
story
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To Another World... with LAND MINES!
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WITH LAND MINES!

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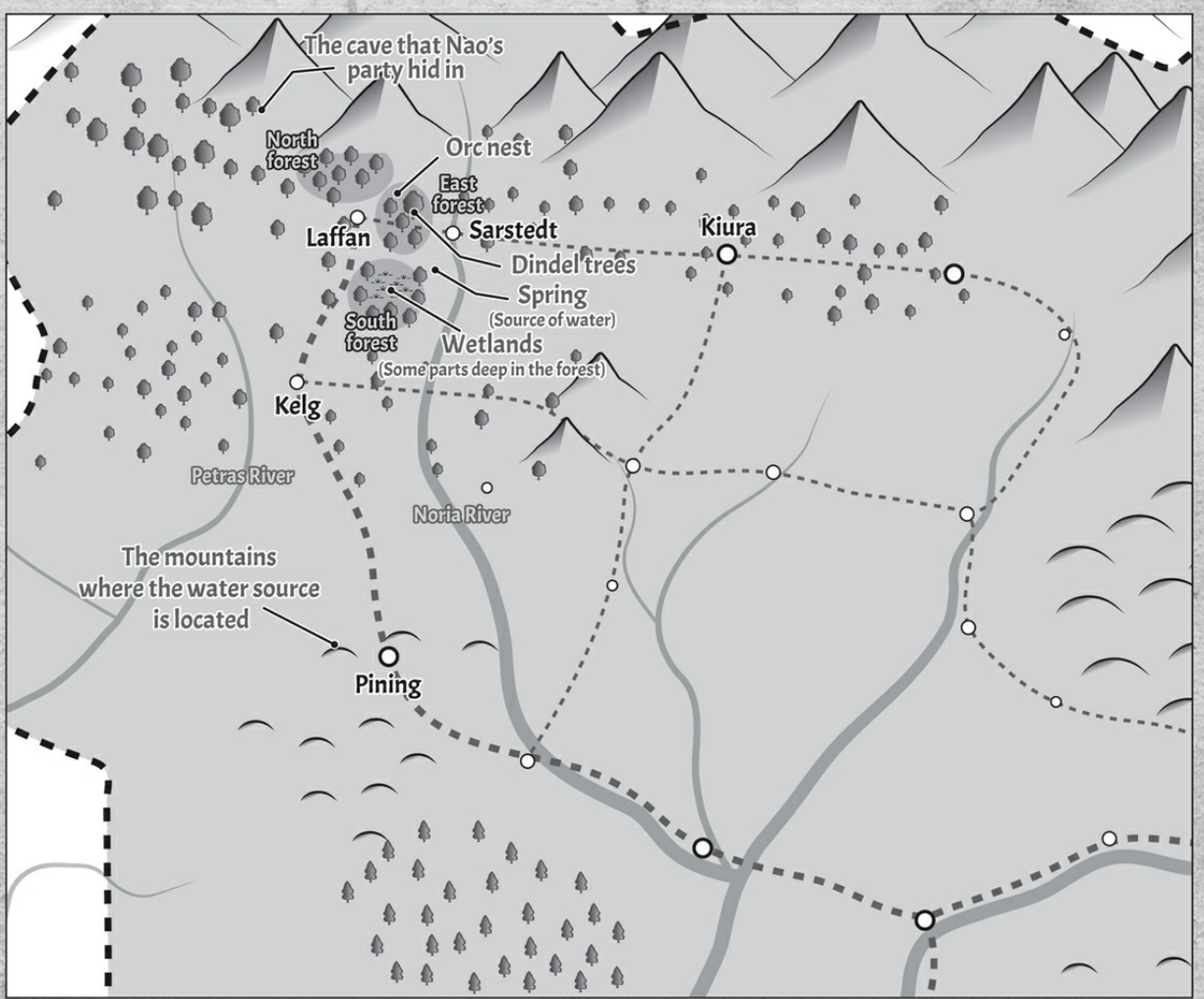
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Prologue

“Nyan, nyan, nyan!”

Metea seemed quite happy as she waved her tail in time with the bumps and jolts of our horse-drawn carriage. She was sitting next to me in the coach box, and periodically she leaned forward to look at her surroundings. There was nothing wrong with her being full of curiosity, but her movements made me feel a bit uneasy, so I picked her up in my arms and set her on my lap, then wrapped one of my arms around her waist to make sure she wouldn’t fall off.

“You sure seem happy, Metea,” I said.

“Yeah! It’s my first time seeing stuff outside of town!” Metea was beaming.

I breathed a sigh of relief. “I see. Well, I’m glad that the weather is good today.”

In spite of Metea’s good mood, I still felt a bit vexed about recent events as I looked up at the sky. The authorities had successfully put an end to the chaos that the Holy Satomi Sect had caused in Kelg, but the cult had left a lot of tragedies in its wake, including the death of Mary and Metea’s dad. The sisters could have entered an orphanage, but they had decided to tag along with my party even though that meant leaving Kelg. As a result, we’d taken the sisters with us on our horse-drawn carriage, but there was another destination that we had to visit before we could return home. As a courtesy, we had presented ourselves at the Adventurers’ Guild in Kelg to inform the branch master that we were departing. As Diola-san had predicted, the branch master had tried to convince us to stay, but we’d firmly declined his offer. Luckily for us, he seemed to understand the reasoning behind our refusal to a certain extent, so he’d dropped the subject right away. However, he did request that we instead accept a quest to meet Viscount Nernas at Pining, the capital city of the viscounty.

Apparently the reason my party had been offered this quest was that we’d accomplished a lot as adventurers. We had been key to the successful

counteroffensive against the last redoubt of the Holy Satomi Sect, and we were also the ones who had captured Satomi herself. On top of that, we had retrieved the family heirloom sword belonging to the House of Nernas. According to the branch master, the viscount wanted to meet us in person at least once, so he had issued a quest to the Adventurers' Guild. Adventurers enjoyed a lot of freedom, so we technically could have ignored the quest, but only a pack of fools would go out of their way to antagonize both the guild and the lord of the domain that they lived in. The guild had also offered to let us rent a horse-drawn carriage on the cheap, so we had accepted the quest without any hesitation.

It was probably Metea's first time riding in a horse-drawn carriage, so I decided I should check if she was getting motion sick. "Do you feel uncomfortable or need to go to the bathroom, Metea?"

"I'm having a great time!" Metea responded in a high-spirited voice.

However, in response to her younger sister's voice, Mary poked her head out from the interior of the carriage.

"Met, make sure you don't cause any trouble for Nao-san, okay?"

The sisters were actually the main reason we had decided to travel in a carriage. After a few days of recuperation, they were able to get around just fine—apparently beastfolk could recover from injuries very rapidly as long as they had a lot of food—but it was a fact that they had suffered some serious injuries, especially Mary, who had lost multiple toes. Her toes were showing some signs of recovery thanks to Haruka and Natsuki's magic, but it wouldn't have been a good idea to make her walk long distances until her feet were fully healed.

"Don't worry, I'm being a good girl!" Metea waved her hands energetically as though to whisk away her sister's concerns, but...

"Really? Isn't she acting a bit too wild?" Mary asked, directing a dubious expression at my arm, which was wrapped around Metea's waist; I was struggling to keep a hold on her.

"Ha ha, it's fine," I said. "What about you, Mary? Do you feel okay? Feel free to speak up if something is the matter."

“Thank you very much, but I’m okay,” said Mary. “You provided us with new clothes, and they feel very comfortable...”

“I’m happy that I get to wear clothes that are pretty and clean!” Metea flapped her sleeves happily.

“Is it really okay for us to have these?” Mary asked. She smiled but seemed slightly awkward as she touched the fabric of her own clothes. “It’s my first time wearing clothes that aren’t secondhand...”

Yuki poked her head out of the carriage beside Mary to offer some words of encouragement. “Don’t worry, we sewed those clothes ourselves, so they didn’t really cost us any money!”

Yuki was the one who had put the most effort into making our clothes, so her words carried a lot of weight.

Haruka also poked her head out to chime in. “The two of you are going to be traveling with us, so it would actually be a problem if we *didn’t* provide you with proper clothes. On that note, feel free to tell us if anything’s the matter, okay?”

“I can’t think of anything right now!” Metea exclaimed. “Oh, um, actually, I feel a bit hungry, so...”

Mary puffed her cheeks up. “O-Oh, Met, please!”

Haruka laughed lightly. “Tee hee, we don’t mind. It’s better for us if you voice your thoughts freely like this. We’ll let the two of you know if and when we want you to be patient for a bit, but for now, let’s take a break and eat lunch. Nao, stop the carriage when you find a good place.”

“Sure,” I said.

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Not too long after my exchange with Haruka, we stopped our carriage a short distance from the highway and began preparations for lunch. We laid picnic blankets out on the ground, lined up some food we’d been storing in our magic bags, and gave our horses water and fodder. There was no need for us to cook anything here, so we split up the work among everyone in our party and finished our preparations in a few minutes.

“All right, it’s time to eat,” said Haruka.

“Okay,” said Mary. “Met, get back here!”

“Okay!”

Metea was squatting down and observing something on the ground a ways away from us, but she hustled over after Mary called out to her. She sat down next to me, and I used a wet towel to wipe her hands off. The Purification spell would have been better, but for some reason, I felt like a wet towel would probably make her feel better. That was probably just a fixed idea of mine owing to my Japanese background.

“Thanks!” said Metea. “Can I eat now?”

“Yeah, feel free to dig in,” I said.

“Yay! Mm, there’s a lot of meat today as well! I’m so happy!”

Metea was the first one to grab for the sandwiches. We’d made these sandwiches to cater to Touya’s tastes, so the one Metea picked up was as big as her face, but she happily devoured it.

“Met! You should wait for—”

Mary raised her voice as if she was going to scold her younger sister, but Haruka cut her short and patted her head, smiling gently. “It’s fine. Feel free to start eating whatever you want as well, Mary.”

“...Um, okay,” said Mary. “Thank you very much.”

Mary was a bit more hesitant and reserved than Metea, but she chose the same kind of sandwich her younger sister had, devoured it in exactly the same way, and then grinned.

“Hmm. Those sandwiches are a bit too heavy for me. I’d like something lighter,” I said. “Let’s see...”

“What about something like this, Nao-kun? It’s delicious,” said Natsuki.

Since I was vacillating about what to eat, Natsuki recommended a sandwich that was half the size of the ones Mary and Metea were eating—in terms of both the bread and meat—so I took it from her and bit into it.

“Thanks,” I said. “Mm, yeah, it is delicious.”

Natsuki smiled. She was eating the same type of sandwich that she had just recommended to me. Rather, Touya and the sisters were the only ones eating those huge sandwiches. I wouldn’t have minded trying those right after some strenuous physical exercise, but they were a bit too heavy for an ordinary lunch.

“By the way, Mary, you two belong to the cat subspecies of beastfolk, right?” Yuki asked.

“Yes, that’s what our dad told us,” Mary replied. “It’s not something I’ve really thought about very often before, though.”

There probably wasn’t any very deep meaning behind Yuki’s question, and Mary had answered just as casually, but Touya had a slightly confused expression on his face.

“I see,” said Yuki. “Your striped tail is really cute.”

“O-Oh, thank you for the praise,” said Mary. “I am proud of my tail, so...” She stroked it, although actually, she seemed a little bit embarrassed.

I smiled when I saw that, but I was a bit curious about the expression I had seen on Touya’s face, especially since he hadn’t said anything, so I whispered, “*Touya, is there something that bothers you about what you just heard?*”

“*Nah, it’s nothing too important, but my Appraisal skill actually displays her subspecies as tiger, not cat.*”

“*...Really?*”

“*Yeah, really.*”

I also tested out my Third Eye skill on Mary, but the only information I could discern was the fact that she was a beastwoman. My skill identified Touya as belonging to the wolf subspecies of beastmen, but that was probably because he had already told me as much before.

On a sidenote, it seemed that it was actually typical for beastmen not to be able to identify their exact subspecies. Dogs and wolves were a good example of subspecies that could possibly get confused even by other beastmen, as were cats and tigers. There wasn’t a huge difference in physical traits between those

pairs of subspecies, and a lot of beastmen were of mixed heritage anyway, so reversion to an ancestral type was fairly common. It was a different story for subspecies with distinctive physical traits, but apparently most beastmen had to ask their parents about their ancestors in order to determine their own subspecies.

"*Well, cats and tigers are kind of similar, so I guess there's no reason for us to point it out*," I whispered.

"*Yeah, you're right about that*," Touya whispered. "*It's possible that their dad didn't know for sure either.*"

When we first arrived in this world and I asked Touya if he was a dog, I remember him snapping back that he was definitely a wolf, but considering what Mary's dad told her, I guess most beastmen and beastwomen don't really think about their heritage in that way on a daily basis. They're probably more concerned with making a living.

"Oh, yeah, will we have to pay a toll for Mary and Metea when we enter Pining?" I asked.

We'd had to pay an entry toll when we first arrived at Laffan. It wasn't necessary anymore now that we'd registered as adventurers, but Mary and Metea weren't adventurers, and we couldn't register them if they weren't going to take on any adventurer work.

"Don't worry; children don't need to pay a toll as long as they're traveling with their guardians," said Haruka. "That's where we come in. It seems that you might have to pay an entry toll if you look like adults, but Mary and Metea should both be fine. There are some exceptions, however."

According to Haruka, if you couldn't prove your age, then it was up to the guards at the gates to decide if you qualified as an adult. As a result, it seemed there were some guards out there who would try to find fault with you in order to squeeze you for some pocket money. Most of those guards would be reasonable if you simply bribed them with a few silver coins, which was usually cheaper than the toll itself, but...

"Well, if it comes down to it, we can just pay the toll," said Haruka. "It's not like it's expensive for us these days."

“Yeah, two large silver coins or thereabouts—that isn’t worth arguing over,” I said.

The toll back at Laffan had been one large silver coin per person, so it was probably the same at Pining given that they were in the same viscounty. We didn’t have a naive sense of fairness, so we wouldn’t fret over losing a few large silver coins. It would probably feel bad if we ended up having to pay a bribe, but the toll was technically a source of tax revenue for the viscounty.

“Um, is that really okay?” Mary asked in an uneasy tone.

A few silver coins must have sounded like a significant amount of money to the sisters, but Haruka casually shrugged. “Yeah, it’s fine. We decided that we’ll take care of you two, so we’ll cover your necessary expenses.”

“Oh, thank you very much,” said Mary.

“Thanks, big sis Haruka!” Metea shouted.

Haruka smiled. “However, in exchange, we’ll make you two help out with chores around the house, so keep that in mind.”

She offered that caveat in a joking way, however.

Chapter 1—Pining

Pining didn't look overwhelmingly larger than Laffan or Kelg, but as a true city, it was still much larger than either. From our perspective as Japanese, Pining simply felt like a decently large town, but the sisters had never been outside of Kelg before, so they seemed very excited; everything here was new to them. However, despite her giddiness, Mary was playing the responsible older sister and firmly holding Metea's hand. As for the entry toll, the guards hadn't actually requested that we pay it. Sadius was a soldier in the local army, and our interactions with him had left us with the impression that all of the soldiers were very well disciplined. As a result, we hadn't been too worried, and when we showed the guard at the gates our adventurer cards, he had muttered the words "Rank 5," so it was possible that our ranks had also played a role in making it easier for us to enter the city.

The guard wasn't the only one who was surprised about our ranks.

"Um, are you all Rank-5 adventurers?" Mary asked right after we passed through the gates.

Haruka cocked her head slightly. "Yeah, we are. Did we never mention that?"

"No, you didn't!" said Mary. "That's really amazing!"

"Amazing!" Metea echoed.

Mary and Metea's eyes were sparkling as they looked up at us. We all exchanged a series of glances. Of course, I was well aware that Rank 5 wasn't low, but I wasn't sure why the sisters were so impressed.

However, according to Mary, even Rank 4 was considered worthy of boasting about in Kelg, so Rank 5 must have been high enough to impress most ordinary citizens throughout the viscounty.

"I feel like Rank 5 is something anyone can achieve if they take things slow and steady and work hard, however," said Haruka.

"People who take things slow and steady usually don't become adventurers,

Haruka-san," said Mary, holding up a finger.

"...I guess you're right about that," said Haruka.

Mary's basic point seemed perfectly reasonable to all of us. There *were* people in the Adventurers' Guild who had that kind of conservative mentality, but they were day laborers who mostly took on engineering work. Ordinary citizens didn't consider Rank-0 adventurers like that to be real adventurers at all. As a manual laborer, Mary and Metea's dad had probably fallen into that category. The quests that you could accept at higher ranks were generally risky in one way or another, so people who prioritized a safe and steady life would prefer to earn money inside the walls of a town or city instead. On top of that, adventurers required not only prowess in combat but good conduct in order to rank up, which was probably why people respected high-rank adventurers.

"Our party hasn't really accepted many quests from the guild, however," I said.

"Really? If your party reached Rank 5 without taking on a lot of quests, that's even more impressive!" Mary was now looking at me with even more respect in her eyes, which made me feel a bit bad somehow.

We had only achieved our current rank thanks to our connections—namely, Diola-san. However, Diola-san was still the vice-branch master of the guild in Laffan, so I was fairly sure that she genuinely considered us worthy of the rank even though she had also given us a certain amount of favorable treatment.

"Oh, so that's why your party can afford to take us in," said Mary. "I see..."

"B-Before anything else, let's head to the guild and return the carriage," I said.

I looked away from Mary and instead locked gazes with Haruka, who nodded. "Mm. After that, let's get some rooms at an inn before we try to book an appointment with the viscount."

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We returned the carriage to the guild; while we were there, we asked one of the receptionist ladies to recommend us an inn. We only had a few criteria: we wanted an inn that was very safe and was well-known for good food.

We ended up booking some rooms at one of the inns that the receptionist lady told us about. It was seven large silver coins for a night's lodging with breakfast and dinner included. The Slumbering Bear back in Laffan would have cost us less than three large silver coins for the same conditions, so this inn was definitely on the expensive side. However, a city like this was different from a small town in the countryside, so it wasn't informative to compare the prices directly. On top of that, the inn we were staying at was somewhat luxurious, so we could request all sorts of amenities as long as we paid for them, one of which was assistance booking an appointment with a noble. We could probably have done it ourselves if we'd wanted to, but we had no experience doing anything like this. On top of that, we had plenty of money thanks to our efforts back at Kelg, and it would probably be better to leave this process to the experts even if it would cost us some money, so we decided to ask the inn staff to contact the viscount on our behalf. After that, we headed into town to look for lunch.

"Any ideas about what to eat?" I asked. "I feel like this would be a good opportunity to eat food that's unique to the viscounty, but..."

"Do you really think Pining has any regional specialties, Nao?" asked Yuki. She sounded like she didn't have high hopes.

Haruka chuckled. "If we're talking about unique, then high-end furniture counts, doesn't it? *And* we helped restore the supply of materials that the craftsmen need."

"Sure it counts, but furniture isn't edible!" said Yuki. "Do you have any ideas, Mary?"

"Um, I'm sorry, but no," said Mary. "I've never been outside of Kelg, so..."

"I've heard that the ale in this city tastes very good!" said Metea.

Mary's response made perfect sense, but all of us, including Mary, were surprised at Metea's interjection.

"M-Met, how do you know that?" Mary asked.

"An old lady in our neighborhood said so!"

Hmm. I guess she overheard some adults talking, huh? It never seems like kids

are listening to conversations between adults, but they actually do at times, and they can pick up on and retain certain things.

"I'm impressed that you know that, Metea," said Haruka.

"Tee hee, it's no big deal." Metea smiled as if she felt embarrassed by Haruka's words of praise. She was squirming and swishing her tail, and it was all very cute.

"Well, we actually don't drink ale," said Touya. "It might make a good gift for Tomi, though."

"It might also be a good idea to buy some for Diola-san," said Natsuki. "She's helped us out a lot recently. That's one way for us to thank her."

In unison, the rest of us muttered, "Oh, right!" It was Diola-san's job to deal with all of the issues that we brought to her, but it would be much better for us if she were more than happy and willing to carry out her job rather than reluctant to do so.

"This means that we'll have to go harvest dindels again for sure, but we should probably also prepare some other gifts for her," I said.

"Well, we can just take our time to pick souvenirs after lunch," said Yuki. She pointed toward the downtown area. "All right. Touya, it's time for your nose to prove its worth!"

"Again?! I mean, sure, I don't mind, but come on," Touya snapped back. Still, he accepted her quest. "*Sniff, sniff.* This way, I think?"

He led us to a dining hall.

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"Mary, Metea, how did you like the food?" I asked.

"It tasted good," said Mary. "But..."

"Your homemade food tastes much better!" Metea put in.

Mary had answered me somewhat evasively, but Metea was very forthright.

"Met, please," said Mary. "I-I mean, to be honest, I feel the same way, but..."

"Thanks. I appreciate your praise for our cooking," said Haruka. "The food at

the dining hall wasn't bad, but it did feel expensive relative to its quality."

The dishes we had ordered cost between one and two large silver coins each, so they were fairly expensive for an ordinary citizen's lunch. On top of that, they couldn't compare to the dishes served at Aera-san's café in terms of either quantity or quality, so...

"I don't feel like I would ever go out of my way to return to that dining hall," I said.

"Yeah, that sums up my thoughts," said Touya. "We probably won't be able to get decent food any cheaper, however. My nose isn't omniscient by any means."

"Yeah, I guess it's true that even you can't find a place that's both cheap and good if nothing like that exists," I said.

"I suppose we've become a bit fussy about food," said Haruka. "We make our own food most of the time, after all."

The Cooking skill, which all of the girls had, was very useful for a range of tasks related to food preparation. Of course, it taught them how to cook and season to our tastes, but in addition, it enabled them to create condiments like inspiel sauce that weren't used in most dining establishments due to the cost of the ingredients. In fact, the dishes that the girls had cooked for our party actually tasted much better than anything my parents had ever made for me back in Japan. There wasn't much variety, since the girls had a limited number of ingredients to work with, but dining out from time to time made me realize that this was basically a first-world problem.

"We can get breakfast and dinner at the inn, so we just need to deal with lunch every day," I said. "Should we just eat lunch at the dining hall until we run low on the supplies in our magic bags?"

"Yeah, let's go with that plan," said Haruka. "We can afford those prices, although it still kind of feels like a waste of money."

"Mm. In terms of what we have left to do today, should we just buy some ale to bring back to Tomi and then return to our inn?" Yuki asked.

"While we're here, I'd like to look around for some books," said Natsuki.

Touya looked at Natsuki; he seemed very surprised. “Huh? Didn’t we buy, like, a hundred books the other day? Do you want to buy even more, Natsuki?”

