her cheeks flushed red.

“It made sense when Olympia told me the Golden Sea didn’t exist. But she wasn’t a real witch, so it actually might.”

“So you’re back to not knowing what to believe?” I asked hesitantly.

“No,” she answered firmly. “She said that people believe what they want to believe. I’ve decided to do exactly that.”

Her eyes shone into mine, taking my breath away.

“I’ll believe that it exists. After all, if it does, I can keep searching for it. I can be with you, visiting lots of places, eating lots of delicious meals, and painting lots of pictures.”

Her gaze had drifted as she spoke, landing somewhere off to the side. The smile on her face was the first one I’d seen that fit her age—soft, and with nothing hidden behind it.

“That’s a great answer,” I managed through the bright emotions making my throat tighten and my chest feel full.

She looked back up at me.

“Besides, we have a deal. I’ll be with you, so you’re not allowed to die.”

Urk.

“I have no idea what you’re on about. That’s ridiculous,” I answered with a snort.

I didn’t have a clue as to when she’d noticed. Her smile strained, taking on a more mature tinge as she looked at me.

“We fired the signal rounds at that station to call Vandyke.”

“And...?”

“When you got it out, you already had live rounds in it.”

“Well spotted,” I said, only just realizing how suspicious that would have been. “I mean, it’s dangerous out there. They were for self-defense.”

“I asked if we should get out the gun when we heard Ned’s distress signal. You said no. That seems like odd behavior for someone using live rounds for self-defense. When we met them, you didn’t even get out. You just stayed in

the car, ready to drive off.”

I fell silent.

“You kept the live rounds in the gun but left it in its case. If it wasn’t for self-defense, there’s only one use I could think of.”

Her conclusion was completely logical, and though I tried to think of some excuse, I knew it was hopeless. I raised my hands in surrender and could only offer a rueful smile.

“I!” Nito suddenly shouted, making my eyes shoot wide open.

She was looking down, her hands gone paper white from how tightly she was holding them together.

“I just read books my whole life. I’d never been outside really, I couldn’t camp as well as those characters, I can’t cook, and I’m not good at talking with people. Also, um, I’ve got no sense of direction, I’m scared of thunder, and I had no idea Olympia was lying! So...”

She raised her gaze. Her eyes shimmered like ice holding the blue summer sky within it—a color that reminded me of home.

“So if you don’t look after me, I’ll end up dead at the side of the road! Got it?!”

“Huh?”

It took me a while to understand exactly what she was trying to say. When I finally did, laughter bubbled up from my stomach. It started small but was soon bursting from my throat in great guffaws, turning into laughter that even I was enjoying listening to.

“W-Why are you laughing?!” she spluttered.

“I just... Does that even count as a threat?”

I couldn’t help it, couldn’t hold it in. What a thing. How could I find it so funny? Why was I tearing up? How had all the things I’d been worried about just faded away like that?

By the time I got myself under control, Nito was sulking. Her cheeks were

puffed up and she was pouting, a sharp crease between her eyebrows as she frowned up at me.

“I’m sorry, all right?” I said.

“You’re not forgiven,” she answered after a moment.

“I promise I won’t try to die anymore.”

“Really?”

“I mean it.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Come on. I still owe you for fixing the Kettle, don’t I?”

“That’s right, and I won’t take money you steal from the town. You need to earn it yourself. Vandyke had it right: money that you earn from working has value.”

“Yup, that’s right, so I guess I’ll earn my money as a peddler.”

A beat of silence stretched between us.

“A peddler?” she asked eventually.

“There are probably people around this place. They might have things they want, like we wanted meat and clothes. I’ll bring things to them, and earn money for it. Then I can use that to pay you back. What do you think?”

“That...doesn’t sound bad.”

“Plus, while we’re going all over the place, we can search too. We can look for the Golden Sea, the other places in your mom’s notebook, and even that man in black while we’re at it.”

“That sounds brilliant,” she answered with a nod.