“I do, yes. I believe we could use a bit more information on dungeons,” said Natsuki. “Having books like that would be useful to us, right?”

Back in Kelg, we had spent five hundred gold coins on books. Since even Haruka had been surprised by that sum, Touya’s question made perfect sense, but so did Natsuki’s response.

“Oh, are you talking about the mine we explored? It’s true that we should probably learn more about those kinds of places,” I said.

We were fairly certain that the abandoned mine where we had recovered the family heirloom sword had been a dungeon. With that in mind, it would be helpful to obtain more knowledge about dungeons so that we could guarantee our own safety in the event that we ever returned to the mine.

“*Also, it’d be nice if we can find picture books that we can use to teach Mary and Metea.*”

Natsuki was whispering as if to avoid making the sisters feel bad, and the rest of us nodded. We could read the written language of this country thanks to the basic powers that Advastlis-sama had granted to everyone in our class, so we weren’t sure if we would be able to teach the sisters properly. Our plan was to ask for help from a professional with experience teaching kids—someone like Ishuca-san—but there was no reason for us not to purchase textbooks if we could find any that looked useful.

“In that case, let’s visit a bookstore first. We can go buy some ale after that,” said Yuki. “I’m pretty sure that we can ask the clerk of a bookstore where to buy ale in this city, so this should be an efficient plan.”

None of us had any reason to object to Yuki’s plan, so we began searching for a bookstore. As we walked through the city, we asked some other pedestrians for directions, and we eventually arrived at a bookstore that was located down a straight road off of the main street. It wasn’t a prime location, but it was still a good one, and it looked larger than any of the bookstores that we had previously visited in this world, no doubt because this was the capital of the viscounty. However, the interior of the building looked much the same as those

of the bookstores we had seen elsewhere. The only books within reach were inside the disposal wagon, and most of the other books were stacked behind the counter. I wasn't really a fan of this kind of layout. However, it was probably necessary given both the value of books in this world and the fact that random customers couldn't be trusted by default, so I accepted things for what they were. I started to look through the disposal wagon, which was usually the first thing I did, while Haruka went over to the counter in order to speak to an old lady who looked like she was the clerk.

"Hello. We're here to look for books containing information on dungeons and monsters," said Haruka. "Would you happen to have any in stock?"

"Dungeons and monsters, huh? Wait here for a bit."

Haruka and Natsuki both had a good eye for books, and Touya would probably be able to find good ones as well due to his Appraisal skill. I just tried to moderate my expectations as I looked through the wagon for any hidden gems. I peeked inside some of the books that appeared comparatively undamaged, but none of them were good. It made sense that they had been dumped in the disposal wagon. Based on what I had learned from my time at the bookstore in Kelg, if a book inside a disposal wagon had a clean-looking cover and binding, it was probably the diary or memoir of some noble. Those were basically useless to us, although we already owned some. Yuki was standing on my right, also looking through the disposal wagon, but she had a glum look on her face, so she probably hadn't found anything good on her end, but it was still worth asking.

"*Did you find anything good, Yuki?*" I whispered.

Her response came as a surprise. "*Well, there are barely any good books, but there are a few that might be somewhat valuable.*"

Yuki handed a stack of papers over to me. They appeared to be documents containing information on alchemy. *Oh, I guess I should be looking for things other than books.* Back in Kelg, we had succeeded in purchasing a grimoire on Time Magic on the cheap, but that was because the clerk had assumed that nobody in a small town like Kelg would purchase it, although he of course knew that it was worth something. We probably couldn't expect to get a similar deal

in the capital city of the viscounty, however. I followed Yuki's example, searching for things that were tattered, and as she'd said, it seemed like there was some material that could be valuable to us. Still, it was fairly common for such things to be missing important parts, so I had to keep that in mind during my search.

"Oh, big bro Nao, there's a book here with some pretty pictures inside," said Metea.

Metea had tiptoed up beside me and was standing at my left and looking down into the wagon. She appeared very focused as she looked through the books inside, so she was probably making a genuine effort to help me out, but Mary, who was watching over Metea from behind, seemed quite worried. *Don't worry, Mary, I understand.* I chuckled as I picked up the book that Metea had pointed out to me.

"Hmm. Oh, it looks like this is a travel journal," I said. "We don't really need books like this, but we can buy it if you want it, Metea."

"Nah, I don't," Metea replied right away. "I can't read, so..." She sounded like she felt a bit sad about the fact that she couldn't read, so...

"In that case, I have an idea," I said.

I looked over to the counter and met Haruka's eyes, and she nodded.

"Mary, Metea, come over here for a bit," said Haruka.

"Oh, okay," said Mary. "Let's go, Met."

Mary seemed relieved as she held hands with Metea and walked over to the counter. There were some books on the counter that were way more valuable than the ones in the disposal wagon, and Haruka pointed at those books as she looked at the sisters. "Each of you can choose one book that you want from the books here."

"Um, but, we—"

"Don't worry, Mary. We'll teach you how to read," said Haruka. "It's very important that you learn."

Mary looked confused, but Metea seemed full of joy. "Yay!"

She tried to look at the books on the counter, but she was too short, so she kept jumping up and down. When Natsuki saw that, she lifted Metea up in her arms.

Mary looked up from behind the counter. “Thank you for helping her, big sis Natsuki!”

Natsuki smiled and, with her free hand, flipped through the books on the counter. “Don’t worry about it. Feel free to choose any book you want.”

“Okay!” said Metea. “Whoa, there are so many with pretty pictures inside!”

Natsuki had probably chosen some books that were aimed at kids, and Mary seemed like she was having a lot of fun flipping through all of the books with colored pictures. Mary also started to look through the books on the counter after Haruka encouraged her one more time. I smiled at the heartwarming scene in front of me, then took some things from the wagon that had caught my interest and walked over to join the others at the counter.

“Did you guys find any interesting books?” I asked.

“Yeah, but only two—*Monster Observations* and *Dungeons* are the titles,” said Touya. “The contents of the others overlap too much with the books we already have.”

“Natsuki already checked them over, but I’d like you two to inspect as well, Yuki, Nao,” said Haruka.

“Okay,” said Yuki. “Hmm, I don’t remember seeing this before.”

Natsuki, Yuki, and I were the ones who had purchased books back in Kelg. We had shown the books that we purchased to Haruka and Touya, but the three of us had better memories of their contents.

“Yeah, I don’t remember seeing these two books before either,” I said. “The rest of the ones you chose look like they’re for studying words, huh?”

“Mm, the clerk recommended a few books to us,” said Haruka. “I see that you two want to purchase some more books as well.”

“I mean, yeah, as a girl, I can’t resist the allure of sales!” said Yuki.

“I don’t know if gender has anything to do with that, because I found some

things that interested me too," I said.

Haruka sighed. I had no idea if she was serious or if she was just pretending to be disappointed in me, so I just laughed awkwardly in response. The books in the disposal wagon were worth two gold coins each, so they weren't the kind of thing we could buy casually. However, in this world, the fact that you'd found a book once didn't mean you could easily find it again. In fact, plenty of books existed in only one copy, so I would have felt bad if I'd missed out on some rare ones.

"Well, I guess it's fine," said Haruka. "Um, how much will it be for all of the books that we want? A small discount for purchasing in bulk would be appreciated..."

While I was chatting with the others, Mary and Metea both seemed to have decided on the books that they wanted. The book that Metea had chosen was more or less a picture book with almost no text. As for Mary, she had chosen a book with plenty of words, probably because she wanted to prove that she was more mature than Metea.

"Hmm. Books aimed at kids don't sell well, so how about fifty gold coins for everything?"

Despite the old lady's words, the price she'd offered was actually somewhat high, but Haruka seemed to think it was a fair price. She stacked up gold coins on the counter, then asked, "By the way, this city is famous for its ale, right? We'd like to buy some to bring home with us as a gift for a friend."

"A gift for a friend, is it? I suppose you're looking to buy barrels of ale, then. Ale is available for drinking at any local tavern, but it won't be easy to buy by the barrel if you're not a merchant—especially not *good* ale."

"Really? Are barrels not available even at liquor stores?" Haruka asked.

"Never have I heard of a liquor store in this city..."

According to the old lady, liquor stores weren't common at all. I wasn't aware of that fact because I didn't really care about alcohol. Apparently most people would drink at taverns rather than at home, so Pining didn't contain many stores that sold alcohol to ordinary citizens; you would have to ask a tavern to

share some with you or else head to a large store in order to purchase alcohol by the barrel.

“Good ale is in short supply, however. It won’t be easy to find it in barrels. You’ll probably have to directly go to a brewery. You’re buying a lot of books, so I wouldn’t mind giving you a recommendation if you like. Even so, I’m not sure you’ll be able to buy a barrel of ale there.”

“Really? We’d be very appreciative,” said Haruka.

“Certainly. I’m only going to give you a recommendation, after all. The place I recommend is called Gardim Brewings, and as for where it is...”

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“Tee hee, my very own book!” Metea hugged it to her chest and hopped around in front of us. We had stowed all of the other books inside our magic bags, but Metea had wanted to hold hers.

“Met, you’ll trip yourself if you keep acting so wild!” Mary exclaimed, sounding very worried.

“Don’t worry, I won’t trip!”

Metea seemed absolutely confident in herself, but it was normal for kids to trip even if they were confident that they wouldn’t. Just as a precaution, I was about to move to a position from which I could easily catch her, but I noticed that Touya had already done that, so I left the task to him.

“Gosh, Met, please,” said Mary. To the rest of us, she said with a troubled look, “I’m sorry that you’ve had to buy so much for us...”



Haruka just smiled and placed a hand on Mary's head. "We've already decided to take on the role of your guardians, Mary. There's no need to apologize to us for things like this."

"Mm. Feel free to speak more frankly about what you want, Mary," said Yuki. "We won't abandon you and Metea just because of that."

"We have no intention of pampering and spoiling you, however, so if there's a problem, we'll be frank as well," said Natsuki. "We might sound harsh in moments like that, but please understand that it's not because we don't like you or anything like that."

"Well, I feel like we're already being pampered and spoiled enough as is," said Mary. She looked down; she seemed to be on the verge of crying. "Thank you very much..."

We glanced at each other and smiled in relief after we saw Mary's reaction. None of us had any experience acting as guardians or substitute parents for children, and the sisters had lived painful lives. They were clearly still testing the waters during our interactions, and honestly, so were we. One of the main reasons that the seven of us had been able to live together without any major problems so far was thanks to Metea's positive mentality and Mary's polite demeanor. However, Mary was still a kid herself, so as we headed to Gardim Brewings, I hoped that our trip to the bookstore would serve as a catalyst for her to act more relaxed and natural around us.

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The clerk who greeted us at the brewery had some disappointing news. "I'm very sorry, but we don't have much spare in stock, so I'm afraid that we can't afford to sell a full barrel..."

"I see. We came all the way from Laffan, so we wanted to bring some ale back with us as a gift for a friend, but I guess that's not possible," said Haruka.

She was acting sad, looking down at her feet, and the clerk seemed like he felt bad for us; he cast his gaze around restlessly. "Oh, all the way from Laffan? Um, since you've come this far, would you at least like to taste some samples of the ale here?"

Hell yeah, I knew a sad look from a beautiful elf maiden would be highly effective! However, our goal was to purchase a barrel of ale for Tomi; it wasn't like we wanted to drink it ourselves. We would have felt bad turning down the clerk's kind offer, however, so all of us except the sisters took turns sipping the ale that the clerk poured into cups for us, and...

"...Wow, this is delicious," said Haruka. "It's much easier to drink than I thought it would be."

"Yeah, I wouldn't mind drinking a lot of this," I said. After I realized that my words might come off as rude, I hastily explained, "Oh, um, I don't mean anything bad by that. It's just that the ale we drank back in Laffan tasted really sour and smelled bad."

The clerk didn't seem offended at all. In fact, he seemed quite proud of the ale here. "That's probably because that ale wasn't stored and preserved properly. Good-tasting ale is actually quite rare."

Oh, that makes sense. I remember hearing stories about how you could find delicious ale at breweries back on Earth if you visited one on a field trip. I guess it might be similar to what I'm experiencing right now. At this point, though, I doubt I'll ever find out what that kind of field trip was like.

"Oh, this isn't fair, big bro Touya," said Metea. She was staring at him as if she wanted to try some herself. "I'm kinda jealous..."

As Touya emptied his cup of ale, he looked like he felt a bit awkward. "Ha ha, you'll have to wait until you're an adult if you want to drink ale," he said.

Yuki and Natsuki finished their cups at about the same time, and they both smiled.

"I don't really like ale, but I wouldn't mind drinking it if it tasted like this," said Yuki.

"Mm. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that it would be worth traveling all the way to Pining just to drink this ale," said Natsuki.

The clerk seemed happy that three beautiful girls had praised his ale. "I'm really glad to hear such enthusiastic praise. Um, can you all please wait here for a moment?"

He scurried off into the back of the brewery and returned shortly with a smile on his face. “The owner said that he’s willing to sell up to three small barrels of ale. Would you like to purchase them?”

“Really? We’d love to,” said Haruka.

The price he offered us for one small barrel of ale was five large silver coins. That undoubtedly reflected the cost of the barrels themselves. Each one looked like it contained about ten liters of liquid, which was by no means cheap compared to ale back in Laffan. However, it tasted much better—we now had good reason to believe that the ale we’d had in Laffan was diluted with water—so that price was actually very reasonable. We bought all three barrels, and as we headed out of the brewery, the clerk called after us that we were welcome to drop by whenever we visited Pining again.

After that, we walked around town for a bit before returning to our inn. No sooner had we come in the door than the staff presented us with an invitation letter. It seemed that the inn had already booked an appointment with the viscount on our behalf. According to the letter, the meeting would take place in four days’ time. We had to arrive at the lord’s mansion in the morning, and we would be guided inside after we showed this letter at the gates.

“Four days’ time, huh? That’s quite a wait,” said Touya. He seemed unhappy, perhaps because the viscount was the one who had summoned us.

“Well, I don’t think it’s that long considering the circumstances,” Yuki admonished him.

Touya paused, then nodded as if he’d decided on reflection that he agreed with Yuki. “Yeah, true, the viscount’s probably busy cleaning up the mess at Kelg.”

“It seems as though he’s actually discharging his duties as the lord of these lands, which makes me feel relieved as someone who lives here,” said Natsuki.

We had left Kelg immediately after the business with the Holy Satomi Sect, but Sadius was probably still busy cleaning up the mess that the cultists had left behind. The viscount hadn’t actually been present at Kelg during the height of the chaos, but given all the problems that undoubtedly remained to be sorted out, I would have questioned his judgment as a lord if he had been free to meet

us right away. He had deployed some local troops to Kelg ahead of time, so he probably wasn't completely incompetent, but rioting had still broken out, just as everyone had anticipated, so he also wasn't exceptionally competent by any means.

"The viscount probably made the earliest appointment he could given his schedule," said Haruka. "Now we're left with some free time."

"Yeah, and three days is a bit too long to just space out and kill time," I said.

"The city doesn't look all that great for sightseeing either," said Touya. "Everything we saw looked pretty normal."

"Yeah. The only difference between Pining and the other places we've been is that there are more people here," said Yuki.

When we first arrived in Pining, Metea's eyes had been shining with excitement and curiosity, but it seemed like even she had lost interest by now; she crossed her arms and nodded deeply in response to Yuki's words. Mary chuckled awkwardly, so she must have felt the same way. As for the rest of us, we had already seen three different towns in this world, with Pining being our fourth. Pining was technically a city, but from our point of view, it didn't look too different from the towns we had seen before. After a year in this world, we had seen enough of what normal townscapes looked like.

"We've already bought some books, and Gantz-san is probably a more reliable source of quality weapons and armor than a Pining blacksmith we've never met before, so all that remains to explore is the reference room of the local guild," said Natsuki. "We probably won't find anything new, however."

"Yeah, we bought a lot of books, so there's probably a lot of overlap in terms of information," I said. "So should we take a quest like normal adventurers?"

"That'd be one option, but it's still really hot outside, so I don't really want to take on a quest if we can avoid it," said Touya.

"Mm. It'd be great if there were a quest we could do that wouldn't expose us to the sun, though," said Yuki.

"The odds of that are slim," said Haruka. "Only a dungeon would meet those conditions."

As we continued to chat among ourselves, I noticed that Metea was looking at us and seemed a bit confused.

“What’s the matter, Metea?”

The response I got from her was a simple and fundamental question. “Do you not work when it’s hot outside?”

“Huh?”

“Dad went out for work every day, even in the middle of summer,” said Metea.

To Metea, the concept of not doing work due to the heat must have sounded like taking a day off whenever it rained on a tropical island. We all fell silent when we realized that our lifestyle would be impossible for someone with a normal job.

Mary seemed to panic upon seeing our reactions, and she hastily pulled Metea toward her by her hands. “I-I’m really sorry about this! Met, you shouldn’t say such weird things! Adventurer work is different from normal work, after all.”

When Haruka saw that Mary was trying to cover for Metea, she played along and said, “Y-Yeah, your sister’s right about that, Metea. You see, a lot of adventurer work requires us to put our lives on the line, so a single quest is exhausting—mentally and physically.”

“Mm,” said Metea.

“As a result, we have to get proper rest after each quest before we take on another. It’s a matter of ensuring our safety,” said Haruka.

“Really? Aren’t there some people who take on adventurer work every day, though?” Metea asked, tilting her head.

Haruka nodded deeply before answering. “Yes, but those are adventurers who can’t earn enough money to afford taking days off work. They lead very dangerous lives.”

“W-We’re high-rank adventurers, so we can make a living without having to work every day!” Touya explained.

“Oh, okay! You’re high-rank adventurers who can choose when you want to work and what work you want to do!” Metea smiled and nodded as if Haruka and Touya’s explanation made perfect sense to her.

The sisters weren’t wrong at all, but for some reason, I sort of felt like we were deceiving a kid. *Are we going to be a bad influence on Metea? Well, I mean, Haruka and Touya weren’t saying anything untrue, so it shouldn’t be an issue, right? Hmm.*

“...For now, let’s head to the guild and see what kind of quests are available,” I said.

“Mm. We can discuss things like efficiency and whether or not to take on quests after seeing them for ourselves,” said Natsuki.

Since it was hot outside, nobody had brought up any alternative to visiting the guild, but now it seemed like Metea’s words had caused us to reconsider our course of action as a party. The very next day, we donned some proper equipment and headed to the guild in Pining again. However, since Mary and Metea were with us, we had no intention of participating in the morning rush for quests, so we took our time eating breakfast at our inn and arrived at the guild a while later. There were a lot fewer people in the building by that point, and we sent Natsuki off to the reference room to check the books just in case. The rest of us headed to the bulletin board to examine the quest posters. The board itself looked larger than the one back in Kelg, so there were a lot of quests, but...

“Most of these quests look like they’re for chores and odd jobs,” said Haruka.

“None of the rewards look very attractive either,” said Yuki.

“Well, the quests with good rewards have probably already been taken by other adventurers,” I said.

The quests were mainly for manual labor—mowing grass, searching for particular items, carrying goods, or waiting tables at dining establishments. Most of them seemed to be aimed at day laborers; there were almost no standard adventurer quests, such as monster hunts.

Metea was staring at the bulletin board with her arms folded and a serious

look on her face. “Mm, nothing good!” She was probably copying us.

Mary was watching Metea with an exasperated expression. “I know that you can’t actually read the text, Met.”

Metea shook her head and pointed at the bulletin board. “I know numbers! The numbers on the posters are small!”

“There’s more than just numbers! I can’t really read much myself,” said Mary, “but it looks like there are some quests I could take on.”

In addition to numbers, Mary was able to read some simple words, and it sounded like she was making assumptions based on the little she could decipher, but...

“Yes, it’s true that there are some quests you could take on, but the reward wouldn’t be anywhere near enough to live on,” I said.

“Really? The reward for this quest for mowing grass should be more than enough for a day’s food—”

“Yeah, but adventurers also need to pay for lodging at an inn,” said Yuki. “I guess you might be able to make do if you stayed at a really cheap inn, but even that would be pushing it.”

Mary gasped and covered her mouth with both hands. Up to this point, the sisters had lived in a house their dad had probably been renting, so the idea of lodging expenses had probably slipped her mind.

“Oh, yeah, these rewards wouldn’t be anywhere near enough to cover the costs of the inn we’re staying at right now,” said Mary. “I had no idea life as an adventurer was this tough...”

“Mm. Life isn’t easy as a greenhorn adventurer, and if you don’t work hard to get out of that spiral, you’ll end up barely scraping by,” said Yuki. “In our case, training would actually be a better use of our time than taking on any of the quests here.”

“Oh, so your party managed to become high-rank adventurers through sheer effort, huh? That’s really impressive,” said Mary.

“I knew your party was amazing, big sis Yuki!” said Metea.

“Oh, um, yeah, more or less,” said Yuki.

The sisters looked at us with newfound respect, and we all awkwardly averted our eyes. The combat skills that Advastlis-sama had granted us had played a significant role in our success as adventurers, so I felt a bit ashamed accepting that praise, but it was true that we had put in a lot of work. *I mean, I’ve suffered a lot of broken bones! In fact, I’m fairly confident that I’ve suffered the most out of anyone in our party, so—actually, maybe Touya deserves that title now after what he experienced the other day when the lava boar put that dent in his breastplate.*

I was staring at Touya, and as if he’d sensed my gaze, he turned and looked at me curiously. “Hm? What’s wrong, Nao?”

I shook my head. “Nah, it’s nothing.” I saw Natsuki walking out of the reference room, so I called out, “Oh, welcome back, Natsuki. Any good results?”

“Nope. There weren’t really any good books in the reference room,” said Natsuki. “I found some books on the local geography that may be of use to us, but they’re the kind you can flip through in just a few minutes. None of the books had information on monsters that we don’t already know.”

Natsuki must have already finished reading all of the books on local geography. The rest of us planned to visit the reception room later and read through them ourselves, but three days of free time was overkill for that purpose, so...

“What if we just try discussing things with one of the receptionist ladies here?” Touya asked. “If we’re lucky, we might be able to get a quest that’s equal to our abilities.”

Touya had arrived at the same conclusion I had, but the girls all frowned and shook their heads.

“I’m not sure if that’ll work,” said Haruka. “It would be one thing if we were on good terms with the receptionists here like we are with Diola-san, but...”

“Yeah, I think we’ll just get turned down,” said Yuki. “We’re newcomers at this branch, so it would be too much for us to ask that kind of favor.”

We had a give-and-take relationship with Diola-san, so she would favor us up

to a point, but we had only visited the guild here in Pining twice, and we hadn't even taken on a quest yet. Our adventurer ranks were decently high, but that probably wasn't so significant that we could secure a special quest simply by asking for one.

"I mean, it's worth a shot, right? If they say there aren't any suitable quests for us, then we can just go do some training outside of town," said Touya. "We've earned plenty of money already, so it's not like we need to force ourselves to take on a quest here, right?"

"...I guess you're right about that, Touya," said Haruka. "And we'll have to head out for work once we return to Laffan anyway."

All of us felt the urge to get back to work after hearing Metea's words yesterday, but in the worst-case scenario, forcing ourselves to do something we weren't used to could make us look like idiots in front of the sisters. *Hmm. Now that I think about it rationally, there really isn't any need for us to go out of our way to show the sisters what we're like when we're doing adventurer work, at least not right now, so...*

I looked at the counter and saw the same receptionist lady who had interacted with us when we dropped by yesterday to return the carriage. "All right, let's go with Touya's idea and discuss things with that lady over there," I said. I assumed she would at least be easier to talk to than the other receptionist ladies.

When I approached her, she smiled. "Oh, the Meikyo Shisui party, right? How may I help you today?"

"Oh, do you actually remember us?"

We'd interacted just once, but she laughed and nodded. "Of course. After all, it was only yesterday, and your party stands out a great deal. For one thing, Rank 5 adventurers are rare, and for another, every member of your party has certain unique traits."

"I-I see..."

Oh yeah, I guess my party has a variety of races, genders, and looks, so it makes sense that we're conspicuous even though there are a lot more

adventurers here in Pining than in Laffan. I nodded to myself, and the receptionist continued, “What can I do for your party today? I can definitely help adventurers like yourselves to a certain extent...”

“Um, well, we were wondering if there are any quests available that are suitable for our rank,” I said.

Ranks reflected the amount of trust that the guild had in certain adventurers, and the receptionist lady seemed more inclined to help us than she might have been to help rookies, but even so, she had a slightly troubled look on her face. “Quests suitable for your rank? Hmm. May I ask for an example of a quest you think would be suitable for your party?”

All of us paused in thought and glanced at each other after we heard that very sensible question. We hadn’t discussed in detail what kind of reward we’d consider adequate, but...

“If I recall correctly, we earned a lot during the winter,” I said. “Our average earnings per day never dropped below three hundred gold coins.”

“Th-Three hundred?!”

“Well, that was a special case,” said Haruka. “Our average earnings per day dropped by a lot—to about fifty coins—after spring rolled around.”

Even after Haruka corrected me, the receptionist lady was staring. “...Fifty coins means fifty gold coins, correct?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Haruka. “Part of that was the bounty of one thousand gold coins that we received back in Kelg after we turned in a certain individual, however.”

“Wait, you’re the ones who caught *that* wanted individual?!”

“Yeah, we happened to run into her. We got lucky,” said Haruka.

“...With all the money you’ve earned, why not relax and enjoy life for a bit?”

The tone of the receptionist lady’s voice turned a bit apathetic after she heard Haruka’s words—an understandable reaction. Most adventurers burned through those kinds of earnings without planning ahead, after all. “Or rather, why did your party come to Pining? If you’re capable of earning that much

money, then there's no need to move to a different town or city, is there?"

"We're visiting this city because we have business we need to attend to here," said Haruka. "However, we've ended up with three days of free time before we can deal with that business."

"Three days isn't that long a wait, is it? I feel like your party is a bit *too* diligent and hardworking compared to the average adventurer."

Hmm. I mean, yeah, it's true that three days isn't that long, but it's kind of awkward as a vacation...

"In that case, are there any sights in this city that you would recommend to tourists?" Touya asked.

The receptionist lady frowned in response to Touya's sudden and unreasonable request. "The Adventurers' Guild isn't really a tourism office, you know? But now that you mention it, I think there is a quest that would meet your conditions."

She headed over to the bulletin board to peel off a quest poster, which she brought back and placed on the counter to show us.

"The reward for this quest probably won't seem entirely satisfactory to you, but nevertheless, I believe it might be what you're looking for."

"Hmm, let me check the contents," I said. "Oh, the quest is to inspect a water source?"

"Mm. The place that requires inspection is usually off-limits, and the area is famed for its scenic beauty, although I've never been there myself."

According to the summary on the poster, there were signs of pollution at the water source, so the party who had issued the quest wanted someone to investigate the cause. The location was only a few hours away from Pining, but you had to be at least Rank 3 adventurers in order to take on the quest. However, the reward was fifteen gold coins, which was quite low compared to the average reward for quests with similar rank restrictions.

"The water from this source is used to brew the best-tasting ale in Pining. It seems that recently, something has occurred at the water source itself. The

problem needs to be resolved before the brewer can resume making ale, but for some reason, nobody has accepted this quest...”

“The reason that nobody has accepted it is obvious.” Haruka had an exasperated look on her face. “It’s because the reward is too low, especially considering that there’s a rank restriction as well.”

The receptionist averted her gaze. “Well, yes, that’s true, but...”

“If the water source is that important, the individual who issued the quest should be willing to pay a proper reward, should he not?” said Natsuki.

“Yeah, any kind of work has to come with reasonable pay,” said Yuki. “Undercutting market prices like this is a very bad thing to do.”

Touya and I nodded in agreement, and Metea copied us. Accepting quests with unfairly low rewards would harm the entire adventurer industry in the long run—and even the people who issued the quests. In the short term, it wouldn’t be a problem, but a system in which people had to work at a loss wasn’t sustainable. Either qualified adventurers would be forced to take on too many assignments and half-ass each one, or the guild would end up foisting quests onto adventurers who *weren’t* qualified. Both outcomes would tarnish the reputation of the Adventurers’ Guild as a whole.

“Yes, I’m well aware of that, but the brewery that issued this quest has a very good reputation, so I hope that someone can do something to help them out. Their ale is very popular, but they refuse to raise their prices. They’re committed to selling ale at a price that even ordinary citizens can afford!”

The receptionist lady sounded very enthusiastic; she must have been one of the people who had benefited from the brewery’s prices.

“I guess that means the owner of the brewery is an artisan who takes pride in his craft, but as a businessman, it sounds like he isn’t very good at making a profit,” said Haruka.

“Mm, that’s certainly true. Production costs for all sorts of things have increased in recent years, but the owner of the brewery hasn’t factored that into the price of its ale, so it seems that his business is struggling.”

“And the result is the paltry reward they’re offering, huh? That’s

understandable in itself, but I don't think it's *good*," said Haruka.

"Mm, you're undoubtedly right." The receptionist lady sounded a bit disheartened, so she must have been aware that she was asking a lot of our party.

Personally, I had some respect for artisans who took pride in their work, but it would have been kind of annoying if their actions caused trouble for me and my party. On the other hand, it wasn't like we were struggling for money, so...

"What's the plan?" I asked. "The quest doesn't meet our criteria in terms of the reward alone..."

"Well, I kind of want to help the brewery out now that we know their circumstances," said Yuki. "And right now, we can afford to."

"My personal opinion is that the owner of that brewery is a failure as a businessman, even if he is an artisan at brewing ale. A single-minded personality can be a good thing, but if it's caused the brewery to run into financial troubles, it amounts to pure stubbornness," said Natsuki. "In fact, I feel it would actually be beneficial for the brewery to close down once so that management rights are transferred to a different person. It's not as though the people actually brewing the ale will go anywhere."

"W-Well, that would affect the price of the ale, so—"

"If the brewery can't even afford to pay adventurers a proper reward, I think they should raise the price of their ale," said Natsuki.

"Management reform could work as well, but it'd be hard to do with the current owner," I said.

I'd chosen my words in a way that implied none of this would be a problem as long as management reform was possible, but after she heard my words, the receptionist lady laid her face down on the counter. "Ugh. High-rank adventurers bullying a receptionist with hard facts..."

"Oh, come on, don't make us sound coldhearted," said Haruka. "By the way, what's the name of the brewery?"

The receptionist raised her face from the counter. "Gardim Brewings."

All of us muttered “Oh...” in unison. The ale we’d tasted at that brewery *was* very good. Now it made sense that they hadn’t had many barrels in stock.

“Well, I think it’s okay for us to make an exception just this once, right? It’s a quest we can fulfill while enjoying the scenery,” said Touya.

Touya sounded like he was down to accept the quest simply because the brewery had sold us some ale, and Haruka nodded. “Yeah, that sounds fine. We can take Mary and Metea with us and treat it as a picnic trip.”

“O-Oh, um, you don’t have to be so considerate of us, so—”

“Yay! Delicious food!” Metea jumped in the air. “I’m looking forward to it!”

Mary’s shoulders slumped when she saw Metea’s response, and I gently patted her on her head. “Ha ha. Feel free to act as relaxed as your younger sister, Mary. I think you’re aware of this by now, but we’re doing perfectly fine in terms of money...”

“Mm, okay,” said Mary. “Thank you very much.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “All right. Does this mean we’re all down to take on this quest?”

“Sure,” said Yuki.

“Mm,” said Natsuki.

Once Yuki and Natsuki consented, a relieved look appeared on the receptionist’s face. “Thank you so much! I really appreciate your help! I was worried that at this rate, the brewery would cease operations forever...”

“Cease operations? Is the brewery in that much financial trouble?” I asked.

“Well, that’s the rumor I’ve heard. The owner is stubborn in all sorts of ways, so if they can’t obtain high-quality water, there’s a good chance that they won’t produce ale this year. If that happens, the brewery will probably have to close down for good...”

According to the receptionist, ale brewed in Pining wasn’t so famous that it was well-known in different kingdoms, but it was considered a reputable product within this viscounty. That was probably why Metea had heard about Pining ale from other people, but we hadn’t been aware of it due to the fact

that we didn’t consume ale on a regular basis. In addition, it seemed that Gardim Brewings was known to produce the best-quality ale of all the numerous breweries in Pining—but that also meant they were very picky about their ingredients, and they wouldn’t brew ale if they couldn’t obtain high-quality ingredients and water.

There hadn’t been any issues in the past, when Pining ale hadn’t yet been that well-known outside of the city, but it was now a reputable product, so these days, there was a lot of demand. The other breweries in Pining had been left with no choice but to increase the volume of their exports to meet that demand, and that had led to an increase in the cost of raw materials. As a result, there was now a shortage of labor and materials, which had led in turn to an increase in the price of ale. The other breweries had adapted by adjusting the quality of the materials they used, by seeking alternate sources of materials, and by increasing their prices. Gardim Brewings was the only brewery that had stubbornly stuck to its old ways. As a result, they couldn’t really compete with the other breweries when purchasing raw materials, and they were short on labor, so naturally, they were hurting for money. It sounded like the only reason Gardim Brewings remained afloat was the support they received from the public, plus their connections with suppliers who had been doing business with them for a very long time.

“Uh, based on everything you just told us, it sounds like Gardim Brewings won’t last much longer even though we’ve accepted this quest for a paltry reward,” I said.

“...That is, in fact, my opinion as well. The main reason people support the brewery is that it sells delicious ale at reasonable prices, so if the prices go up, most people will move on to ale from different breweries. However, if you fulfill this quest, then—”

“Then you’ll be able to drink delicious ale at low prices for a bit longer, right?” said Haruka.

Initially, the receptionist had nodded reflexively in response to Haruka’s comment, but then she hastily tried to correct herself. “That’s right! For at least one more year—I mean, the brewery’s business situation might improve!”

We were all staring at her, and she awkwardly averted her gaze.

“...Let me explain the details of the quest.”

According to the receptionist, the objective of the quest was to investigate the water source used by Gardim Brewings. Apparently, the supervisor had noticed a strange smell emanating from the water when he went to check in the course of preparing to brew a new batch of ale. That was what had led to the issuance of this quest. The deadline was one month from now, but the quest wouldn’t be branded as a failure even if we couldn’t discover the cause of the strange smell. That was the trade-off for the cheap reward. On top of that, we had the option of abandoning the quest at any time if we were so inclined.

The receptionist handed us a couple pieces of paper. “Here’s a map of the vicinity and an access permit. You’re free to treat this quest as nothing but a little diversion while picnicking, but I personally have high hopes. You’re Rank 5 adventurers, after all!”

She smiled, as if hoping we’d feel the pressure of her expectations.

After we accepted the quest that the receptionist lady at the Adventurers’ Guild had recommended to us, we spent the rest of the day on preparations and then headed out from the west gates of Pining the next day. It was still very bright and hot outside, but we endured the weather as we walked for about thirty minutes before we finally saw a forest ahead of us. At that point, I turned around to check on Mary’s condition.

“Do your feet feel okay, Mary?” I asked.

“Oh, yes, I’m perfectly fine,” Mary replied. “I’ve completely recovered!”

Mary smiled and started hopping up and down as if to show how healthy she was. Her movements looked natural enough. That was all thanks to the Regenerate spell; Haruka and Natsuki had finished healing her yesterday. A few days prior, her missing toes had already grown back and her feet had appeared fully healed, but the girls had said that they felt like their healing was continuing to benefit her, so they had kept it up. Yesterday was the point at which they had decided the process was truly complete.

“That’s good to know,” said Haruka. “However, please tell us right away if you feel anything weird or feel any pain, okay?”

Mary smiled and nodded. “Okay. Thank you very much.”

As Mary and Haruka were talking, Metea was walking out in front. She pointed at something ahead of her.

“Oh, I see a fence!” Metea exclaimed. “Is that how you can tell if the place is somewhere you shouldn’t enter?”

Touya, who was walking next to Metea, said, “Yeah, I see it too.” He frowned. “I’m not sure if you can really call it a fence, though. It doesn’t look like it’s been maintained at all.”

I understood what Touya meant: the fence was quite old and worn out, and it only reached up to my waist. In fact, some parts looked like they had completely rotted away.

“The fence at least serves as an obvious boundary, but it looks like it’s easy to climb over,” said Yuki. She casually hopped over the fence. “Alley-oop!”

“Whoa, that’s so cool!” Metea exclaimed. “I want to do that too!” Looking like she was having fun, she copied Yuki.

“Oh, Met, wait!” exclaimed Mary, who was right on her heels.

The fence reached up to my waist, so it was only a bit taller than Metea. However, she hopped over it with ease, probably because beastfolk were capable of impressive physical feats.

“It warms my heart to see that they’re so energetic,” said Natsuki.

“Mm. It’s all thanks to your hard work, Natsuki, and Haruka’s too,” I said.

I was aware that Haruka and Natsuki had overexerted themselves in using their healing magic. Natsuki seemed quite relieved by what she’d just seen, and I patted her on her back to show my appreciation for her hard work.

After that, we crossed over the fence ourselves, and as soon as we entered the forest, we were greeted by a refreshing breeze on our cheeks. I looked around and saw that the underbrush had been cleared, so someone must have been maintaining this forest. The fence seemed not to have been cared for, but

the road that led to the water source looked like it was in good condition.

“It feels quite comfortable here in this forest,” said Natsuki. “In fact, I think this would be a great place to walk around if it weren’t off-limits.”

“This entire forest is private land, right? It looks pretty spacious,” said Touya. “I’m honestly kind of jealous.”

“Well, to be more accurate, the mountains behind the forest have been approved for exclusive private use,” said Haruka.

According to Haruka, the land itself was owned by Viscount Nernas. Gardim Brewings had simply received his permission to use it. However, it seemed like that was a significant factor in deterring trespassers from the forest. It was obvious which was riskier between trespassing on land owned by commoners and land owned by the lord. The chances of actually being detained by the authorities out here were low, but it would have been perfectly lawful for someone to kill you if you weren’t carrying an access permit, so most people wouldn’t have dreamed of approaching this area.

“It’s kind of a shame that people can’t freely walk here, but I guess it’s a necessary trade-off to prevent this forest from being spoiled,” said Yuki.

“Yeah, you can’t really expect most people to abide by high moral standards, and especially not adventurers,” I said.

Back in Kelg, some adventurers had tried to take advantage of the chaos to loot or commit crimes. Everyone else chuckled awkwardly at my statement, so they must have been thinking the same thing. Apparently the lord had originally brought the forest and mountains under his protection in order to secure the water source, so the land had to be kept off-limits in order for maintenance to be carried out.

“It seems that the expenses involved in maintaining this place are a huge burden on Gardim Brewings, however,” said Natsuki.

“Yeah, I bet it’s expensive to maintain a place this spacious, especially considering the road ahead looks firm and paved,” I said. “We’ll arrive at the reservoir if we continue along the road, right?”

I was looking at Yuki because she was standing in front of the party with a

map in her hands. She pointed straight ahead. “If this map is correct, then yeah. We’ll have to climb a ways into the mountains, but it won’t be as hard as actual mountaineering, so we can take it easy.” Yuki glanced at the sisters, who were still energetically walking around, and then grinned. “Oh, by the way, Mary, Metea, let us know if you start to feel tired, okay? Touya will carry you on his back.”

“Me? Well, I mean, sure, I don’t mind,” said Touya. He grinned. “In fact, I can even carry you if you want, Yuki.”

Yuki shook her head and held her hands out in front of her as though warding him off. “No thanks, Touya! I’ll ask Nao for help if it comes down to it. Feel free to enjoy the soft sensation of my butt, Nao.”

“Huh? Me? Well, sure, I don’t mind if you want to ride on my back, but...”

I was trying to answer evasively in response to the dangerous words that had suddenly flown my way, but Yuki threw her hands up in the air. “What are you trying to imply, Nao?! Are you saying that my butt isn’t big enough for you?!” She was acting angry, but it seemed unnatural and calculated.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said. “More importantly, if I’m going to carry anyone on my back, then it’ll be Mary, right?”

I looked at Mary, who hastily waved her hands in denial. “O-Oh, you don’t have to worry about me, Nao-san! Feel free to enjoy Yuki-san’s butt, and—”

“I’m not going to do that!” I exclaimed. “Or rather, Yuki, don’t tell such awkward jokes around someone like Mary who doesn’t know us that well. It’ll be bad for you if she takes your jokes seriously, right?”

I sighed, as did Mary—she must have been relieved to learn that Yuki was joking—but when Yuki saw that, she just grinned and got right up in my face. “I’m not actually joking, you know? I wouldn’t mind letting you touch my butt, Nao. And anyway, the armor I’m wearing right now is lighter than usual, so if you do end up carrying me, then you’ll be able to enjoy my bountiful chest too, and—”

However, the grin on Yuki’s face abruptly froze when she noticed the other two girls had approached her from behind.

“Yuki, you better stop now before you regret it,” said Haruka. “Alternatively, feel free to keep going if you don’t mind getting spanked until that butt of yours swells up.”

“If it comes to that, let’s take turns, Haruka,” said Natsuki. “It’ll get exhausting for just one person.”

Haruka and Natsuki had placed their hands on the left and right side of Yuki’s butt, respectively. Yuki slowly turned around and gave them an awkward smile. “I-I’m just joking, of course! C-Come on, you know that I wouldn’t be serious about something like this, right? Ha ha...”

“We’re joking as well, of course,” they replied in chorus. “Tee hee...”

Soon, all three girls were laughing together, but they weren’t all laughing in the same way. I looked away from them and saw that Metea was walking along the road into the mountains while Touya kept beside her as a precaution.

“...We should probably hurry up,” I said. “Touya and Metea are a bit ahead of us.”

I held out my hand to Mary, and she took it, but then she looked at the girls behind us with a worried look on her face and muttered, “Are you sure about this?”

“If you’re that curious, feel free to join them,” I said. “But you do—”

“Let’s hurry up!” Mary exclaimed. “I’m, uh, worried about whether or not Met’s causing trouble!”

Apparently Mary was daunted by the prospect of joining in the girl talk between Haruka, Natsuki, and Yuki, so she hastily grabbed my hand, and together, we chased after Metea.

★★★★★★★★★

About an hour had passed since we had started ascending into the mountains. Metea was still walking out in front of our party when she suddenly raised her voice.

“Whoa! There’s a big hole!”

The hole Metea was pointed at appeared to be funnel shaped and was about

two hundred meters in diameter. I stood on the edge and looked down into it. In the middle was a spring full of clear, shining water with a deep blue color.

“This is absolutely beautiful...”

Natsuki was the one who had muttered those words of awe. I hadn’t given voice to my own thoughts, but I was just as amazed. You would never see that blue color in normal water. In fact, it was so beautiful that I wondered if something bad had been mixed into it, although that probably wasn’t the case given that it had been used to brew ale for so long. Still, the sapphire color was almost spooky.

“This is amazing!” Metea exclaimed. “It’s such a pretty blue!”

“Mm, it’s deep blue!” Mary exclaimed.

It seemed like Metea and Mary had no misgivings about the water. They ran down the road that led to the spring. If we’d been somewhere else, I would have tried to waylay them, but I couldn’t detect any hostile signals with my Scout skill, and there weren’t any large trees obstructing our view of the spring, so the sisters would probably be fine as long as they didn’t trip or slip. The rest of us slowly followed after them.

Haruka was looking around. “Hmm. I wonder if this is actually a crater.”

Yuki and Natsuki both nodded in agreement.

Yuki said, “It’s similar in shape to Mount Fuji’s Hoei Crater—it looks like the mountainside got blown away by a volcanic eruption.”

“It’s a lot smaller in scale, but that sounds like a good theory,” said Natsuki.

“Does that mean the impact is what opened up this spring?” I asked.

“I think that sounds perfectly plausible,” said Haruka. “I don’t know much about geology, however.”

I don’t know much about geology either, but there’s this example in front of us, so I guess it is possible. Having acknowledged the reality at hand, I nodded to myself.

At my side, Natsuki nodded as if she had similar thoughts. “If the spring is volcanic in origin, then it sort of makes sense that it’s so very blue.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes. Water without any microorganisms in it can turn a deep shade of blue like the one we’re looking at,” Natsuki replied. “In fact, there were some examples back on Earth, but they were usually the result of high temperatures.”

“The water in this spring hole looks like normal water,” I said. “At least, I don’t think it’s that hot...”

According to Natsuki, other causes of deep blue water included strong acidity or alkalinity, which didn’t allow plants or microorganisms to thrive. However beautiful they were to look at, such sources of water were, of course, very dangerous.

I glanced at the girls to see if they thought we should stop the sisters, but they all shook their heads.

“I think it should be fine,” said Yuki. “The guild would have warned us if the water were dangerous.”

“Well, there’s still the risk that they’ll fall in, so we should probably hurry up,” said Touya. He pointed at the sisters, who were standing in the water and splashing each other. “They probably can’t swim, right?”

The rest of us looked at each other and gasped. Back in Japan, kids who couldn’t swim were in the minority, but we were in a different world. Facilities like pools weren’t available here, and there were dangerous monsters in the wild, so most people wouldn’t get a lot of opportunities to swim in rivers. All of us hurried over to Metea and Mary, but...

“Yay, it’s so cool!” said Metea. “It feels great!”

“Nao-san, the water is really cool!” said Mary.