I smiled again at her firm nod. Then, I stood up and pulled out that particular case from the mound of boxes we’d taken out of the Kettle. I unlocked it and saw within it that mass of metal that had grown so familiar in my hand. I took the gun out of the case and broke the body open, taking the rounds out and holding them out to her in my fist.

“Can you look after these?”

She looked at my fist, looked at my face, and then held her hands out hesitantly, cupped with her little fingers all pressed together. I opened my hand and dropped the two bullets into hers. They bounced slightly in her palms and she let out a panicked noise before closing her fingers around them.

“I won’t give them back, you know?”

“Call them a present, then,” I told her.

“I don’t particularly want these to be my first present from a guy,” she told me.

I grinned back in agreement.

“I look forward to traveling with you some more,” I told her.

“Right.”



The world was indeed in ruins, and there were few people left. The people that *were* left had all lost something, Nito and I included. Yet we shifted our attention to what we still had and treasured each day. I was sure all the people we'd met, and even more besides, were living out their days like that as well.

The world itself was shrouded in night, without any hint of brightness from either hope or the waiting future. Whether tomorrow would ever come to this world was uncertain, but there were people out there who held on to faith that dawn would break as they traveled through this world, and I respected how they lived. I'd been cast into the darkness alone, and had thought of death without the dawn. Yet at some point, one had become two with this girl as we'd traveled and laughed together.

I looked around at the mountain of things in front of me. I had my backpack with my camping gear, the recipe book, the wine, and the blow poke. Now, I had the cigarette case as well. There were still things in the auto-trike too. We'd have to move those to the Kettle with the rest, and then we'd set out again. This time, in search of the places in Nito's notebook as I peddled my wares.

Huh, haven't I got a lot of plans now?

Laughter filled my heart once again as I looked up at the sky. The indigo carpet of the night sky was bursting with countless sparkling stars. Nito looked suspiciously at me as I suppressed my laughter, but that didn't bother me. I didn't know when it had happened, but I'd started simply believing in tomorrow. I finally knew why the words Jack had left with felt so nostalgic to me.

"Hey, Nito," I said. "See you tomorrow."

She tilted her head, the silver threads of her hair sparkling as they flowed and shifted with the motion.

"Right, see you tomorrow," she said with a smile.

I'd found someone I could be with and believe in that uncertain tomorrow with, laughing and smiling as we ate. It was such a joy to have that, and it meant I was truly living.

The notebook was laying open where I'd set it down. The page shimmering in

the lantern light was filled with the Golden Sea, its brilliant amber a sign of the most beautiful dawn in the world.

Fin.

Afterword

Once, while I was cooking over my fire in a mountain campsite, a silver car came up and stopped in front of me. The elderly couple that got out asked me for directions. I told them how to get back to the highway and they thanked me, but as they were leaving, they asked if I was fishing—I was sitting beside a river. I told them I was on a day camp and had come to eat my lunch. They were confused and, after a moment, asked if I was alone.

I was indeed alone, but rest assured. This tale is of two people traveling, along with the meetings they have along the way. They can eat together and look at the scenery with one another. Still, there is one thing I want you to understand: food can taste great when you're alone as well. Like a warm bowl of *tamago kake gohan* at night.

To everyone I've met through my last series *Have a Coffee After School, In Another World's Café* (complete, with six volumes on sale and a volume of manga), it's been a while. And to everyone I'm meeting for the first time here, it's good to meet you, my name is Kazamidori.

I should explain. *Have a Coffee After School, In Another World's Café* is the story of a protagonist that came to this otherworld and shut himself away in his café, and of the happy day-to-day life of the customers that visit. Once it was over, I wondered for a while about what I'd write next. I'd spent so long writing that story set inside the café that I inevitably decided I wanted my next one to be set outside.

This story, *Goodbye Otherworld, See You Tomorrow*, has the protagonist Keisuke—along with our heroine Nito—sharing a single steam-powered vehicle as they travel a ruined world. They set up a bonfire at the side of the road, warm up their canned food while doing this and that to make things taste more enjoyable, then tend the fire under the starry sky before retiring to bed. Keisuke goes to his tent, and Nito sleeps in the car. Thus, the days pass as they travel to the next new place.

Have any of you journeyed? Journeying is leaving your home to go to another place. School trips, business trips, leaving and coming home, going to a friend's, walking around the neighborhood...all of these things are journeys. Even going to school or work is a journey. To all of you travelers, good work today.

My job is sitting at a desk and writing stories, but I often go on journeys of my own. As I type down the words and describe a scene, I can see it. As I write a character's speech, I can hear their voice. I wander the story with them; I go here and there, like a lost child, sometimes doubling back, before finally arriving at the scene. It's my role as an author to take you, my reader, on that journey with me.

How was the trip this time? I can only hope that it was a good journey.

So, now that I've set us up a good mood, I want to tie things up with my thanks to everyone, but due to circumstances beyond my control, I need to write another two pages.

For you readers, that was just a new line. For me, though, this afterword stopped right there for two weeks. The original plan was for a four-page afterword, but then suddenly another two pages were added in. It would be great if it were due to a story I absolutely wanted to get into the afterword or something, but it isn't. Frankly, I'm writing this at Christmas. It's currently six p.m. Fortunately, I've got plenty of room, so let's explain how this came to be. Please read on.

Once the manuscript is written, it needs to be proofread. The proofreader checks for typos, omitted words, and malapropisms, and then the author checks again. Sentences are changed, deleted, and added. It's the final chance for the author to lay hands on it. Ideally, this process won't change the page count. There are certain page counts that are better for publishing, and the editor wrangles the manuscript to that number during the proofing. Finishing it off without ruining that is, so to speak, where the author's skill shines.

I understood that well. I set about the proofing brimming with confidence. Then...the book got shorter, by two pages. Strange... That shouldn't have happened...

It’s my own fault, and so I have to spend my Christmas adding another two pages to the afterword. These pages are my Christmas present—from the editor to me, I suppose. Huh? I can write another two pages? Thank you!

Everyone, have you ever read an afterword that says so little while still being this long? I don’t think there are many. I do hope that it doesn’t sour your impressions. I’ve seen an afterword be compared to the credit roll at the end of a film before. This time, the music changed halfway through, and here we have the second part. The afterword’s too long now, and seventy-eight percent of the audience has left the cinema already. You, the person reading this now, must be the kind to stay in the cinema until the very end, right?

Anyway, I should finish it up soon.

My illustrator, Nimoshi-san, drew such wonderful illustrations. They were like the crisp dawn after the first snowfall of the year. As soon as the sketches of Keisuke and Nito arrived, I could only nod and think, “Right, this story is theirs.”

My managing editor Tanabe-san helped from beginning to end. Whenever I let things slip and glossed over things, Tanabe-san pointed them out. It was like being wounded over and over, but because of that, it’s a deeper, more vibrant, and more interesting story.

I can’t thank the proofreaders enough for bringing together all the words on the page into one cohesive whole. As someone who worries whether to push or pull a door, I have to take my hat off to them for seriously looking over each and every word.

Thanks to an unimaginable number of people’s help, this book exists, was lined up on the shop shelves, and finally arrived in your hands. Above all, I give *you* my deepest thanks for reading so far.

I hope that we can meet on our journeys again at some time. Well, see you tomorrow.

Kazamidori, December 2019


Goodbye Otherworld, See You Tomorrow
The Traveling Paintbrush and the Hefty Backpack
"Excuse me...that smell is bothering me."
Nito
A half-elf girl Keisuke met on his journey. She's a good painter and her appearance belies a surprisingly sharp tongue. She seems to be searching for something...
"Th-The smell? Sorry, does it stink?"
Keisuke
A modern-day high school student who suddenly found himself in a world that had fallen into ruin. He's traveling in a steam-powered vehicle he named the Kettle while searching for any signs of a way home.