Metea was energetic most of the time, but Mary wasn’t usually as wild, probably because she was still a bit nervous around us, so we all smiled when we saw that Mary was having fun too.

“Just be careful, okay? Don’t fall into the spring,” I said. “I’m serious about this.”

I approached the spring and saw that it was much deeper than I had assumed.

The water was very transparent, but even so, I couldn't see the bottom of the spring; even though I was capable of swimming, I felt a bit scared. I moved my hands through the water, and it felt cold enough that shortly after jumping in, I would probably have been unable to move around much. We had access to the Resist Cold and Breathe Water spells, so it wouldn't have been difficult for us to rescue each other, but the temperature of the water was quite dangerous for the sisters due to their small bodies.

"The cold definitely feels nice," said Haruka.

"Yeah, it really does, tee hee!" said Mary.

"It's blue and not blue at the same time!" Metea scooped up some water in her hands and presented it to us. She seemed a bit puzzled; she had her head tilted.

We were also puzzled about the color of the water, so Metea's confusion was perfectly understandable.

"It's not like this water actually has its own color, though," I said.

"Really?" Metea asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "It only looks blue, and as for the reason..."

I understood how light refracted through water, but I wasn't sure how to explain it. *Hmm...*

After a moment's thought, I casually passed the baton to Natsuki. "Natsuki, can you take over?" I asked.

Natsuki seemed surprised, but she still gave it some thought. "Me?! I mean, sure, I can explain how it works, but you'll need some basic knowledge of science to understand it, girls..."

There were a lot of basic concepts—how you could see colors, wavelengths of light, and light absorption. It wouldn't have been easy for anyone to explain all that in layman's terms to kids who lacked even the most basic knowledge about science.

"Um, Metea-chan, the water in the spring looks blue for the same reason the sky looks blue," said Natsuki. "Why do you think the sky looks blue, Metea-

chan?”

“Um, err, I think it’s because there’s a blue ceiling at the very top of the sky!”

In a way, Metea’s answer was a typical one for a kid. It was natural to assume there was something blue all the way up there.

“A ceiling, huh? The truth is actually a bit different. You see, the air and water are actually a little bit blue, and if you gather a lot of them, then they’ll look very blue,” said Natsuki. “So if you gather a lot of air in one place, then I suppose you could call it a blue ceiling.”

“Really?! That’s amazing!” Metea seemed quite surprised at Natsuki’s explanation.

Mary was also listening; she nodded to herself, as if Natsuki’s explanation made sense to her. Natsuki had done her best to explain things in simple terms, but...

“*Haruka, was Natsuki’s explanation actually correct?*” I whispered.

“*Well, the way it actually works is that air molecules diffuse the short wavelengths of visible light, so you can technically say that the air is blue*,” Haruka whispered. “*Light shifts toward red passing through thicker layers of air, though, like it does at sunset.*”

“*Colors are created via reflection, so diffusion is a bit different, but it’s not like there’s an easy way to explain that to kids*,” Yuki whispered. “*By the way, the sky is blue due to Rayleigh scattering, and clouds are white due to Mie scattering. Also, the first syllable of Metea’s name happens to be pronounced like Mie. It’s an interesting coincidence considering the topic at hand*.”

Natsuki must have overheard our whispered conversation; she turned toward us with a scary smile on her face. “Haruka, Yuki, if either of you can come up with a better explanation, then I’m more than willing to hear it.”

Haruka fell silent for a moment, then casually changed the subject. “...Let’s investigate the spring.”

It seemed like it would have been difficult for Haruka to explain what we’d been discussing to Mary and Metea in a way that they could understand. I

couldn't say anything either, since I was the one who had foisted the responsibility onto Natsuki in the first place.

Natsuki sighed. "In any case, Mary, Metea, my explanation wasn't completely accurate, but it's difficult to *really* explain. If you want to know the exact details, then make sure you study hard. If you do, then you might be able to understand one day in the future."

"Really? Okay, I'll do my best!" said Metea.

"Okay, I understand," said Mary.

The sisters nodded in response to Natsuki's excuse without questioning her further. I had no idea if they would ever get to the point of understanding any branch of what we would have called science back on Earth, but if Natsuki's words served them as a source of motivation, then that was worth something. *Hmm. Come to think of it, we have no idea if scientific knowledge from Earth actually applies to phenomena in this different world...*

"...You know, there may actually be a blue canopy," I said.

At first, Haruka laughed. "Are you talking about the sky, Nao? I don't think that's possi— Well, actually, you might be right about that." She interrupted herself midsentence and pondered that possibility with a serious expression on her face.

"Gods exist in this world, so Nao makes a good point," said Yuki. "It's not really something for us to think about, however. We can leave it to people in the future who want to reach beyond the sky. We still haven't run into any flying magic."

"There is still a spell called Airwalk, but as you'd expect, it only enables you to walk on air. There's no way you could reach the stratosphere like that," I said.

Apparently, you could freely walk around in midair if you mastered the spell, but that was all it could do. If you wanted to walk higher in the air, you would need to spend as much energy as it would take to climb physical stairs the same distance. That being the case, if you ascended dozens of kilometers in the air, your mana would be depleting constantly, so it wasn't a realistic option. I had thought that in a world of magic, I might be able to fly somehow, so I'd been

very disappointed when I first learned about those limitations on the spell.

“Man, I hope I can develop a spell that lets me fly within my lifetime,” I said.

“If you succeed, then please use your spell on me as well, Nao-kun,” said Natsuki. “I can’t use Wind Magic, after all.”

“I’ll let you know if I develop a flight spell that’s actually safe,” I said.

It was very common to dream of flying. I casually shrugged in response to Natsuki’s expectations before looking down into the spring again.

“I gotta say, though, the spring here looks intriguing,” I said.

The crater appeared to have been dug straight down, and the water was so transparent that I could see about twenty meters below the surface, although not all the way to the bottom. The transparency of the water made it seem as though I were looking down a bottomless pit. The deep blue color made me feel afraid of being sucked in. I was aware that if I fell in, I could just swim, but I couldn’t completely shake off that fear.

“The spring we swam in with Aera-san and Riva had clear, clean water, but the water here is even clearer and cleaner,” I said.

“Mm, the water here definitely looks very clear and clean,” said Yuki.

Yuki had a slightly exasperated look on her face. She scooped up some water in her hands and let it spill back into the spring so she could watch it sparkle in the sun.

“Yeah. It seems fine to touch, but I’m not sure about the taste,” I said.

I scooped some of the water into my mouth, but it merely tasted cold and delicious. *Is there really an issue with this water?*

“Are you okay, Nao?” Haruka asked.

“I have the Robust skill, so I’m probably fine,” I replied. “If not, then I’m counting on you, Haruka.”

“I mean, yeah, I’ll heal you if needed,” said Haruka. “How does the water seem to you, Touya?”

“Let me take a sip,” said Touya. He scooped up some water and sipped, then

frowned, wrinkling up his nose. “Hmm. There’s a faint bad smell to it, I guess?”

After I heard Touya’s assessment, I took another sip, but I couldn’t detect what he was talking about. The girls and the sisters all took sips from the spring as well, but it seemed like they felt the same way I did; all of them had their heads tilted in confusion.

“Well, even with my sense of smell, I can barely detect it,” said Touya.

“...I guess that means the owner of Gardim Brewings noticed the very faint weird smell, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, that must be the case,” said Haruka. “It also means that the owner really is good at the craft of brewing despite his lack of business sense.”

Hmm. I really doubt that the owner’s sense of smell is as sharp as Touya’s. Does he have a very acute sense of taste? We can only speculate, since we’ve never met him face-to-face, but actually, maybe he’s a beastman himself.

“Okay, if the issue with the water is its smell, then we need to think about what the cause might be,” said Haruka.

I looked around the interior of the crater, but nothing stood out to me. It would technically have been a good thing for us if there had been any obvious signs of pollution, like trash on the ground, but that wasn’t the case.

Touya pointed at the sky and at our surroundings. “There’s no roof or walls here, so it’s possible that waste matter from animals or birds has gotten into the water.”

But Haruka just shrugged. “There’s no point in speculating about that, Touya. If the water looks this clean, it’s probably circulating rapidly and being replaced frequently.”

It was possible that the water was a bit impure, but there was no way it was bad enough to be dangerous. Mineral water and tap water technically contained trace amounts of poisonous additives, but they weren’t harmful as long as they didn’t exceed a certain concentration.

“This is natural spring water, right?” I asked.

“There is a stream over there, but it looks too small to maintain the spring

here," Yuki replied, pointing to what did indeed appear to be a very small stream. There were no other obvious sources of water flowing into the spring, nor were there any streams flowing out.

"The outlet where the water flows in and out is probably underwater," said Natsuki.

"If this area used to be volcanically active, then the lava probably left a lot of tunnels that the water can flow through," said Yuki.

If the water was circulating through lava tubes, the spring would remain pure even without a river feeding it. Or rather, that was probably why the water was so clean and clear in the first place.

"But if the cause of the problem is the spring water itself, there isn't really anything we can do about it, is there?" Touya asked, sounding a bit exasperated.

"Mm. If that's the case, then it's a bigger problem than just this year's water being unusable for brewing," Haruka replied.

Mary gave Haruka a confused look. "Um, really?"

"Yes. A spring can be fed by water that has been underground for dozens or even hundreds of years," said Haruka. "With that in mind, even if we figure out the cause of the weird smell and resolve it, it will be quite a while before the spring water gets better."

"That's a big problem!" Metea threw both of her arms up into the air to express her surprise. It was a heartwarming sight, but if Haruka was right, this was definitely a very serious problem. It would be very difficult for us to resolve or even detect an issue if the cause was a few dozen years in the past.

"Touya, does it smell like a hot spring to you?" Haruka asked. "If that's what it is, then there's really nothing we can do about it."

At first, I was confused, but then I said, thinking aloud, "...Oh, right, thermal water might have gotten into the groundwater." It was definitely possible if this was a volcanic area.

"Yeah, we don't have the ability to change the course of an underground

river," said Touya. "But I don't think that's what's up here. Not that I went to hot springs often enough that I have a clear memory of what they smell like, but I'm not picking up on any sulfur here. I don't know what hot spring water tastes like, though, so that's all I've got."

"To be more specific, hot springs smell bad due to hydrogen sulfide," said Yuki. "The two types of hot springs that I've visited are carbonate hot springs and ferruginous hot springs, and it's the latter that have a weird smell."

"Mm, most people don't get a lot of opportunities to drink hot spring water," said Haruka.

"I've drunk water from the Arima hot springs and the Gero hot springs, but neither really left an impression on me," said Natsuki. "In both cases, the water did have a taste, but it wasn't very strong."

I hadn't experienced any of this for myself, but apparently there were some hot springs with water that you could drink. If the water from the hot springs that Natsuki had mentioned had left a significant impression on her, they probably wouldn't have been safe to drink from, so her words made sense to me.

"I guess the conclusion is that we don't know if the underground rivers are the cause of the bad smell, but we also can't say for sure that they aren't the cause," I said. "Hmm."

"Well, we technically do have the option of diving in to investigate the spring," said Haruka. "However..."

Haruka sounded like she wasn't very enthusiastic about the idea, and I shook my head. "Let's avoid that if possible. We don't know what might be down there."

During our recent day vacation, we had fought an emperor salmon underwater. Despite its name, it was basically a shark. We hadn't fought it head-on, but monsters weren't the only potential dangers in underwater caves, so...

"We have access to the Resist Cold and Breathe Water spells, but I'm fairly sure we'll die here if the effect of either spell runs out while we're exploring,"

said Yuki.

We were used to having this kind of conversation among ourselves, but Yuki's words caused an unexpected and intense reaction from someone who wasn't familiar with the way we talked about matters of life and death.

"No! Don't die, please!" Metea was looking at us with her fists clenched and her ears and tail on end. She looked like she was on the verge of crying. It was an expression I'd never seen on her face before; she was ordinarily the kind of kid who smiled all the time.

"Met..." said Mary.

Yuki seemed to recognize her gaffe once she saw Metea's reaction, and she hastily patted her on the head to calm her down. "D-Don't worry, we have no intention of doing something as dangerous as diving into the spring! Right, Nao?"

"Of course not. Besides, the reward for the quest wouldn't even be worth going that far," I said.

As I replied to Yuki, I stooped down and made eye contact with Metea. Her tail loosened up and dropped flat after she heard my words.

"Really? You won't die?"

"Well, there are quests out there that are dangerous for adventurers, but we're definitely not going to die here," said Haruka.

"Whew..."

Metea hugged me, as if she felt relieved, and I hugged her back, wondering to myself what we should do next. The first idea that popped into my head was to investigate the area surrounding the spring a bit more, but suddenly, a cute growling sound reverberated through the air and interrupted my thoughts. Everyone else looked at me, but I wasn't the source.

"Um, now that I'm not scared anymore, I feel kinda hungry, tee hee," said Metea. She rubbed her tummy, looking a bit embarrassed, and the rest of us broke out into grins.

"Oh, that's right, it's about lunchtime," said Haruka. "We can resume our

investigation of the spring after that.”

“Mm. We have walked quite a ways,” said Natsuki. “I imagine you want to eat as well, right, Mary-chan?”

“Um, I can wait a bit longer, but I am a bit hungry,” said Mary. She was speaking in a quiet voice, probably because she still felt a bit shy around us.

“There’s no need to hold back at all,” said Touya. “Feel free to say anything, even ‘I’m starving! Feed me!’”

“U-Um, that’s...”

“Touya, you’ll make it harder for her to work up her courage if you put it that way,” I said. “However, it’s true that you shouldn’t hesitate to tell us when you’re hungry, Mary. After all, you’re still a kid, so your appetite is probably different from ours.”

“O-Okay, I understand!” Mary said with a nod.

As I looked at her, I thought back to how I had behaved around her age, but I dropped that train of thought after I realized that it wasn’t really relevant. My life hadn’t been as harsh and difficult as hers, after all.

“Okay, let’s move a bit away from the spring and start a fire,” said Yuki. “We bought a lot of things for today’s picnic, so look forward to it!”

Now that we had magic bags, we were cooking outside much less frequently than when we’d first arrived in this world. We could easily prepare and carry delicious meals that would still be fresh whenever we took them out to eat, after all. However, from time to time, I would still feel nostalgic about the meat skewers that we used to grill over bonfires; it reminded me of our early days as adventurers. Those memories weren’t exactly relevant to our plans for today, but a picnic was half of the reason for our trip, so our plan was to grill some meat like in the old days. However, one person stopped the rest of us before we could begin preparing lunch.

“Heh, Yuki, it’s not time for that just yet,” said Touya, shaking his head. He was acting really cool for some reason. “I’ve got something cool to show everyone.”

He started assembling something he had pulled out of his magic bag.

“Huh? A barbecue grill? When did you make this, Touya?” I asked.

“Oh, well, I tinkered away at it during my spare time while I was working on our foldable cots,” Touya replied.

According to Touya, he had been looking for the perfect moment to show this off, but he’d been waiting for a while and an opportunity had never presented itself.

“However, it’s finally time for my specially made barbecue grill to shine and show off its firepower!”

“Oh, did you manage to create a gas burner? That’s an impressive technological innovation,” said Haruka.

“Whoa, I had no idea that you succeeded before the rest of us could make a magical device that functions like a stove,” said Yuki. “Good job, Touya!”

“Mm, cooking via direct heat has its upsides as well,” said Natsuki. “Convenience is one benefit, and—”

Touya cut short all of the praise from the girls and hastily pointed at the grill. “No, it doesn’t actually have a gas burner! I was just talking metaphorically! You can tell by looking at the grill itself, right?!”

It looked like a very standard box-shaped cast-iron grill plate with metal legs. I had no idea if he had applied the principles he had learned making the foldable cots, but the end result looked pretty convenient, especially since it was collapsible. However, it didn’t seem to be a magical device with any special functions; Touya would have probably asked the girls for help if he had planned on making anything like that. The girls were all aware of that fact, and now that Touya had turned self-conscious, they all laughed and shrugged.

“I’m just joking, of course,” said Haruka. “Your barbecue grill does look like it’ll be a convenient tool for us, however. Good job, Touya.”

“The way you acted like you wanted to show off kind of irritated me, so that’s why I decided to respond like that,” said Yuki. “However, I’m glad that with this, we can now easily grill meat whenever and wherever we want.”

“Oh, come on, let me bask in the glory for a bit,” said Touya. “I put a lot of work into this, and—well, not really, I guess. I was just working on it as a side project.”

Touya suddenly looked a bit dejected. According to him, he and Tomi had periodically worked on the barbecue grill for a change of pace whenever they weren’t making much progress on the cots.

“Tee hee. All right, then. Let’s use your barbecue grill right away, Touya-kun,” said Natsuki.

“Sure, feel free!” Touya exclaimed. “I prepared a grill net and charcoal too!”

Touya tossed a bunch of charcoal into the barbecue grill, and I used the Ignite spell while the girls sliced meat and vegetables into pieces for easier cooking. Touya took out some shallow dishes and handed them to the sisters, then filled the dishes with dipping sauce that the girls had made. Then he took out some tongs that he had apparently prepared as well and used them to spread the charcoal around evenly before placing the grill net on top.

“Okay, everything’s ready to go, so— Oh, wait, I forgot about the other tongs,” said Touya.

Touya pulled another set of tongs out of his magic bag and handed one to everyone. There were a couple of extra tongs, which he set on the plates of meat and vegetables.

“I see that you’ve done a lot of preparations,” I said. “Did you make the tongs yourself too?”

Touya was watching Mary and Metea play around with the tongs. “Yeah! Chopsticks would probably have been just fine too, but it all worked out in the end.” When he’d been making these things, he’d had no idea that the sisters would join us, but it was fortuitous, since they presumably had no idea how to use chopsticks.

“I’ve never used something like this to eat!” Metea seemed quite happy as she raised her tongs into the air, but then her whole body listed to the side in an expression of confusion. “Um, how am I supposed to use this to eat?”

“It’s easy, but listen carefully to me. First of all, take whatever you want from

the plates here and place it on the grill," said Touya.

As an example, Touya took a slice of meat from the nearby plate and placed it on the grill. The meat began to sizzle as the fat dripped into the charcoal and sent up some smoke. Metea swallowed when she saw that.

"I know it looks delicious already, but be patient as you cook the meat—be sure not to undercook it. Once it looks like the meat is thoroughly cooked, dip it in some of the sauce before you eat it," said Touya. "However, make sure you don't touch the meat that other people have cooked. A war will start if you do!"

Metea and Mary both had serious looks on their faces as they nodded. "Okay!" they replied in unison.

Haruka chimed in with an exasperated look on her face. "No, that won't happen at all. Don't teach them weird things like that, Touya."

"There's plenty of meat to go around," I said. "Feel free to eat as much as you want, okay?"

"It's fine to eat as much meat as you want, but keep in mind that you'll have to eat vegetables as well if you want to grow bigger," said Natsuki.

"Okay!" the sisters exclaimed.

The sisters seemed very excited as they used their tongs to reach out for the food on the plates. Metea grabbed a slice of meat right away, but after hearing Natsuki's admonition, Mary reached for the vegetables. The difference in their actions made their different personalities clear. However, everyone was aware that Mary loved meat as well. *Hmm. I guess I'll pay attention in case she holds back a bit too much when it comes to the meat.*

"All right, let's start eating as well. We prepared many different types of meat this time," said Yuki, pointing to each plate in turn. "There's tusk boar, which we haven't had in quite a while; standard orc meat; bind viper meat, which has a nice chewy texture to it; killergator meat, which is a bit on the healthy side; an unusual meat in the form of venison from short horn deer; giant bat meat, which is surprisingly delicious; and some lava boar meat that we can talk about even though it isn't really suited for grilling. Also, I should mention—there's no seafood, since we have all this meat."

I wouldn't have been able to tell apart most of the meat on my own. Tusk boar meat and orc meat were very familiar to me, but it seemed like it would be fun to compare the others.

"I gotta say, though, looking at all of this makes me think back on how many different kinds of monsters we've slain," I said.

"Mm. And these are just the edible monsters," said Haruka. "Oh, by the way, there are all kinds of different orc parts available here."

"It would have been a hassle to separate all of them out onto different plates, so we bunched the orc parts together," said Natsuki. "Please use your eyes to tell them apart."

"Whoa, that sounds really difficult!" I said. "Even when it comes to pork, I'm the kind of person who only knows how to distinguish between pork ribs and everything else that isn't the ribs, you know?"

It was easy to identify liver and offal due to how different they looked, but when it came to ordinary meat, I had no clue.

"You can just ask if you want to know," said Yuki. "I'll use my Appraisal skill to teach you!"

"Right, your Appraisal skill is definitely useful, Yuki," I said. "Well, I'm fine with anything as long as it tastes good."

While the rest of us were examining the different meats on offer, Metea, Mary, and Touya had been lining up meat on the grill and then eating it with big grins the second it was ready for consumption.

"This meat is very chewy!" said Metea. "I'll try this other meat next!"

"Met, that slice isn't fully cooked yet!" Mary exclaimed. "You have to cook it properly before you can eat it!"

"Okay," said Metea. "Oh, this slice over here looks ready!"

"My meat..."

"I-I'm sorry about this, Touya-san," said Mary.

"Well, I mean, I don't really mind," said Touya. "Feel free to eat as much as

you want too, Mary."

"Thank you very much," said Mary. "Mm, the dipping sauce goes really well with the meat. It should go well with the vegetables too."

The way the three of them were enjoying their food made me feel like there was no point in fussing over the little details when it came to cooking. The rest of us glanced at each other and smiled, then began to cook our own slices of meat.

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About thirty minutes after we finished lunch, Haruka stood up and declared, "Okay, it's about time for us to resume investigating the spring."

Metea was lying on the ground, but she got up when she heard Haruka's words, as did Mary.

"Upsy-daisy," said Metea. "Okay, let's do this!"

"Whew, I feel a bit better now," said Mary.

Initially, the sisters had been very excited, since it was their first time grilling meat outdoors, and they had eaten so much that they seemed to feel a bit uncomfortable. However, it looked like they had already recovered from their bloated tummies, probably because they were beastwomen. The rest of us stood as well and started to clean up the picnic sheets that we had laid down on the ground. As for the barbecue grill, which would have required a lot of time to clean up back on Earth, we'd dealt with it immediately after lunch thanks to the Extinguish Fire, Cool, and Purification spells and had already stowed it in Touya's magic bag. *Man, magic is way too useful. I'm so glad that we have it.*

"How should we approach this, though? Should we investigate the vicinity of the spring first?" Touya asked.

"Investigate!" Metea exclaimed.

If the option of investigating underwater was off the table, then our only remaining option was to investigate the surrounding environs. Touya started walking toward the spring, and Metea perked up her ears as she chased after him. There was nothing she could do to help, but she was wagging her tail and

seemed very motivated, so I felt like there was no reason for us to go out of our way to dampen her spirits, and the rest of us followed them.