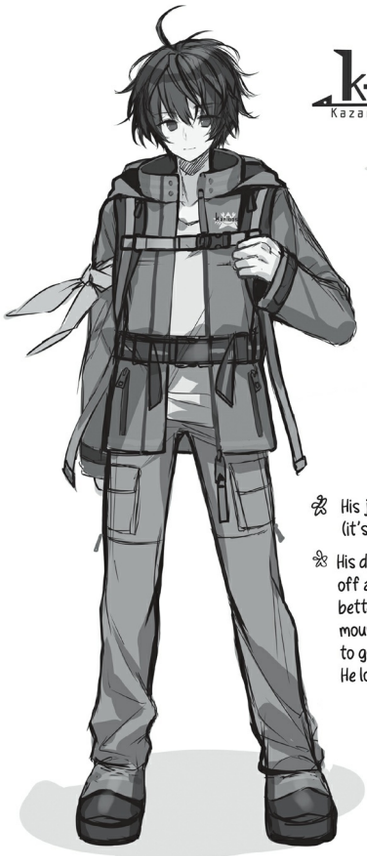
"I might just be a cooking genius."

"Mmmm!"




Vandyke's Steam Workshop — Kitchen
"It definitely will. We worked hard on it, after all."
"I hope it tastes good."
Mertaille
"For special days"
A famous Maritian family meal. Sliced vegetables are spread out inside a skillet, then baked in an oven. The seasonings differ depending on household traditions, and are said to embody the history and memories of each family.


“Your journey’s... over?”
“It is. After all, the place I wanted to go doesn’t exist.”
On her face was...
“So I’m fine here.”
...A beautiful smile.



KiE Kazaniboshi

Keisuke-kun

Kanibosi

"Kanibosi" Logo Design

Together, Nimoshi-san and I are...kanibosi! Just kidding. It's actually the logo on Keisuke's clothes. I suggested it, then Nimoshi-san's extraordinary skills bumped it up a notch. But while we're at it, I'll be in charge of the crabs (kani), which leaves Nimoshi-san with the stars (hosi).

- His jacket is also waterproof. (it's not the same style as Nito-chan's)
- His design uses lots of warm colors and gives off a calm impression. I thought it worked better with the stronger impression of mountain climbing fashion so we decided to go with not much decoration. He looks really ordinary.

Keisuke

You could say this about the whole book, but I think that there's a much softer light on Keisuke, in particular, because of Nimoshi-san's illustrations. Without them, he was a much darker person. That's just how warmly Nimoshi-san sees the world.



Nito-chan

- A hooded jacket. Khaki goes well with any color. Changing her skirt is an easy way to make variations on her outfit.
- The lack of decoration on her chest makes her seem a bit more innocent and open
- Contrast between her baggy coat and flowing skirt
- Sleeves



Ties so she can roll her sleeves up when painting

- Since she's a character from the otherworld, her accessories are a belt and metal accents
- Leather sketch bag



Nito

Her design was complete as soon as I received the rough drafts. Since it's the author's job to check them, I answered, "They're crazy good! Nimoshi-senpai OP!" She's even cuter and more expressive than I first imagined.

Table of Contents

Cover

Prologue — An Indigo Carpet of Night

Chapter 1 — A Train Station Floating on Horizon Blue

Chapter 2 — A Steam Workshop in Van Dyke Brown

Intermission — Beyond the Blue Light's Reach

Chapter 3 — An Ivory Honeymoon

Intermission — Scarlet for the Bonfire

Chapter 4 — A Hazy Phantom Gray in the Distance

Chapter 5 — Olympia Green Awaits

Curtain Call — An Aurelion Dawn

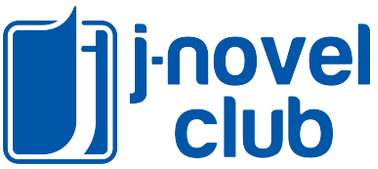
Afterword

Color Illustrations

Characters Log

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Goodbye Otherworld, See You Tomorrow: Volume 1

by Kazamidori

Translated by MPT

Edited by RB Rheanan

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Kazamidori, Nimoshi 2020

Illustrations by Nimoshi

First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo All rights reserved.

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: December 2021