We walked around the spring looking for any potential problems. However, we weren't able to find any anomalies that way. There wasn't any grass within one meter of the shore, and the bottom of the spring seemed to consist of bedrock, so there weren't any aquatic plants or even sand. There didn't seem to be any trash or dead animals in the spring either, although I had no idea if that was because the spring was managed and maintained.

"All that's left for us to investigate is the small stream that flows into the spring," said Haruka. "Should we head upstream?"

"The water looked clean, but I guess that's the only place remaining to investigate," I said.

If we couldn't find the source of the odor in the small stream, then there was nothing else we could do. Or rather, it would turn into the kind of investigation that would require more than just a few days to complete. Half the reason we'd accepted this quest was to have a picnic, so we concluded that we would head back to Pining if we couldn't find any clues today, but...

Touya brought some water to his nose rather than drinking it. "Oh, the water smells really bad here. This has to be the problem."

"It smells bad!" said Metea, who had scooped up some water in imitation of him.

I'd also copied Touya, but I couldn't detect any odor from the water in my hand. I turned to Mary for confirmation, since she was a beastwoman. "Is the bad smell actually that obvious?"

After Mary had scooped up some water herself, she nodded. "Mm. It's very easy to smell when I bring my nose close to the water."

"I'm pretty sure that any beastman or beastwoman would notice this right away," said Touya. "The guy who issued this quest—all he had to do was grab some beastman he knows and have him investigate, you know? If he had, then there wouldn't have been any need to issue a quest in the first place."

"You might be right about that, but what if he doesn't count any beastmen or

beastwomen among his acquaintances?” Natsuki asked.

“Well, then his only option would have been to pay a random beastman or beastwoman, so—oh, right.” Touya nodded to himself when he realized that Natsuki’s words made perfect sense. “I guess that’s us, huh?”

“Mm. Besides, it’s not like this area is completely safe,” said Haruka. “Apparently, when people from the brewery come here, they have to bring guards with them...”

Nothing had happened to us this time, but according to Haruka, you could sometimes encounter dangerous animals in this area. With that in mind, the owner of the brewery had made the right choice to issue a quest at the Adventurers’ Guild.

“Whatever the cause of the smell is, it’s upstream, meaning somewhere in the middle of the mountains,” said Touya.

The small stream flowed down into the cone-shaped crater from the mountains. As we walked upstream, we continued to sniff the water from time to time, but we never saw anything that looked like it might be the cause. We headed out of the hole and started to ascend the mountain itself. Halfway up the slope was a forest, and we walked through the trees for a few hundred meters before Touya stopped in his tracks and pointed like he’d found something.

“This is it,” said Touya.

“Here? I don’t see anything weird, though,” I said.

The small stream looked the same as it had all along its watercourse, so the rest of us tilted our heads in confusion, but Touya fished a shovel out of his magic bag. “It smells the worst here. Give me a sec.”

It looked like a bunch of coarse sand had accumulated at the bottom of the small stream. As Touya dug away at it, a hole grew, and eventually, something appeared at the bottom.

Metea was the first person to react. “Oh, sewage slimes!”

Buried at the bottom of the river were a few slimes ranging in color from gray

to black. Since they were bunched together, it was hard to tell there were multiple slimes, but that seemed to be the case.

“Sewage slimes? Do they pollute water?” I asked.

“No, they don’t. It’s my first time seeing some, but they actually purify water,” Natsuki replied. “I don’t remember their true name, however. Do you remember, Touya-kun?”

“Me? Oh, right.” He must have used his Appraisal skill on the slimes, because he said, “Let’s see. Apparently their proper name is clear slimes.”

Appraisal was a very useful skill that worked to retrieve even information the user didn’t clearly remember. However, it was equally impressive that Natsuki had managed to pull that information out of her memories pretty quickly without the Appraisal skill.

“These slimes look like sludge, but they’re called clear slimes? That doesn’t really make sense to me,” I said.

“They look dirty *because* of the fact that they purify the water,” said Natsuki.

“I see. I guess that means sewage slime is just the common name,” I said. “I’m surprised that you knew that, Metea.”

“I saw some in the neighborhood near my house. They were very small!” Metea was pinching her nose as she replied to me. Even I could detect the bad smell now.

“Someone probably tossed them there,” said Mary. “I saw some myself from time to time.”

“Mm, as their name implies, clear slimes purify water, but they usually live in dirty environments, and they absorb trash and debris, so many of them give off a very bad odor,” said Natsuki.

“On the other hand, this is a clean place, so someone must have planted the slimes here on purpose,” said Yuki.

“Yeah, that’s probably the case. Their objective must have been to pollute the spring, but I don’t know if this is a very effective way of doing so,” I said.

“Mm. Most people wouldn’t notice the minor level of pollution, after all,” said

Haruka.

The culprit had merely buried some clear slimes here instead of tossing trash into the spring or the stream. *Is this level of pollution enough to drastically change the taste of the ale? I don't think I would be able to tell the difference. This feels like such a half-assed plan.*

However, Yuki was looking down at the slimes thoughtfully. Frowning, she raised her head to explain what she'd been pondering. "I think the culprit's objective was to harass the brewery. The owner of Gardim Brewings is a stubborn guy who won't brew ale if he's not satisfied with the quality, right? This minor level of water pollution right before Gardim Brewings usually starts brewing ale—it must have been done on purpose. It makes it seem like it's just a stubborn artisan who's using a nonsensical excuse to avoid brewing, right?"

"Oh, true," said Haruka. "It would be a different story if the spring looked obviously polluted, but if the pollution is almost undetectable, then..."

"It just makes it seem like the brewery is just being unreasonable in their decision not to brew ale," said Touya. "It took my powerful nose to discover this, after all."

"On top of that, clear slimes become clean eventually, right? That means the water will return to normal after a while. It's hard to tell if the culprit wanted to get rid of the evidence of their actions or if they just didn't want to ruin the water permanently," said Yuki. "This plan seemed like a half-assed one at first, but you can also interpret it as a very insidious and well-thought-out one, right?"

Yuki's explanation made perfect sense to me. The culprit had acted with knowledge of the brewery owner's personality and sense of taste and smell, factoring in the likelihood that the owner would notice this minor level of pollution.

"Does that mean the culprit actually planned this all meticulously?" I asked.

"It's definitely a pretty malicious plan," said Touya. "Well, if we just slay the slimes here, then that plan is doomed, so—"

He made as though to scoop up the clear slimes with his shovel, but Haruka

exclaimed, “Stop, Touya! Don’t do it!”

“Huh? Why?”

“Our job is to investigate the cause of the bad smell,” said Haruka. “We’re not supposed to resolve the actual problem ourselves.”

“I mean, yeah, you’re technically right about that. But, like...” Touya had a look on his face like he thought everything would work out fine if we slew the slimes, but Haruka sounded like she had some serious reservations.

“It’s true that this problem will be resolved for now if we slay the slimes, but it’s obvious that someone purposely buried them here, right? On top of that, Yuki’s explanation implies that there’s a high chance the culprit did it out of malice. Don’t you think someone needs to investigate more thoroughly?”

“You’re saying we should leave the slimes alone for that reason, Haruka?” Touya asked.

“Mm. It would be a different story if these slimes were dangerous monsters, but anyone can slay them,” Haruka replied. “That being the case, it’s fine to leave them alone, isn’t it? It’s important to preserve the state of the crime scene for an investigation, after all.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right about that,” said Touya. “In that case, let’s just mark this place on a map, and I’ll bury the clear slimes under the sand again.”

“Okay, I’ll get on that right away,” said Yuki.

Yuki marked the map in her hands, and Touya refilled the hole with sand. I had no idea if the clear slimes could survive under those conditions, but it probably wasn’t an issue given that they had survived this long. Slimes were weird.

“Okay, let’s head to the guild in order to report what we discovered,” said Haruka.

“This kind of doesn’t sit right with me, but I guess it’s up to the issuer of the quest to decide what to do next,” I said.

We had successfully completed the actual objective of the quest, and our picnic amid the natural beauty of the forest had been refreshing. It seemed like

Mary and Metea had enjoyed our trip here, so we had probably gotten a bit closer to each other. As a result, we all walked with a spring in our steps as we headed back to Pining.

We visited the guild that evening to report the outcome of our quest.

“We discovered some monsters—commonly known as sewage slimes—at this place that we marked here on the map,” I said. “The slimes are probably the cause of the bad odor in the water. At least, we didn’t find anything that seemed abnormal.”

The receptionist lady nodded. “Mm, there shouldn’t be sewage slimes in a place like that. Very well. Your party has successfully completed your assigned quest. Good work. I felt certain we could count on high-rank adventures like yourselves, and I’m glad that I was right. Few other adventurers would have been able to produce results like these.”

After praising us extravagantly, the lady handed over the reward without any complaints. She must have been aware that an investigation quest was different from a hunt quest in which the objective was to resolve the issue rather than just discover it.

“The only reason we were able to do so was thanks to Touya,” I said. “Most people wouldn’t have been able to discover the cause of the bad smell. By the way, are there a lot of people with grudges against the issuer of this quest?”

Now that we’d discovered the source of the odor, it was clear that someone had caused this problem deliberately. That being the case, even if we had decided to slay the clear slimes, the stream would probably have ended up polluted again, which wasn’t exactly good news for the receptionist lady as a big fan of Gardim Brewings’s ale.

Wearing a grave expression, she sighed and lowered her voice. “Well, I’m not sure if that’s the right way to put it, but I have some idea of the cause. Don’t share this information with anyone, however.”

According to the receptionist, other breweries frequently targeted Gardim Brewings. Gardim Brewings was suffering at the moment due to its business model, but it was a long-established brewery and had maintained its reputation

for brewing high-quality ale. The other breweries wanted to obtain a monopoly on the use of the spring, which currently belonged to Gardim Brewings. Gardim Brewings had a lot of potential for renewed success in the future, and anyone who acquired it stood to reap a huge profit. It was like a ripe fruit, and many people in the ale-brewing business were eagerly awaiting its downfall.

"So there are a decent number of people who want to hasten that downfall..."

"I see. I take it that's the reason the culprit didn't pollute the spring too badly?" Natsuki asked.

The receptionist laughed awkwardly. "Mm, that's very likely the case. All they need to do is to ensure that Gardim Brewings fails to brew ale for one season."

Hmm. In a predicament like that, I feel like most people would ignore the bad smell, especially since it's hard to notice anyway, and just work hard on brewing ale, but I suppose an artisan who takes pride in his work can't accept those conditions. Pride is pointless if it leads to trouble for your customers and forces you to shut down, however.

"Is the art of ale brewing really worth being so picky about?" Haruka asked.

"That pride is part of the reason that Pining's ale has become so famous, so I can't really comment."

"Pride, huh? It can have a positive effect under the right circumstances, but under the wrong circumstances, it'll lead to doom," said Yuki, chuckling awkwardly.

I nodded. "Yeah, pride was the downfall of a lot of companies back in our homeland."

High quality was something worth striving for, but even if they were of slightly substandard quality, most products would sell as long as they were cheap. Recent history contained many examples of this principle in action. If the difference in taste was something that only a few people could distinguish, then Gardim Brewings was a bit too obsessive and picky about the quality of their products.

"Breaking the law is bad, but now that we've found the slimes, all we can say

is ‘good luck.’ Hopefully things turn out well in the end,” I said.

We would do our best to help out if Aera-san’s café were dealing with a problem like this, but we had only bought ale from Gardim Brewings on one occasion. In addition, Natsuki had mentioned before that she thought the owner of the brewery was stubborn to a fault, and I completely agreed with her assessment, so I felt like this issue would likely resolve itself in one way or another even without any further involvement on our part. It was true that leaving the whole thing alone felt a bit weird, but none of us were hell bent on bringing all criminals to justice, and it wasn’t our job to do so either.

“Ha ha, mm, yeah. In any case, I really appreciate your party’s efforts to help with this issue. Thank you very much.”

The receptionist had a somewhat awkward and conflicted smile on her face as she thanked us. As we headed out of the guild, I felt a bit bad for the people who were fans of Gardim Brewings’s ale, but I also felt like the brewery had to work hard themselves if they wanted to stay in business. Their fate was in their own hands.

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Metea was still pretty tired the day after we returned from the quest, so we spent the day relaxing at our inn. The day after that, we took the sisters with us and headed to the viscount’s mansion. We showed the guards the invitation we’d received, and they led us inside and left us in a parlor to wait. I’d been selected as our representative this time, so I was feeling pretty nervous throughout the wait. Natsuki would probably have been the best suited to this role, but in this kingdom, it might have seemed a bit strange for a party with multiple men to have a female representative. I wouldn’t describe the culture as patriarchal, exactly, but it was something that we had to keep in mind. The different attitudes toward gender in this country might have had something to do with the physical proximity of threats like monsters. Natsuki was actually quite strong, but it was a fact that she was also a very beautiful and classically feminine girl. With all of that in mind, it was better for a guy to act as the representative in order to avoid giving anyone the wrong impression.

Between Touya and me, everyone else had selected me without any

hesitation due to my appearance. We didn't need Touya's intimidation factor for a meeting with the viscount, so my appearance would probably leave a better impression—unless the viscount really liked beastmen for some reason. There was the possibility that the viscount would feel jealous of my youthful appearance, but if that turned out to be the case, we would have no choice but to deal with it. We had sat down on the sofas and waited for a few dozen minutes when we finally heard a knock on the door. It opened, and a middle-aged man entered the room. He must have been Viscount Nernas. An elderly man who looked like a butler followed behind him, along with some bodyguards. All of us rose to our feet when we saw the viscount.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Oh, not at all," I said, shaking my head.

The appointment we'd been given was just sometime in the morning, which was pretty ambiguous. Anyway, we hadn't been waiting for too long. It would probably have been better to schedule a specific time, but that wasn't easy in this world; very few people had clocks or other means of keeping track of time. In any case, the viscount seemed to have arrived as soon as he could given his busy schedule.

"My name is Joachim Nernas. Please feel free to resume your seats."

"Okay, thank you," I said.

All of us sat down facing the viscount. He looked into our faces one by one, observing us, and then tilted his head as if he was a bit puzzled about what he saw. "Hmm. So you're the members of the Meikyo Shisui party, are you? You all look rather younger than I imagined."

"Oh, yes, we are," I said. "My name is Nao, and I'm still a fledgling adventurer..."

Uh, how am I supposed to respond in situations like this?



I know I can't just answer with silence, and I can't lie that I'm not that young, because I definitely don't look old. There's no way I can say something like "You shouldn't judge us by our age!" either. I hope my awkward answer doesn't upset him...

However, the viscount didn't seem to take umbrage at my answer; rather, he chuckled and shook his head. "Oh, I don't mean there's anything wrong with your being young—or that I had any doubts in your abilities. I've received reports from both Diola and Sadius, and I'm deeply grateful to your party. You have contributed a great deal to Laffan's furniture industry, retrieved the family heirloom of the House of Nernas—and I've heard, too, that your party has contributed to the defense of Kelg. Oh, hmm. If I recall correctly, it was you who dispatched the bandits as well."

"Thank you very much for the praise," I said. "We just happened to be lucky..."

"If luck were all that was needed, the local garrison would have been able to dispatch them with ease, ha ha!"

Ugh, I have no idea how to respond to this properly either. I can't exactly say that we're stronger than the local army, even though that's true, so...

"...In that case, I should say that I believe a significant factor in our success was the blessing of Advastlis-sama," I said.

I was telling the truth as a last resort to come up with an answer that didn't sound rude, and the viscount raised an eyebrow. "Oh, are you all believers in Advastlis-sama? Perhaps I should instruct the troops to venerate him as well, then."

"We're not exactly pious enough to be called believers, but we do visit his temple to offer prayers from time to time," I said.

"Hmm, I see," said Joachim.

Back in Japan, religion and related issues weren't exactly polite topics of conversation, but people in this world took religion very seriously due to how close at hand the gods were. I had played along with the viscount, but I had no idea if my choice of words had been adequately respectful. Touya and Haruka

were sitting on my left and right respectively, and I briefly glanced at each of them in turn. Touya looked like he was totally spaced out, while Haruka had a poker face. *Damn it, I should have asked Natsuki to speak for us instead!*

"Now, I don't mean to imply anything untoward, but have I put you in an awkward spot?" Joachim asked.

"O-Oh, not at all," I replied.

I mean, the fact that we got summoned here in the first place is the "awkward spot," but that's another thing I can't say out loud!

"Hmm. I summoned your party in order to express my gratitude, but it seems it isn't going so well," said Joachim. "Incidentally, I heard Meikyo Shisui described as a party of five, correct? Who, then, are the children who accompanied you here? Surely not new members of your party?"

The viscount wasn't a bad person by any means—he had changed the subject after he noticed that I was unsure of how to reply to him—but the new topic was awkward in its own right.

"Oh, those are children who we took into our custody at Kelg," I said. "They lost their dad in the riot and the ensuing chaos, so..."

"Ah..." The viscount's voice trailed off awkwardly after he heard my explanation.

My description of the sisters' circumstances could have been interpreted as a criticism of the viscount's misgovernment, but I could hardly have lied, so I'd felt very hesitant about replying. As a viscount, he probably couldn't compromise his dignity by offering an apology, but neither did he seem so cold and ruthless that he would ignore the sisters' plight. I had no intention of putting him in an awkward situation either, so I quickly changed the subject.

"We plan to allow the children to live with us in our home in Laffan for the time being," I said. "Luckily for us, we're wealthy enough that we can easily afford to care for them."

"I see. I'll keep that in mind," said Joachim. It genuinely sounded as though he had no ill intentions toward us. "Wiesel!" he called to the butler, who was standing behind him.

“Mm. Please accept this as payment for embarking on the lengthy journey to Pining,” said Wiesel.

He handed me a small bag. It looked like it was actually a reward, but we had already received rewards for our work at Kelg and all of our other accomplishments, so that was probably why he’d instead used the word payment.

It would probably have been rude to refuse the bag, so I accepted it and immediately discovered that it was much heavier than I had expected. “Thank you very mu— Oh, um, there seems to be a *lot* of money in here...”

If the only contents were gold coins, there must have been at least a hundred. I wouldn’t have minded accepting a reward like this if it felt like a reasonable one, but there was something scary about the idea of taking more money than we’d actually earned.

I looked at the viscount for reassurance, and he chuckled. “This includes what your party accomplished in this very city two days ago. You resolved the issue that has been plaguing Gardim Brewings, did you not?”

“Um, I don’t know that we did...” We had merely discovered the cause of the issue and had left the rest to the guild and the brewery itself.

But the viscount shook his head. “That is more than enough. It gives me an excuse to intervene. Pining’s ale industry is a very important one and should be developed further in the future. I cannot allow some minor trouble to hinder that progress.”

“I see. In that case, we humbly accept this payment,” I said.

I had no idea if the viscount was going to take action against the other breweries that had hatched a malicious plot or intervene to save Gardim Brewings from its financial troubles, but that was none of our business. All that mattered to us was that there were no hidden intentions behind the reward. I stuffed the bag into my pocket.

The viscount nodded; he had a satisfied look on his face. “Meikyo Shisui, I am pleased and, indeed, proud to have excellent adventurers like yourselves in my viscounty. I pray you will live lives of ease. I look forward to hearing about your

exploits for many years to come.”

The viscount’s words sounded very considerate, and in fact, they were the last words of the meeting. We bowed and left the viscount’s mansion.

Chapter 2—Welcome!

We had decided to walk back to Laffan in order to save time. Under most circumstances, that reasoning would have sounded a bit strange, but it made sense for my party. Each of us took turns carrying the sisters on our backs as we dashed down the road back home, with Touya and me taking the most turns. We actually arrived home quite fast.

Metea sounded very excited when she caught sight of the home we'd worked so hard to pay for. "Whoa, so this is your house?!"

Mary seemed surprised too. "I-It's a mansion..."

"Yeah, it is!" Touya exclaimed. "We also own another mansion that's even bigger than this one!"

"Really?! I knew I made the right choice!" Metea looked at Touya with sparkling eyes, then threw her hands in the air and jumped up and down.

"Whoa, I had no idea that you could earn so much money from adventurer work," said Mary.

She sounded very impressed, but Yuki just laughed awkwardly. "Uh, it's more like we worked very hard to earn a lot of money. Just so you know, most adventurers only scrape by."

"Anyone can become an adventurer, but the sheer number of adventurers also means that a lot of them die without ever finding success," I said. "We just happened to get lucky."

I tried to drop a hint that adventuring wasn't a profession I could recommend without some qualifications, but Metea put a hand to her forehead and grunted as she worked her brain for a bit. At last she raised her head and declared, "Okay, I'll become an adventurer and earn a lot of money!"

"...Are you serious about that, Metea?" I asked. "What happened to your plan of having Touya support you?"

“Dad also told me that he would feel even more relieved if we could earn money ourselves, so if I can do that, big bro Touya isn’t needed!” Metea was smiling, but her words sounded a bit cruel.

All of the girls burst out laughing.

Natsuki, who looked especially amused, turned to Touya and said, “Oh my, Touya-kun, it seems you’ve been rejected.”

“Uh, I’m not sure you can really call this a rejection,” said Touya. He seemed a bit conflicted and cocked his head in confusion, but then he put on a serious face and asked, “Metea, are you serious about aiming to become an adventurer?”

Metea nodded vigorously and made another firm declaration. “Yeah! I’ll earn a lot of money so that I can feed my big sis and take care of her!”

“Huh?! That idea doesn’t really sit right with me...” Metea’s words seemed to have caught Mary completely off guard, so this must not have been something that the two of them had discussed in advance. With a troubled look on her face, Mary turned to Haruka for help. “Um, Haruka-san, do you think I would be able to make a living as an adventurer?”

“Well, I can’t say anything for sure, but I think you’d be able to find at least modest success,” Haruka replied. “You’re a very patient person, after all.”

“Setting aside the question of whether or not you *should* become an adventurer, I completely agree with Haruka about that,” I said.

In spite of suffering severe burns during the riot, Mary had carried Metea to safety on her back. That was a testament to her determination and mental fortitude, which would probably serve her quite well if she decided to pursue the life of an adventurer.

“Mm. You have great physical abilities, and also, you have us around,” said Yuki. “It seems like one of the main reasons that many rookie adventurers fail is the lack of any instructors or mentors who can teach them the ropes.”

“I see,” said Mary. She paused in thought, probably because all of us had given her relatively positive feedback.

Natsuki chuckled and laid a hand on Mary's shoulder to bring her back to the present. "Before anything else, let's head inside, okay? We can talk about what to do in the future after we sit down and relax."

"Okay!" said Metea. "I want to explore the house!"

"I mean, our house is quite big, but the layout isn't actually that complex," I said. "If you want to explore, I think our other house would be better for that."

"I want to explore that house too!" Metea seemed very excited as we opened the gates and headed inside, but...

"There are weeds everywhere," said Haruka. "I don't want to think about what we'll see when we visit Edith's mansion..."

"Sure, this was a predictable outcome considering the season, but I can't see any traces of the field that I made," said Touya.

"I mean, all you did was plow the yard with a hoe," I said. "I know how you feel, though."

I felt a bit melancholy thinking that we already had to clean up the yard *again*, but Metea seemed like she was enjoying the scenery. "Whoa, this is such a big yard! Can I look around?!"

"Sure, but there's nothi—"

"Yay!" Metea pushed aside the weeds and dashed away before I could finish my words.

"Met, wait!" Mary stretched a hand out toward Metea's back, but Metea had disappeared without looking back. Mary's shoulders slumped as she apologized to me in Metea's place. "I'm really sorry about this, Nao-san..."

I shook my head. "Well, there isn't anything to find in our yard, so I'm pretty sure she'll return soon. Our yard is safe too, so— Oh, she knows that she needs to be careful around wells, right?"

There was a well at the back of our house, but we seldom used it due to the fact that we could create water ourselves with magic.

Mary nodded. "Yeah, she knows. I taught her all about the dangers."

“That’s reassuring to hear,” said Haruka. “In that case, let’s head into our hou_”

Metea jumped out of the bushes and shouted, “I found a small shed in the corner of my yard!” She must have already explored the entire yard once, and she looked like she was full of excitement; she was waving her hands and pointing at a corner of the yard.

“Oh, yeah, that’s the place I use as a small smithy,” said Touya. “There wasn’t anything interesting inside, right?”

“A smithy! I had no idea that you could do blacksmithing as well, big bro Touya!” said Metea. “That’s so amazing!”

“Heh, yeah, I’m a decent blacksmith,” said Touya. He seemed genuinely flattered. “Okay, Metea, the next place to explore is our house.”

“Yeah! I’m looking forward to it!” Metea exclaimed.

“...She sure is energetic,” said Haruka.

Mary looked like she felt embarrassed by her sister, but Haruka just laughed and shrugged.

★★★★★★★★★

We had been away from home for a long time, so first thing, we opened the windows and dusted all over the house. While we were cleaning, Metea zoomed around exploring. Periodically, I tagged along with Mary to chase after Metea. After a few hours, we’d finished cleaning, and we gathered in the living room to sit down for a bit. The girls had prepared some tea and snacks and set them on the coffee table in the middle of the living room. After we sat down on the sofas and enjoyed the refreshments, we all felt very relaxed.

“Whew, we can finally take a load off our feet,” I said.

“Mm. This was a longer business trip than usual,” said Natsuki.

We hadn’t spent much time away from Laffan, but what with traveling to Kelg and then all the way to Pining, we had covered a lot of distance. Many memorable events had occurred along the way. Natsuki was sipping her cup of tea with an air of relief, so she was probably exhausted from everything we’d

been through.

“Home sweet home,” said Touya. “Whew...”

Touya lay down and rolled around on the carpet, and Metea immediately copied him. She seemed to enjoy the texture of the carpet; she was laughing as she rolled around. We had initially planned on designing this living room in imitation of Western-style mansions, but at the end of the day, all of us were Japanese, so we’d quickly changed our plans and decided that this living room would be a place where shoes weren’t allowed. We’d kept the sofas from the Western concept, but we’d added carpet for lying down and rolling around. We’d also set up a pantry in the corner, so all in all, our living room was a very comfortable space. On top of that, Yuki, Haruka, and I could work together to adjust the temperature with magic, so whenever we had nothing to do, all of us would gather here to spend time together.

“You don’t wear any shoes while you’re in this room, huh?” said Mary.

“Yeah. It may seem strange, but it’s more relaxing for us this way,” said Haruka. “Mary, Metea, make sure you remember to take your shoes off before entering this room, okay?”

“Okay!” they replied in unison.

Haruka told the sisters about the other rules we all had to follow—that it was forbidden to enter someone’s private room without permission, that they were free to eat anything in the pantries but shouldn’t eat too much, and that they shouldn’t touch our weapons or any of the objects that pertained to Haruka’s Alchemy skill and Natsuki’s Pharmacy skill. As a way to wrap things up, Haruka told them they could ask her any questions that came into their minds.

Haruka’s explanation seemed to have reminded Mary that we really were going to live together from now on. She bowed politely to us, then pulled Metea upright from where she was lying on the carpet, and Metea copied her sister’s bow.

“Okay. I’m sorry about any inconvenience that we might cause, but thank you so very much for letting us live with you,” said Mary.

“Thank you so very much for letting us live with you,” Metea echoed.

“You don’t have to act so polite! Feel free to take your time getting used to things,” I said.

“Yeah, let’s get along with each other,” said Haruka.

“Mm. I’m looking forward to our life together in this house,” said Natsuki.

“Feel free to count on Yuki-chan for help if anything comes up, okay?” said Yuki.

“Cheers. Take it easy, all right?” said Touya.

The sisters smiled after they heard our words, and Metea started to lie down on the carpet again.

“Are you tired, Metea?” I asked.

“Nah, I’m fine,” Metea replied. “I still have a lot of energy.”

I wanted to make sure that Metea wasn’t tired because I was about to bring up a serious topic, but she rolled toward me and climbed onto my back. *Is this her way of implying that she’s still energetic? Hmm. Sure, I guess.*

“First of all, Mary, Metea, are the two of you sure about wanting to become adventurers?” I asked. “To be honest, we wouldn’t mind if you just took care of our house. We’d even be willing to pay you a certain amount.”

In fact, asking the sisters to take care of our house was the first plan that the five of us had discussed. For the time being, we could look after the sisters without any issues, but they would eventually grow up, and it wouldn’t really be right for us to continue to take care of them after that. Purely by chance, we’d become the owners of two mansions, and we would frequently be away from home, so it would be perfectly natural for us to hire some people to take care of our property. It would be beneficial for us if we could hire someone trustworthy to take care of our home, so it wasn’t like we had just come up with a job for the sisters to do.

However, Mary paused in thought for a bit and eventually shook her head. “I really appreciate the offer, but if possible, then I’d like to become strong so I can protect Met if it comes down to it.”

Metea had been the first to voice her intention to become an adventurer, but

the only reason I'd asked them today was so that we could plan out things from tomorrow onward; there was no rush. A response like "Please give me some time to think about it" would have been equally fine, but Mary had a serious and determined look on her face, so she was probably remembering that they had nearly died as a result of the riot in Kelg. Mary had pulled off a heroic feat for someone her age, but it was a fact that she and her younger sister would have died if we hadn't happened to pass by the place where they'd collapsed, and that memory probably still haunted her.

"...Well, I think the idea of training to become stronger is perfectly fine," said Yuki. "That training will remain useful even after you quit being adventurers, after all."

"Mm. There are a lot of dangers out there in this world, especially for girls," said Natsuki.

"Agreed. There are all kinds of scum who think they can get their way by force," said Haruka.

The girls all grimaced as they chimed in; they were probably thinking about certain classmates of ours who were dead by now. We had slain some of them ourselves as an act of self-defense, but we had only been able to do so because we were stronger than them. If we'd been weak, the girls would have definitely suffered an awful fate.

"Well, I don't have any reason to object to this idea," said Touya. "We can protect you if we're nearby, but..."

"...It's not like we'll always be around," I said. "Well, in that case, Mary, Metea, I guess we'll teach you the basics starting tomorrow."

"Okay!" said Mary. "I'll do my best!"

"Me too!" said Metea. "I'll become an amazing adventurer like you are, big bro Nao!"

The sisters clenched their fists in a show of determination, and I nodded before continuing. "All right, but don't overexert yourselves, okay? Make sure you tell us if the training gets too tough or painful."

We actually got injured pretty routinely during our training sessions, so our

regimen wasn't easy by any means. I would hold back against the sisters, of course, but it would be my first time teaching a couple of kids how to fight, and I felt a bit worried about Mary in particular; she was a patient girl who would probably force herself to endure a certain amount of punishment without complaining. *I'll have to keep that in mind during our training session.*

"Also, while we're at it, let's deal with other things that we need to take care of," I said. "I feel like we've let them pile up, so..."

"Oh, yeah, we've definitely put a lot of things off for later," said Yuki.

"Mm. All right, let's start by assigning our new housemates some rooms," said Haruka. "We do have spare rooms, after all. Would each of you like your own room?"

"My own room!" Metea seemed very excited, but that excitement immediately faded from her face, and she looked to Mary for help. "Oh, um, I'd feel lonely by myself..."

"We'd like to share a room," said Mary with an awkward laugh. "It doesn't have to be a private room—"

I shook my head. "Actually, all we have to offer are private rooms, so please accept this."

The house that the sisters had lived in before might have been the kind in which an entire family slept together in the same room, but it would be awkward for us if the sisters slept in the kitchen or the dining room.

"Well, they're private rooms, but we mainly use them for sleeping," said Yuki. "We spend most of our time here in this living room, after all."

"Oh, I see," said Mary. "Okay."

"We can place an order with Simon-san for more beds, but let's make the blankets ourselves," said Haruka. "It'll be faster that way."

"Mm. We'll also have to mow our yard," said Natsuki. "We can't just leave it overgrown for our neighbors to see—and that includes the yard of Edith's mansion."

"We need to stock up on prepared meals as well," said Yuki. "We went

through a lot during our journey, so we'll have to make some more to store in our magic bags."

"Oh, speaking of which, we also need to deal with the dead monsters in our bags," said Haruka. "We haven't gutted them yet."

"Right, that's something we definitely need to deal with as soon as possible," I said.

We had gotten much better at combat and were regularly slaying even more monsters than in the past, but that came with one big downside: we had to dress all of the carcasses. As a result, every one of us had leveled up the Disassemble skill by now, but it wasn't a superpower; it didn't instantly gut the monsters and dispose of everything that was left over, so the process produced a lot of waste. We could easily have discarded that waste in the woods, where wild animals would take care of it for us, but that wasn't an option if we brought the dead monsters back home with us rather than dressing them in the field. As a result, we had taken advantage of the fact that our magic bags could contain an enormous volume of material and had used them to store most of the game we'd slain recently. The exceptions were especially large monsters like lava boars, plus the ones that we delivered to Aera-san and the ones that we consumed ourselves.

"I think it'd be a good idea to place some orders for new armor as well," said Touya. "We haven't used the hide from the lava boar yet, right?"

"Well, the lava boar's hide has been tanned," said Haruka. "But I agree with that idea."

"Man, now that we've listed all of them out, there are actually a ton of things we need to do," I said.

In fact, if we'd included the minor tasks, the fingers of both hands wouldn't have been enough to count up all the items on our agenda.

"Yeah, but we can just deal with them one by one," said Yuki. "There's also something that I planned to make with Haruka using the Alchemy skill. You placed an order with Gantz-san a while back for the parts that we need, right, Haruka?"

“Oh, yeah, I did,” said Haruka. “I told him that he could take his time, but I’m pretty sure he should be done by now.”

“Hm? Did you two come up with a useful new invention?” I asked. “Is it something like a magical device that can automatically gut monsters for us?”

I had gotten used to it by now, but there was nothing fun or enjoyable about getting my hands bloody or seeing the innards of a monster. It would have been great if our job began and ended with slaying monsters.

Haruka chuckled. “Nah, that’s impossible. But the magical device we plan to make can save us some labor. The simplest way to describe it would be as a compost bin with a shredder attached. You can toss something the size of a scalp ape inside and it’ll fit just fine.”

“...Yikes,” I said.

Ugh, you made me imagine it way too vividly, Haruka. It sounds like it’ll be a very dangerous device...

“By compost bin, do you mean this device will create fertilizer?” Natsuki asked.

“Yeah, that’s right. We’ve talked about having our own kitchen garden and flower beds, so the goal was to make something that could process the waste from the gutting process into fertilizer. It’s a way of killing two birds with one stone,” said Yuki. “Among the research papers that Edith left behind, we found something that seemed perfect for that purpose.”

“There were some pages in the alchemist encyclopedia that described a similar device, but the one that Edith described in her papers is more powerful,” said Haruka.

“A magical device that’s capable of breaking down even bones and turning them into compost, huh? Phosphorus is abundant in bones, so that’s quite good,” said Natsuki.

“Right? We can even sell bone meal as fertilizer,” said Yuki.

“O-Oh, I guess it makes perfect sense, in a way, to turn all of our monster waste into compost,” I said.

Even I knew that fertilizers were primarily composed of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, but beyond that, I was clueless.

“By the way, where will the other components come from?” I asked.

“If you’re asking about nitrogen and potassium, then wood ash is an easily obtainable source of potassium,” Natsuki replied. “We can plant beans for nitrogen, and oil cakes also contain a lot of nitrogen, so we can probably just use some of the rapeseed that we bought the other day. I’ve heard that compost doesn’t require very much added nitrogen, though.”

“You seem to be quite knowledgeable about this, Natsuki,” I said.

“To a certain extent,” said Natsuki.

Uh, I’m not sure if that’s the right phrase, Natsuki. Is this truly basic knowledge for anyone who has some experience with kitchen gardens, or...?

“Well, even if we can come up with a bunch of fertilizer, we can’t exactly use it right away, since the open field in our yard is completely covered in weeds right now,” said Yuki.

“Yeah, you’re right about that,” said Touya. “What’s the plan? Should I work hard again to clear the weeds?”

While the rest of us were busy crafting elemental metal, Touya had spent a great deal of time cleaning up our yard all by himself. Those days were still fresh in my mind. Touya had enough stamina to clear the weeds and the open field by himself, but...

“Nah, let’s use money to deal with this problem,” I said. “We’ve earned enough to afford that option.”

“Money? What do you plan on doing, Nao?” Haruka asked.

She looked at me as if she was slightly skeptical of my idea, and I hastily waved my hands in denial. “All I’m saying is that we should hire some people to do the work for us, Haruka. Ishuca-san told us the other day that the orphans don’t get much work, right? Considering our current busy lifestyle, there’s no point in clearing the yard ourselves—pretty soon, it’ll get exactly this bad again—so it wouldn’t be a bad idea to hire somebody and leave it to them, right?”

Based on what Ishuca-san had told us, the kids at an orphanage would spend their days playing and studying while they were young, but when they reached a certain age, they would start to take on work in order to get experience that would help them after they had to leave the orphanage. Back on Earth, that system would have been called child labor and harshly criticized, but there was no system in this world to protect or support people who couldn't find work. It would be even worse for the kids if, when they reached adulthood, they were suddenly thrown into society outside of the orphanage without any work experience. However, apparently that was actually the case for a decent number of orphanages out there. Most of the kids from those orphanages were unable even to become day laborers. As a result, they had no choice but to take on dangerous work as adventurers, and many of them lost their lives in short order.

"Oh, yeah, I remember her saying that," said Haruka. "I wouldn't put it past someone like Ishuca-san to exaggerate, however."

"I mean, yeah, I agree. She probably told us the story in a way that would make us feel bad for the orphans." *Ishuca-san looks like a proper priestess on the outside, but she's actually tough and shrewd.* "However, she probably wasn't lying to us outright, right? Besides, it's not like we have anything to lose. Ishuca-san is trustworthy, and if we're going to hire people to take care of our yards, it's good to hire through someone trustworthy, right?"

"I'm not against your idea or anything, Nao. I actually think it's quite a good one. You're right that we can't realistically maintain our own yards," said Haruka. "What about you, Touya? Do you mind if we hire kids from the orphanage to take care of the yard at Edith's mansion?"

"Hmm? Nah, not at all," said Touya. "I want the shrine to be properly taken care of, however."

Haruka and I nodded.

"Of course," said Haruka. "We all feel the same way about that."

"All right, then," said Touya. "What's next? Armor, right? We need armor and weapons for Mary and Metea."

"Yeah, but we don't know what would be suitable for them, so for now, we

can just let them use our weapons during training and decide on what to order later," I said. "Mary, Metea, does either of you want to use any specific weapon?"

The ability to choose a weapon of your own liking was important in terms of motivation, but the sisters glanced at each other and shook their heads.

"Uh, a sword, maybe? I don't really know!" said Metea.

"I've never found myself in a situation where I needed to use a weapon, so I have no idea what would be suitable for me," said Mary.

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense. We also haven't shown you how we actually fight for real," I said. "With all of that in mind, we should definitely carry out some training sessions before you make a decision."

"Okay," said Metea. "I don't really get it, but I understand!"

Yeah, and I understand that you don't really get it, Metea.

"Well, once you actually start training, you'll gradually get a rough idea, I think," I said. "We also have to restock on the prepared meals that we store in our magic bags, but I'm counting on you for that, Yuki, Natsuki, and Haruka. I'm sure none of us want to eat the kind of meals Touya and I would come up with."

"Sure, we'll find some time to make meals," said Haruka. "However, will you please tag along when we go into town to purchase ingredients?"

"Of course. I can be ready to head out whenever," I said. "Hmm. That should be everything, right?"

I used my fingers to count off all of the issues we had raised, and when I was done, Yuki pulled on my sleeve. "What about gardening, Nao? What about my plan for wonderful flower beds?"

"Huh? It's my first time hearing about this big plan," I said. "Didn't you say something about how you would compromise and settle for a small flower bed?"

I remembered a conversation along those lines when we had visited the marketplace in Kelg. I felt like Yuki could work on a small project like that in her own free time once the weeds had all been pulled, but Yuki must not have been

satisfied with my response, because she waved her hands around in displeasure. “I only gave up at the time because I was told that I would have to become a full-time gardener all on my own! If we can hire kids from the orphanage to take care of our yards for us, then now is the time for me to make my dream come true! I really want to create a front yard full of wonderful flowers, you know?”

“Your dream, huh? Well, there’s plenty of space in our yard for you to work on a flower bed or a flower garden,” I said. “I have no intention of stopping you.”

While I was talking, Yuki had been looking at me with puppy dog eyes, but then she snapped out of it. “No, that’s not it! I want you to help me, Nao! And you like beautiful flowers as well, don’t you, Haruka?”

Yuki leaned against me as she turned to Haruka for approval, but Haruka just laughed and shrugged. “Well, of course, I don’t *dislike* beautiful flowers. Why don’t you help her out, Nao?”

“I mean, sure, I don’t really mind,” I said. “All right, let’s add planting flower beds at the lowest priority level on the list of tasks that we need to accomplish. There isn’t anything else, is there?”

Yuki kept on badgering me to raise the priority level of the flower beds, but I resisted her demands as I looked around at everyone else, and after I had confirmed that there were no other objections, I wrapped up our discussion with the words “All right, let’s do our best again starting tomorrow.”

The next day, we split into groups for different tasks. Yuki headed out to place an order for beds, Haruka and Natsuki worked on making blankets and food, and Touya went to visit Gantz-san. As for myself, I had been put in charge of handling negotiations with Ishuca-san, plus visiting the Adventurers’ Guild to talk to Diola-san. The negotiations with Ishuca-san would be about hiring orphans to take care of our yard, while my visit to Diola-san would be to report that we’d returned to Laffan and to introduce the sisters to her. Diola-san would eventually have met the sisters anyway, since they would probably be tagging along with us from now on, but it wouldn’t have been right not to

inform her about them ahead of time, so I brought the sisters with me to the guild, but...

Diola-san smiled the moment she saw me. “Hello, Nao-san. How have you been doing lately? Incidentally, the dindel season is just around the corner.”

“...What kind of greeting is that supposed to be, Diola-san? Don’t worry, we haven’t forgotten about your dindels,” I said. “We enjoy them too, so we’ll head out to gather some as soon as they’re in season.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I suppose my inner monologue slipped out.” Diola-san covered her mouth in an exaggerated way and laughed. “So, why are you here today? I see you’ve brought two girls with you. Are you here to introduce me to your new girlfriends?”

“Don’t accuse me of something like that, please!” I said. “Besides, what do you mean by ‘new’?! I don’t have any old girlfriends either!”

Diola-san casually deflected my complaints. “Hm? There’s Haruka-san, Yuki-san, and Natsuki-san, right?”

When the sisters heard those words, their eyes went wide in surprise.

“Oh, Nao-san, are you actually dating all three of them?” Mary asked. “I didn’t notice at all...”

“Are you a ladies’ man, big bro Nao?”

Metea’s innocent eyes were causing me some pain. I squatted down and put my hands on her shoulders before responding. “That’s not it at all, Metea. I’m not dating anyone right now, okay?”

“Really? I heard you were quite active during your time in Pining, Nao-san,” said Diola.

“Diola-san, your words sound like they have a different meaning in this context, so can you please give me a break?”

“Oh, I sincerely apologize for my poor choice of words,” said Diola. “I wasn’t trying to imply anything.” She had a fake-looking smile on her face.

I probably wouldn’t have made any progress if I’d continued to press her on that subject, so I forcefully shifted the conversation back to my original reason

for coming here. “It’s true that I’m here to introduce these sisters, but that’s because they’re new members of our party. We’re now a party of seven, so I figured that the right thing to do would be to alert you first, Diola-san. Mary, Metea, please introduce yourselves.”

At my urging, the sisters stood side by side and bowed.

“My name is Mary. It’s nice to meet you, Diola-san.”

“My name’s Metea! Nice to meet you, big sis Diola!”

Diola-san seemed genuinely pleased. “Oh my, they’re such good girls! Where did you find these good girls, Nao-san?” Diola asked. “The majority of newbie adventurers are like ill-behaved children, so I’m really impressed with your luck.”

Despite how happy Diola seemed to be, I detected some hints in her words about her struggles as the vice-branch master of the guild, and I paused in thought before coming up with a vague answer. “We found them in Kelg during the incident that occurred there the other day, and now they’re living with us.”

Diola-san was a very perceptive person, and she seemed to take my meaning immediately; she nodded with a serious expression. “Oh, I see. I’m afraid that as an employee of the guild, I cannot provide them with special treatment, but please free me to consult me if anything comes up.”

“Thank you very much, Diola-san,” I said. “To be honest, we felt a bit uneasy about taking kids into our custody...”

“Well, I think it’s terribly noble of your party to take them on anyway,” said Diola. “I have more life experience, so I believe I’ll be able to provide your party with a certain amount of advice, although it’ll be advice from an adult woman who isn’t married and doesn’t have any kids...”

Why do some people purposefully choose words that’ll only cause them pain? It’s something I’ll never understand. I responded with silence, which I felt was the wisest course of action, but Diola-san stared at me, so apparently I’d miscalculated. *All right, time for a backup plan. I choose you, Metea!*

“Hm? What’s wrong, big sis Diola?” Metea asked.

“O-Oh, it’s nothing at all!” Diola exclaimed. “You absolutely need to keep it together, Nao-san.”

“Yes, ma’am!” I felt like there were several implications hidden in Diola-san’s words, so I saluted her. “By the way, I happen to have a souvenir for you, Diola-san...”

After that, I projected the utmost humility as I presented one of the barrels of ale that my party had bought in Pining.

“This ale is very popular in Pining,” I said. “You’ve helped us out a lot, Diola-san, so please accept it as a token of our gratitude.”

Giving gifts on a regular basis was essential for strong interpersonal relationships, especially long-term ones.

“Oh my! I’ve merely carried out my duties as an employee of the guild. There was no need for you to go so far out of your way for little old me, you know?” said Diola.

“Really? In that case—”

I had no intention of taking away the barrel of ale, but Diola-san extended both of her hands toward it. “However, I would feel bad turning down a sincere gift from your party, so...”

“Oh, um, okay,” I said. “Please accept this gift from us, Diola-san.”

I handed over the barrel of ale without any hesitation.

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Diola-san cheered up after I handed her the barrel of ale, and we spent a little time catching up. After that, I left the guild with the sisters in tow and headed over to the temple. First, I donated some money, although I had no idea if our donations would help at all in this case. As I offered a prayer to Advastlis-sama, I prayed for the sisters as well. Then we walked to the orphanage, where I found Ishuca-san right away. I introduced the sisters to her, then brought up the topic of hiring orphans to manage and care for the yards of the two houses that my party owned.

Ishuca-san smiled. “What a generous offer, Nao-san. I’m sure that the gods

are very pleased with your party. May the gods bless you."

"Thank you very much, Ishuca-san," I said. "However, weren't you kind of steering us toward this outcome by telling us about the orphans?"

Ishuca-san was a very busy person, but while our party had been practicing magic with the Light Orb, she had dropped by from time to time to tell my party about the orphans and their circumstances. If she hadn't been so insistent, then I probably wouldn't have been so quick to think of hiring orphans to manage our yard. Ishuca-san was probably aware of the fact that my party owned two houses, so it wouldn't have been hard for her to arrive at the conclusion that we weren't able to maintain the yards ourselves.

I gave Ishuca-san a skeptical look, but her smile didn't falter at all. "Oh, you're just imagining things, Nao-san," she said, tilting her head. "I simply wanted to let everyone in your party know more about the orphanage, since you've contributed so much to the well-being of the orphans—that's all."

The way she made it sound, it had been up to us to decide what to do with the information she'd provided, but she had definitely been aware of how we would act. However, it wasn't really that manipulative in the big scheme of things. Ishuca-san was pretty blatant about trying to get donations out of visitors to the temple, but she had helped us a lot as well, so it wasn't a one-sided relationship.

"The subsidies from the lord and the donations to the temple are more than enough to feed the orphans, but if they remain in the orphanage for their entire childhoods, they'll struggle as adults," said Ishuca-san.

"Do jobs like these enable the orphans to make personal connections that they can rely on later in life?" I asked.

"Mm. In fact, the only orphans who can get jobs once they become adults are the ones who manage to form these kinds of connections," Ishuca replied. "I have a decent number of acquaintances, but that's hardly enough to find jobs for every orphan every year..."

It was important that kids have parents to vouch for them. Ishuca-san seemed to be held in high regard in this community, but kids left the orphanage every year, so she couldn't be responsible for all of them. Gantz-san had taken Tomi

under his wing, but for someone without parents to form that kind of relationship was a very rare exception. The fact that we had spent a lot of money at Gantz-san's store had been a significant factor in his decision, as had Tomi's high proficiency as a blacksmith and the profits from Touya's shovels; Gantz-san probably wouldn't have taken on Tomi-san otherwise, and the average kid who'd just left an orphanage definitely wouldn't have been able to offer those kinds of incentives to an employer.

"Just to be clear, I don't know if working for us will help the orphans get jobs in the future," I said. "And they'll have to work for a long period of time..."

"It's still a very good opportunity for them," said Ishuca. "Let's discuss the details."

I discussed the arrangement with Ishuca-san, including the number of kids we'd need based on the size of our yards and the frequency with which they had to be mowed. We agreed on a monthly lump sum, although the wages that Ishuca-san suggested were actually quite low; in fact, they would have been less than half of the minimum wage back in Japan, so even taking into account the lower cost of living in this world...

"The wages that you suggested sound quite low, Ishuca-san. Are you sure about this?" I asked.

"Well, I'm taking into account the younger kids who can't really do much work. I'd appreciate it if you would treat this as a form of contribution to the temple," said Ishuca. "However, I'll assign people to accompany the kids when they head over for work, so please rest at ease."

"That's good to know. It's not that I don't trust you, but there are some dangerous spots in both yards, so that would be great," I said.

The kids probably wouldn't enter our houses without permission, but there were places where they could injure themselves, such as Touya's small smithy, the well, and the area that we used for our training sessions. A supervisor could help prevent any accidents.

"What do you mean when you say you'll assign people, though? You're talking about someone other than yourself, right, Ishuca-san?"

“Well, I might accompany them myself, but for the most part, it’ll be the apprentice priests or assistant priests,” Ishuca replied. “Have I not introduced them to your party, Nao-san?”

“No, you haven’t,” I said. “We may have met some of them before, but...”

We had seen some people around the orphanage who were older than the orphans, and we had greeted them, but we had no idea who they actually were.

“I see. In that case, it would probably be a good idea to call them over to introduce themselves,” said Ishuca. “Let’s see...”

Ishuca-san looked around and spotted a boy that looked like he was about ten years old. He seemed to be quite curious about the sisters. Ishuca-san beckoned him to come over.

“If Seira, Cain, and Sydney are around, can you go and tell them to come over?” Ishuca asked.

“Okay!”

The boy glanced at the sisters and then dashed into the orphanage. Not too long after, a small silhouette ran out of the building, but it definitely wasn’t one of the people that Ishuca-san had asked to come over.

“Nao-chan!”

The person who ran to my side with a huge smile on her face was Remi. However, she hastily stopped herself in her tracks and hid behind Ishuca-san’s legs once she noticed that there were unfamiliar people nearby. Remi peeked out and looked up at me; she must have been wary of the sisters.

“...Who?”

“Oh my.” Ishuca-san placed a hand on Remi’s head and gently chided her. “You should introduce yourself properly first, Remi.”

Remi just growled in response.

When Metea saw that, she stepped forward, thrust out her chest, and declared, “Me and big bro Nao are family!” Although she was trying to act tough, she still sounded like her normal hyperactive self.

Remi showed her entire head after she heard Metea's words. I had no idea if that was because she understood that Metea was associated with me or just because Metea was a kid who was around her age.

"...Cute ears and tail," said Remi. "I want to touch them."

Metea shivered for a brief moment, then said, "O-Oh, if it's just a little bit, then I wouldn't mind letting you touch them!"

Remi cautiously popped out from behind Ishuca-san and waddled over to hug my leg, then slowly reached out to Metea with both hands.

"...So soft," said Remi. "It feels nice."

"Tee hee, I'm very proud of my tail," said Metea, flicking it around a little. "What's your name?"

Remi approached Metea a bit closer and said, "Remi is Remi."

"Remi-chan! The person next to me is big sis Mary!" said Metea. "Let's get along!"

"Tee hee, my name is Mary," said Mary. "It's nice to meet you, Remi."

"U-Um, nice to meet you...?"

Mary extended one hand, and Remi cautiously shook hands with her. After that, Metea placed one of her hands on top of their hands and smiled. Remi smiled when she saw Metea's smile. It seemed like the kids might become good friends, which was a huge relief to me.

About that time, three people came over to join us. Two of them were girls who looked like they were around my age, and the third was a guy who looked a bit younger than me. One of the girls struck up a conversation with Ishuca-san, but she seemed quite surprised to see Remi with the sisters.

"Did you call for us, head priest? Oh, are these girls new friends?"

"Oh, Seira. Yes, they're the family of Nao-san's party," said Ishuca. "Cain, Sy—Oh, Ange? Where's Sydney?"

"Sydney is out right now," replied the other girl. "Although you didn't summon me, I came because I assumed it must be something important..."

I’d thought she was the oldest of the three people who had appeared here, and apparently I was right.

“I see. Nao-san, this is Ange,” said Ishuca. “She’s the only priest who serves under me in this temple who isn’t an apprentice or assistant priest.”



“My name is Ange. I’d like to express my thanks for your party’s continued support of this orphanage. I’m only eighteen, so I’m still very young and inexperienced, but it’s nice to meet you.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s nice to meet you as well,” I said.

Ange didn’t move as gracefully as Ishuca-san, but she acted very proper and beautiful, so my heart was thumping a bit as I replied to her.

“Ange probably won’t accompany the kids very often, but she is the next person after me in the temple hierarchy, so I hope you’ll get to know her well,” said Ishuca. “As for the other two here, these are Seira, who’s an assistant priest, and Cain, an apprentice priest.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” they said in unison.

“There’s also Sydney, the other apprentice priest, but she’s out right now, so I’ll introduce you at another time,” said Ishuca. “The three people here are the ones who will supervise the kids when they head out for work.”

“Um, Head Priest, what do you mean by work?”

“Oh yes, I haven’t explained that yet,” said Ishuca. “You see, Nao-san’s party offered an opportunity for the kids to work...”

Ishuca-san explained everything we had been discussing. It must not have seemed unusual to the three of them, as they all nodded.

“I see. Thank you very much for the offer, Nao-san. When should we bring the children over?”

“Whenever is fine for my party,” I said. “All that matters to us is that our yards stay maintained. We’re leaving the work intervals to you.”

Our yards were extremely overgrown right now, and it would have been nice if they were cleaned up as soon as possible, but the temple probably had their own list of tasks that they needed to handle first. However, the response I received wasn’t what I had expected at all.

“In that case, how about we start today?”

“Um, well, that would be fine with us.” I looked to Ishuca-san for

confirmation. “Would that be okay on your end, Ishuca-san?”

Ishuca-san smiled and nodded. “Yes. They’re in charge of scheduling.”

“I see. In that case, I’d like to pay the reward in advance,” I said. “Will that be okay?”

“Yes, that would be great. Are you sure about paying before any work is done, however?”

“Mm, I trust that the work will be carried out,” I said. “And in any case, my party is away from home a lot, so I may as well pay upfront for about six months of work.”

I handed over the gold coins that would be the kids’ wages, and then we discussed the fine details. My party just had a few simple requests—mainly that the kids maintain the flower beds and the crops in the field once we finished planting them; I explained that the kids were free to harvest and eat the crops themselves while we were away from home—so we wrapped up our discussion pretty quickly.

I glanced at the sisters, since it was about time to leave, and it looked like they were having fun playing with Remi. At first, Remi had been very cautious and timid around the sisters, but now she had a relaxed smile on her face, so it seemed like she had already gotten used to them. I felt like it would have been fine to let them continue playing with each other, but they would probably get sick of it eventually, so I steeled my resolve and walked over to them.

“Mary, Metea, it’s about time to head home,” I said.

“Oh, okay,” said Mary.

“Okay!” Metea exclaimed.

I knew already that the sisters were very obedient children, and it seemed that the same applied to Remi. She had a lonely look on her face as she said goodbye to the sisters, but she didn’t pout about it. However, she ran toward me alongside the sisters and hugged my leg.

“Nao-chan, please come back again to play with me,” said Remi, looking up at me. “Remi also wants to meet Yuki-chan again.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” I said. “I’ll bring Yuki, Metea, and Mary with me next time.”

I hadn’t been visiting the orphanage regularly, but after I saw that sad look on her face, there was no way I could tell her that I wouldn’t visit just to play with her if there wasn’t anything I had to do here, so I smiled and patted her head.

“Okay! Remi’s looking forward to it! See you again, Met-chan, Mary-chan!”

Remi waved at the sisters, and the sisters waved back as we left the orphanage. Metea wasn’t the kind of kid who would act selfishly under circumstances like this, but she did look like she felt a bit lonely. I held her hand as we made our way back home.

Mary turned around to look at me. “By the way, Nao-san, Remi-chan really likes you, right?”

“Yeah, for some reason,” I replied. “I think it’s because I’m not a very masculine guy.”

By now, Remi had met Touya multiple times as well, but it seemed like she was still shy around him. On the other hand, Remi was perfectly relaxed around Yuki, Haruka, and Natsuki, so it was probably due to the difference in our appearances.

“I don’t think that’s the only reason,” said Mary. “I think it’s also because she knows that you’re a kind person, Nao-san.”

“Really? Hmm. What do the two of you think after interacting with Remi?” I asked. “I’ve been told that she’s a shy girl, but...”

“We became friends!” Metea swished her tail around happily. “Remi-chan doesn’t seem to be bothered by my tail at all!”

“Well, it’s more like Remi-chan really likes your tail, Met,” said Mary, giggling. “She tried to grab it whenever she could, and she aimed for my tail too.”

Based on what I had heard from the sisters back in Kelg, it seemed like even the kids there were prejudiced against beastmen and beastwomen, so the two of them were probably happy to have met another kid who treated them normally.

Hmm... “If you don’t like it, then I can tell Remi to stop,” I said.

The sisters had both seemed perfectly fine with Remi chasing after their tails, but I asked them just to be sure, and both of them shook their heads in response.

“Oh, you don’t need to do that, Nao-san,” said Mary. “Remi-chan touched our tails gently, so it wasn’t uncomfortable. I wouldn’t like it if a boy touched my tail, but I don’t mind if it’s Remi-chan.”

“And I’m older than Remi-chan, so it’s only natural for me to forgive her for small things!”

Metea was usually treated as a little sister, so it seemed like she was quite happy to meet a kid who was younger than her. The main goal of our visit to the orphanage had been to introduce the sisters to Remi, and I had hoped that they would be able to make friends around their age in this town far away from their hometown, so I felt very pleased with the results. Metea was walking with a spring in her step, and I patted her head.

“I see,” I said. “In that case, let’s visit again in the future to hang out.”

Metea nodded deeply. “Yeah! I’ll go for sure!”

Metea seemed quite happy, and Mary seemed quite relieved by her younger sister’s reaction. When we arrived home, we were greeted by Touya, who was rolling around on the carpet in the living room.

“Oh, hey, welcome back,” said Touya. “Did everything turn out okay on your end?”

“Yeah, some kids from the orphanage, along with a supervisor, will be coming over to mow our yards later today,” I said. “What about you, Touya?”

“I placed some orders no problem,” said Touya. “Yuki’s back too, and she went over to help Haruka and Natsuki.”

“I see. The two of us can’t really do much to help them, so that makes sense,” I said. “Now, then, what should we do?”

The girls probably wouldn’t complain even if Touya and I spent some time relaxing in the living room, but I would have felt a bit bad about it. Cleaning the yard was one option, but I had already requested that the orphanage take care

of that. *Hmm. How about—?*

“Let’s do some training!” Metea was breathing heavily and clenching her fists in excitement. “I want to do my best to catch up!”

“Training, huh? Sure, I guess.” I glanced at her sister. “What about you, Mary? Are you okay with training right now?”

Mary immediately nodded. “Yes. I’d like to do some training too. I want to be able to help out as soon as I possibly can!”

“There’s no rush, but I guess it’s fine if you’re really motivated,” said Touya. “All right, let’s get going!”

Touya hopped to his feet right away, and we headed outside to the area where we usually trained. The ground had been trampled flat over the course of many long training sessions, so there weren’t many weeds here. Touya and I brought a spear, a staff, a kodachi, and a sword with us, and we pointed at the weapons as we showed them to the sisters.

“These are the four main types of weapons that we use,” said Touya. “They’re the only weapons we’ll be able to teach you to use.”

“Haruka uses a bow, so if that’s what you want, you’ll have to ask her to teach you,” I said.

“Oh, nah, that’s fine,” said Mary. “A bow sounds like it would be difficult to learn, so we’d like to start by learning ordinary weapons.”

Mary had a serious look on her face as she responded, and Metea, standing next to her, nodded to herself.

“Okay. In that case, pick a weapon—or rather, you probably have no idea what to pick right now,” I said. “I guess we should show you how the weapons are actually used in combat.”

“Yeah, true, we haven’t shown you how we actually fight yet,” said Touya.

He and I sparred, changing weapons from time to time, and the two of us taught the sisters about the strengths and weaknesses of each as well as how to use them in combat and other tips that we had learned from our adventures. While we were at it, some kids from the orphanage arrived to mow our yard.

They seemed to be curious about our sparring as well, but the sisters took no notice of them. In fact, they were giving Touya and me their full and undivided attention, and they used the information they had learned from us to choose their weapons.

"I want to use a kodachi!" said Metea. "I'll go *whoosh* and *shing!*"

"A kodachi, huh? They're not exactly easy to obtain, but I guess it's not really an issue," I said.

Tomi could make some kodachi for us if we placed an order, and in a pinch, daggers could serve the same function.

"I'd like to use a sword," said Mary. "It seems like Met wants to prioritize speed, so I'll prioritize power."

"Yeah, sure, that's a good way to balance each other out," I said. "And you're quite strong, Mary, so I think a sword would be a great fit for you."

Mary was actually much stronger than you'd assume from her appearance, as I was aware from the fact that she'd carried Metea on her back out of their burning home. She had already shown her strength in this training session too, as she had been able to wield a sword made of blue iron with no problem—although, unlike Touya, she had to use both hands. Blue iron was much heavier than normal iron, so it was a truly impressive feat. *Man, I feel like it won't be long before Mary surpasses me in physical strength.*

"If you get to the point of wielding a two-handed sword, it'll really complement our party's current configuration," I said. "However, I'll feel a bit sad if a kid as cute as you gets really muscular, Mary."

"U-Um, I don't think that'll happen at all," said Mary with an awkward laugh. "It won't, right?"

There was no way I could be sure, since she had many years of growing ahead of her. The saving grace in this case was the fact that a person's appearance wasn't necessarily linked directly to their physical strength.

"You definitely need to train to get better at mana control too," I said. "If you use skills, then you can obtain physical strength even without becoming muscular, so—"

“Nao, I agree with you, but shouldn’t they focus on the basics first?” Touya shrugged his shoulders in an exasperated way. “I’ll teach Mary for now, so can you teach Metea?”

“...Yeah, you make a good point, Touya,” I said. “Take it easy on him, okay, Mary?”

“Okay!” said Mary. “I’m leaving Met in your hands, Nao. Do your best, Met.”

“Of course!” Metea exclaimed. “I’m going to become strong!”

Mary smiled at her younger sister’s energetic response and then followed Touya to another part of the yard; she was holding a wooden practice sword in her hands. I handed Metea one of the practice kodachi we used for sparring and held another in my own hands.

“Okay, Metea, start by swinging your kodachi for practice,” I said. “Hold it like this, and swing it like this.”

“Hmm, like this? Okay, I’ll give it a try,” said Metea. “Hiyaahh! Hiyaahh!”

Yeah, that kind of speed isn’t even close to normal for a tiny kid. I bet she’ll soon be able to slay monsters like goblins no problem. I stared into the distance as I realized there was a very real possibility that Metea would become incredibly strong in no time.

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After Metea told us she intended to become an adventurer, we had expressed our doubts about how long she would be able to put up with training, but Mary said that Metea was actually a very patient kid. There was nothing exciting about training—it was actually boring and painful—but as her sister predicted, Metea never whined or complained, not even once. In fact, the sisters went so far as to continue training by themselves, even when the rest of us were busy with other tasks. Eventually we had to stop them, as we were worried that they were overworking themselves. Our doubts about their patience faded away quickly when we saw how motivated they were, and training together early in the morning became a normal part of our daily routine.

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As we continued training the sisters, we also spent some time dealing with miscellaneous tasks, watching over the kids from the orphanage as they mowed our yard, and helping Touya clear the field again so we could plant crops. A few days had passed when the girls told the rest of us that they had finished a project they had been working on, and at their request, all of us gathered near the back entrance of the kitchen. The first thing I saw was a large box, about two meters wide and one and a half tall, sitting on the ground. It had a lid that looked like it could be reversed, and there was a small door near the bottom. It looked like the kind of huge garbage bin that would have been used for commercial waste back in Japan, but it was actually something completely different.

Yuki slapped the top of the box. “Ha ha ha, we’ve finally completed the compost machine!” She sounded quite proud.

The box was actually a magical device—the combination shredder and composter that the girls had talked about crafting. Now that the sisters had joined our party, we would probably slay even more monsters than in the past, so this device would be a huge boon to us.

“Man, this is absolutely massive,” said Touya. “I was thinking of the kind of composter machine that’s closer in size to a barrel.”

“This magical device is capable of breaking down up to five hundred kilograms at once, so it’s suitable for industrial-scale use,” said Haruka. “It only takes it about twelve to twenty-four hours to turn everything inside into compost.”

“The shredder’s quite powerful as well. According to the papers that Edith left behind, it should be capable of breaking apart things like orc bones with ease,” said Yuki. “It doesn’t look like she was able to test it on monsters like lava boars, though.”

“Orcs, huh? That’s really amazing,” said Touya. “So it’ll just break down monsters like scalp apes no problem?”

“Nah, not quite. Magicites are the only useful material that we can retrieve from scalp apes, so this magical device will have to break down the entire carcass,” said Haruka. “It can only fit four at a time, and if they’re any larger than average, the limit will be more like two.”

“We usually encounter scalp apes in groups of ten, so it’d take a few days for this magical device to break down all of them, huh?” I said. “I guess that means we’ll have to decide whether they’re worth bringing back with us.”

We generally left dead monsters alone when we slew them in places we seldom visited, but we never left carcasses anywhere that we routinely passed by, since we would have been forced to watch as nature slowly dealt with them. With that in mind, I had hoped that the magical device would be able to solve that problem for us.

“Well, we haven’t actually tested it out yet,” said Haruka. “I’m just describing what it’s supposed to be capable of doing based on its specifications.”

“Really? In that case, what happens if you throw in something that’s too hard for it to break down?” I asked. “Will it explode and—”

“It won’t explode!” Haruka interjected. “The object will just remain inside of the magical device, intact. It’s not like there are metal blades inside to get jammed. Take a look.”

I had been imagining some sharp and dangerous-looking implement, but there was nothing like that inside of the box when Haruka opened it up for me to take a look, so it was hard to believe that the magical device could actually break down the bones of orcs. According to Haruka, the magical device wouldn’t require any maintenance at all, unlike mechanical shredders, which would require a new blade and lubricant after extended use.

“I see. Alchemy is definitely a very impressive form of magic,” said Natsuki. “I can’t really imagine how it’ll work, however.”

“Right? I figured that it would be wonderful for everyone to witness one of the greatest inventions of all time in action, so that’s why we gathered you all here!” Yuki exclaimed.

Yuki’s words were a bit too grandiose, but it was a fact that she had worked very hard to complete this invention. However, I remained silent.

Yuki pointed at Touya. “So yeah, Touya, toss something like a hobgoblin inside.”

“Sure,” Touya replied casually.

Touya produced a headless hobgoblin from his magic bag and tossed it into the compost device. Mary's eyes went wide in shock. *Oh yeah, now that I think about it, this is the first time we've shown the sisters things like that, huh? They'll have to get used to it eventually, though.* I refrained from commenting on Mary's reaction and instead asked Yuki a question.

"You want to test the performance of this magical device, right? Shouldn't we test out an orc too while we're at it, Yuki?"

"Yeah, I guess that's a good point," said Yuki. "I'd like to test whether it can actually break down orc bones."

After Yuki had given her consent, we dragged a whole orc out of our magic bags. Mary took a step back after she saw the size of the orc's carcass, but Metea seemed quite impressed, so she was probably the braver of the two sisters, at least in terms of not getting fazed by new things.

"All right, let's gut this orc real quick," I said. "It's nice that we can just discard the unwanted parts right away."

We could toss the waste parts of the orc into the compost device right next to us. In the past, we'd always had to be careful with how we treated things like digestive organs, so the magical device would make our lives much easier.

"Mm. Okay, Yuki, all of the waste from the orc is inside the magical device now," said Natsuki.

Since all of us had been working together, we'd finished quickly. Yuki made sure that things like the hip bones, along with the unwanted parts, were all inside of the compost device, then closed the lid. "Okay, let's lock it, just for safety's sake. All that's left is to throw this switch. Time for action!"

Yuki seemed very excited as she threw the switch, but as for the rest of us, our faces stiffened when we heard an unpleasant sound reverberating through the air.

"U-Uh..."

"I don't even want to imagine what's happening inside," I said.

"I expected it to produce some nasty sounds, but I didn't expect it to be this

bad,” said Haruka.

Apparently the compost device was working as intended, but the sound was too spooky to describe. On top of that, it was pretty loud even on the outside; I had no idea if it was because of the acoustics of the box shape.

“This sound might be a nuisance to our neighbors,” said Touya. “Is this really how a device for commercial use should sound?”

Haruka promptly refuted Touya’s question. “Well, you normally wouldn’t throw an entire goblin into the device.”

Yuki chimed in to back her up. “Edith enhanced the shredder function, so that might be the reason. A normal one wouldn’t be able to pulverize and break things down like this.”

“This thing is way too dangerous. I bet it could break down a person’s body in an instant,” I said. “Don’t even think about climbing inside of this, okay, Metea?”

I felt like the box shape of the magical device made it look perfect for hide-and-seek, so I warned Metea just in case, and she nodded vigorously and told me that she would never do it.

“Metea should be fine, but kids from the orphanage have been going in and out of our yard lately,” said Haruka. “However, the lid can be locked, and even if we forget to lock it, there’s a safety function that can detect if there are living things inside, so we can rest at ease.”

“That’s good to know, but we should probably still issue a warning just in case,” said Natsuki. “We can’t say for sure that the device will absolutely never malfunction.”

“Mm, it’s better to be safe than sorry,” said Yuki. “Oh yeah, don’t forget to take the finished compost out of the bottom compartment. It’ll overflow if you leave it alone. I think that should be it as far as stuff we need to keep in mind.”

“On a side note, a single magicite from a goblin can power the device long enough to break down about one ton of waste,” said Haruka.

“Uh, what does that mean? Is it cheap or expensive?” I asked.

“In Japan, I remember hearing that compost machines cost about forty yen to operate per kilo of waste,” said Natsuki. “My memories are quite vague, however.”

“Forty yen, huh? Hmm,” I said.

Garbage bags weren’t free in the area where I’d lived back in Japan, but forty yen sounded more expensive than the price of the garbage bags for a comparable volume of waste. Weight wasn’t really an easy metric for comparison, however.

“One goblin magicite is worth about 250 Rea, right?” I asked.

“If you sell them at the Adventurers’ Guild, then yes,” Haruka replied. “They’re probably a bit more expensive if you want to buy them.”

“Oh, right. Let’s say they’re worth double—five hundred Rea each—if you’re buying them. That would mean each kilo would cost you about fifteen Rea,” I said. “Hmm, yeah, that’s pretty cheap.”

“The forty-yen number that Natsuki mentioned is for all types of trash and waste, right? I think it’ll be cheaper if we mainly use it for kitchen waste,” said Yuki.

“Oh, yeah, back in our hometown, there were some forms of waste that weren’t easy to break down,” I said. “Also, some things couldn’t be recycled effectively.”

Recycling was a concept that sounded good on paper, but the amount of energy it required could sometimes be greater than the energy saved. For example, there were many costs associated with recycling things like disposable food trays. You would need detergent and water to wash them, and there was also the cost of purifying the water so that it could be used for cleaning. Then there was the cost of setting up recycling bins, the cost of actually retrieving the food trays in the recycling bins, and the cost of shipping them to a recycling plant. In fact, the fuel required for transporting the food trays alone, based on their weight and volume, would probably cost more than the petrochemicals used in food trays. It was also necessary to pay the workers who separated the recycled goods, and you had to add all of that to the total cost of recycling waste, so...

“Yeah, it’s a classic example of confusing means and ends,” said Yuki. “Things like pull tabs make no sense at all.”

“They had a purpose in the past because you could easily remove them from cans, but it’s definitely more efficient just to recycle an entire can instead,” said Haruka.

On a side note, it seemed like the concept of recycling existed in this world as well, but it only applied to things like metals and glass, which had enough value that you could sell them at stores. The other kinds of garbage were kitchen waste, wood, and crockery, and all of those could be buried or burned, which was pretty eco-friendly overall.

“Uh, I don’t really understand what you’re all talking about, but we never paid any money to dispose of garbage,” said Metea.

“Our household never produced any garbage that was hard to dispose of,” said Mary. “We couldn’t afford meat with bones in it, and we ate all of the vegetables that appeared on our plates. We would just burn our garbage in the hearth or bury it in our small yard.”

In a way, the production of excess garbage and waste was only a problem for rich people in this world. It sounded like the sisters had never had any trouble disposing of their garbage because they had led poor lives.

“Well, to be honest, we don’t produce that much garbage ourselves if we don’t gut monsters at home,” I said. “By the way, what have we been doing with bones? Do they end up as snacks for Touya?”

“Yeah, I love the texture, so— Well, no, I don’t eat bones, Nao!”

“Hm? Haven’t you mentioned before that you feel an urge to chew on bones?” I asked.

“That was right after eating bone-in meat! It’s not like I want to eat just bones!”

“Yeah, I know; I’m just joking,” I said. “When gutting monsters, we usually discard the bones with the rest of the carcass, right?”

“Mm, but regardless, we should have a much easier time disposing of waste

from now on," said Natsuki. "It'll cost us some money, however."

Natsuki seemed like she was a bit disappointed about the fact that the compost magical device would cost money to operate, but Yuki, seeing that reaction, thrust her hands out palms-first and shook her head.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that at all! We've modified this device so that we can power it using our own mana!" She slapped it. "It doesn't require magicites, so it has an amazing operating cost of zero!"

"Oh my, that is amazing!" said Haruka, playing along. "That's such a budget-friendly product!"

"In addition, it's equipped with an overclock function!" said Yuki. "If you pour in a lot of mana, then it can break down waste at even higher speeds!"

"That's so convenient and useful!" said Haruka. "It must be expensive, right?"

"Not at all!" said Yuki. "In fact, if you buy now, then you can have it delivered to your doorstep at no additional cost!"

"That's wonderful! I'd love to place an order right away!" said Haruka.

"...Is this supposed to be some kind of sales pitch or infomercial?" I asked.

Touya, the sisters, and I were all completely stunned by the skit that Yuki and Haruka had suddenly launched into.

Natsuki smiled awkwardly as she jumped in. "But the material cost is a problem in itself, isn't it? What was the initial investment? How much did it cost you two to create?"

Haruka and Yuki both fell silent. *Mm, yeah, there's also the cost of actually constructing the device.*

"Right, the total cost won't necessarily be cheap even if the operating cost is close to zero," I said.

"Well, the initial investment should be spread out over time if we continue using it," said Natsuki. "With that in mind, it shouldn't be too expensive, right...?"

"O-Oh, yeah, it's not too expensive," said Yuki.

“And we didn’t have to pay for labor, so it’s within an acceptable range, yeah,” said Haruka. “Trust us on this.”

Yuki and Haruka were avoiding Natsuki’s eyes, though. However much the device had cost to make, it was true that waste from gutting monsters had been a persistent issue for us, and creating a magical device had probably helped them improve their abilities at alchemy. With all of that in mind, I felt like it was perfectly fine to invest in slightly expensive magical devices, especially since we weren’t struggling for money.

It seemed like Natsuki had no intention of scolding Haruka and Yuki either; rather, she laughed to herself for a moment before continuing, “I admit I’m a bit curious about the overclock function. How does it work?”

“Oh, do you really want to know? We worked quite hard on it, so it should be really good,” said Yuki. “Nao, can you please touch the compost device and pour a lot of mana into it? You don’t have any other plans for today, right?” She pointed, looking quite happy.

“Nah, I don’t have anything else I plan to use my mana on,” I said. “Here, right?”

When I followed the direction of her fingers, I saw a translucent hemispherical object. I touched it as instructed, and the moment I started to pour my mana into it, I heard a loud sound from inside the compost device.

“...This is safe, right?” I asked. “It won’t suddenly explode or anything?”

“Don’t worry, Nao,” said Haruka. “This is the trial run.”

“Oh, okay, that’s good to kno— Wait, isn’t that very dangerous?!”

Haruka had answered my question so calmly that I’d almost been lulled into going along with the test, but in fact, her answer implied there was nothing safe about it. I glanced at Haruka’s face in shock, and she laughed before explaining, “If you pour in three times the base amount of mana, then it’ll halve the processing time. If you pour in nine times the base amount of mana, the processing time will be reduced by three-quarters.”

“You’re just going to ignore my question?! Fine, I guess. In that case, if I use twenty-seven times the mana, will that reduce the processing time to one-

eighth of normal?”

“Nah, from that point onward, you only need to keep doubling the mana to halve the time,” said Haruka. “According to the specifications, if you increase the amount of mana all the way to 144 times the base, the device should be able to break down everything inside in less than thirty minutes.”

“...Does that mean it’s only safe if you pour in an amount of mana that’s just a few times the base amount?” I asked.

“Nah, 144 times is actually still within a very safe margin,” said Haruka. “In fact, I’d appreciate it if you poured in as much mana as you can to test the limits. We went out of our way to implement this function, after all.”

“Huh? Really? Well, I guess I’ll give it a go and put my trust in you and Yuki,” I said.

“Yeah, you can definitely trust me, Nao,” said Yuki. “I’m the very picture of safe, after all!”

Really, Yuki? In that case, why are you casually pushing Metea and Mary away from the device? Oh well. I complied with Haruka’s request and kept pouring in mana, and eventually, something felt different; I couldn’t pour in any more.

“Okay, I think it hit the limit,” I said. “I don’t know for sure, but I think that’s 144 times the base amount.”

“If you can’t pour any more, it should be full,” said Haruka. “All we have to do now is wait.”

When the device was completely full of waste, it would take an entire day to break down its contents, but we hadn’t filled it too heavily this time, and I had used the maximum amount of mana, so the required time should have been reduced to one sixty-fourth of the base time.

“It should be done in about ten minutes, right?” Yuki asked.

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Haruka replied. “Let’s just wait.”

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We killed some time by visiting the bathroom and organizing the contents of our magic bags, and after a while, the device emitted a beeping sound.

Haruka opened the lid to check inside. “Hmm. Yeah, it looks like the device has finished breaking everything down.”

Metea stood on tiptoes to look into the device. “Is the goblin gone? Whoa, it is! It’s completely empty inside!”

Mary, standing beside Metea, sounded equally impressed. “Mm. There was so much inside, but it really is all gone now.”

There had been an awful mess inside before Yuki had thrown the switch, so I was impressed too.

“The waste would be giving off a bad smell if the magical device hadn’t broken everything down properly,” said Haruka. “Let’s see what the compost looks like.”

Haruka opened the door at the bottom, thrust a shovel inside, and scooped out some blackish earth. It must have been fertilizer, and it seemed like it was a bit warm as a result of being freshly made.

“This looks a bit different from what I had in mind when I thought of compost,” I said. “It looks kind of dense...”

“You were probably thinking of something like leaf mold, Nao,” said Yuki.

“Leaf mold is better for enriching soil, so it’s a bit different,” said Natsuki.

“Yeah, there are a lot of nutrients in this, so most plants would probably wither if you tried to grow them in it,” said Yuki. “It might turn out differently if we compost branches and leaves, though. We could also try tossing in the weeds from our yard if we want.”

Hmm. I don’t really understand what they’re talking about, but the one thing I do understand is that it’s not a good idea to use this compost as a substitute for soil.

“Well, the compost looks good, so the test run was a success,” said Yuki. “We don’t know the fertilizer ratio, so I feel a bit uneasy using a lot of this, but it should be fine if we just use a little bit, right?”

“Mm. And in any case, a kitchen garden isn’t really a serious project for us, so I don’t think there’s any need for us to worry about it too much,” said Natsuki.

According to Yuki, farmers would calculate the ratio of fertilizer contents like nitrogen when deciding whether to use it. Apparently fertilizer sold back on Earth had to list that ratio on the label. Farmers had to take into account the risk that a badly balanced ratio or too many nutrients would hinder crop growth. However, it wouldn't be that big a deal for us even if we failed, since we would just be growing crops in a kitchen garden.

"Oh yeah, the plan was to grow fresh, safe vegetables, right?" Touya asked. "I remember some talk about parasites being scary."

Touya was right that that had been our original goal, but Haruka shrugged. "Yeah, but we've already resolved the parasite issue."

"Huh? Have you all finally decided to believe in the power of the Robust skill?" Touya asked.

"No, that's not it at all!" said Yuki. "We talked about not relying on the Robust skill because I would be in the most danger, remember?!"

"Did we really talk about that?" Touya asked. "I thought we talked about how the rest of us could rest assured that anything dangerous would affect you first, Yuki, and—"

"That's not safe for me!" Yuki punched him in the stomach. "Don't use me as a canary in a coal mine!"

Touya was just joking, so Yuki probably hadn't punched him that hard, and—*Hold on. I heard a dull thud, so did you punch him with a lot of force, Yuki? I mean, it looks like your punch didn't do much damage, so I guess it's not a problem.*

"No, we actually discovered a different solution, so we can eat anything we want to," said Haruka. "Do you not remember what we learned from Diola-san when we turned in the lava boar, Touya?"

"Hm? Well, the topic of livers made a huge impression on me, but I can't remember anything else," said Touya.

"I can't believe you were thinking about using me to detect dangerous food even though you remembered that conversation, Touya," said Yuki. "That's exactly what we're talking about, though. Diola-san told us that people who eat

lava boar liver hire a mage to use the Disinfect spell on it first, remember?”

“And now we’ve learned to use the Disinfect spell,” said Haruka.

“...Oh, I get it now! That means we can eat raw vegetables without any worries!” Touya exclaimed. “We can eat hamburgers with crisp lettuce now, right?!”

“Well, yeah, more or less. We can feel even more secure if we use the Purification spell in combination with the Disinfect spell,” said Haruka. “However, it seems like it’s perfectly normal for people in this world to consume raw vegetables. Right, Mary?”

“Huh? Oh, um, yes, that’s right. We washed vegetables really well and ate them raw,” said Mary. “However, fresh vegetables were expensive, so we would put the scraps in soup.”

Mary sounded a bit sad as she responded. According to Haruka, magic bags and cold storage weren’t readily available to normal farmers, so leftover wilted vegetables could be purchased on the cheap at morning markets.

“Huh? Wait, does that mean all the work that Nao and I did clearing that field was for nothing?” Touya asked.

“Nah, not at all. Vegetables that we grow ourselves will definitely be fresher than anything we can find on the market,” Yuki replied. “There aren’t many vegetables that we can plant at this time of the year, though. But anyway, let’s try using the compost that we made.”

We still had to retrieve the compost from inside of the magical device, so we scooped it out and spread some of it in the open field that we had plowed, but...

“Hmm. There’s a lot of leftover compost,” I said.

“Yeah. The amount that this device made was enough to fill a lot of fertilizer bags for commercial and industrial use,” said Yuki.

We had tossed a few hundred kilos of meat and bones into our compost device, and although the sheer volume had been reduced by quite a bit, it was still a lot. If we continued to use the device to dispose of our waste from gutting

monsters, there was no way a single ordinary household could use up all of the compost.

“Let’s scatter some of the compost under the trees in our yards,” said Haruka. “And by that, I mean the kutto trees that Riva likes.”

“Sure, that’s fine with me,” I said. “I feel like there are more than enough of them even if we don’t do that, however.”

We could harvest a lot of kuttoes from our own yard, and there were a lot of kutto trees in the yard of Edith’s mansion too, so the total amount of kuttoes was way more than we could consume ourselves.

“I-I like kuttoes as well,” said Mary. “They’re cheap, after all.”

“Kuttoes are a delicious snack,” said Metea. “I like to eat them too.”

“Yeah, it’s fine to pick some for ourselves. We can extract oil from kuttoes too, and we can share them with the kids at the orphanage, so I guess there’s no such thing as too many kuttoes,” said Haruka. “It’s a bit annoying to gather them, however.”

“Oh, is it okay to harvest a lot of them?! I’ll work hard gathering kuttoes!” Metea seemed very happy and clenched her fists in excitement as if she had heard some very good news.

Kutto trees were fairly common—they could be found throughout town—but you couldn’t exactly trespass on private property to harvest them for yourself, and there probably wasn’t enough space to plant kutto trees in a small yard like the one where the sisters had lived.

“Um, if you tell the kids from the orphanage that you’ll share half of the kuttoes with them, then I think it’ll be quite easy to gather a lot,” said Mary. “We used to gather kuttoes on the streets or buy them from the market.”

“Oh, that’s a great idea, Mary!” said Yuki. “Hmm. We can also scatter some compost under the dindel trees as a form of thanks after we harvest some dindels, right? It’s a bit late this year, but we might get rewarded with an even more bountiful harvest next year.”

“Mm, there’s definitely no such thing as too many when it comes to dindels!”

said Natsuki.

“...It’s kind of rare to see you so excited, Natsuki,” I said.

After she noticed that the rest of us were looking at her, Natsuki took a step back as if she felt embarrassed. “Oh, um, yeah. The taste of dindels is pretty unforgettable for me. It was one of the first things that I tasted after you saved us...”

“Oh, right, that’s perfectly understandable.” I felt some warmth in my chest as I nodded at Natsuki.

Natsuki had survived on some pretty disgusting food at Sarstedt, so her first taste of dindels had probably been more shocking than it had been for the rest of us, and the same probably held true for Yuki.

“All right, then. We can use a lot of compost on the dindel trees, but we’ll still have a lot left over,” I said.

“Well, we can figure out how to deal with the excess compost in the future,” said Haruka. “For now, let’s just toss it into a magic bag.”

“Sure,” said Yuki. “I feel kind of extravagant using magic bags for something like this, though.”

Magic bags were so rare that most adventurers couldn’t purchase one even if they had the money. I felt like some of those adventurers would have punched us if they’d found out that we used magic bags to store compost.

“In a way, it’s a privilege that we enjoy due to the fact that we made these magic bags ourselves,” I said.

Valuable crops and fish were nothing special for the people who cultivated them. Back in Japan, I had heard stories about how people involved in producing luxury food items could eat as many as they wanted. Other adventurers would probably have been envious of our magic bags, but there was no reason for us to hold back at all; magic bags were very useful. We prepared a separate magic bag specifically for compost and tossed all of the extra inside in order to avoid dealing with the problem right away. *I guess we’ll eventually have to think of a way to deal with all the compost...*

While we continued our training sessions with Mary and Metea, we also worked on gutting monsters and turning the waste into compost. It would normally have been reckless to let the sisters work as adventurers at their age, but in hardly any time at all, they showed some unexpected growth due to their stamina and agility as beastwomen. There was a possibility that my Increased Experience Gain (Tiny) blessing had played a role as well. On the off chance that that was the case, I decided to donate a bit more money than usual at the temple as well as praying to Advastlis-sama.

After many days of training, we received a message from Gantz-san: the weapons and armor we had ordered were complete. We decided it would be a good opportunity to resume adventuring with new weapons and armor, but before that, there was still one last thing we had to do.

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"A welcome party...?"

Mary and Metea tilted their heads in parallel, and their tails bent in a cute way too.

"Yeah. You see, we considered leaving the two of you in the care of the local orphanage if you weren't comfortable living with us in this house," I said. "That would have been extremely awkward for all of us if we'd already had a welcome party, right?"

My party had previously discussed a number of topics among ourselves, such as what would be best for the sisters and whether or not they would feel uncomfortable living with people they had just met. The orphanage in Laffan seemed like it was a decent place, and there were other kids around the same age as the sisters, along with people like Ishuca-san whom we could trust, so it had seemed possible that it would be better for the sisters to live there. On top of that, a welcome party right away would probably have made it hard for the sisters to voice any complaints they had about their daily life with us, so my party had decided to postpone the party until they had settled in.

Mary hastily shook her head to reassure me that she had no complaints. "Oh, not at all! Our lives here have been very comfortable!"

Metea had something more specific on her mind. "The food here tastes

great!”

Hmm. Does that mean you don’t really care who you live with as long as the food tastes good, Metea?

“Mm, so, in any case, we figured that now would be a good time for a welcome party,” said Haruka.

“Yep. However, feel free to let us know if you think you would prefer life at the orphanage,” said Yuki. “Your own feelings are the most important here.”

“Mm. You can feel free to share any complaints you may have about life with us in this house,” said Natsuki.

“I don’t have any complaints at all!” Mary said firmly. She lowered her eyebrows. “In fact, I feel a bit bad about all the help you’ve given us, so...”

“I can eat food and sleep in peace every day!” said Metea.

That was basically the same thing Metea had said before. However, food, clothing, and shelter were basic needs, so there was some wisdom in her words.

“A-And to be honest, a welcome party on top of all that you’ve done for us would make me feel kind of bad...”

“Really, Mary?” I asked. “We were just planning on having some fancy dishes, and—”

“A welcome party sounds great!” Metea threw her hands up in the air.

When she saw her sister’s reaction, Mary moaned like she was ashamed. “Ugh, Met...”

“Tee hee. Well, one of the reasons we want to hold a welcome party is to introduce you two to some people we know, so you don’t have to think too hard about it, Mary,” said Haruka. “More importantly, what would you like to eat? Nao, Touya, if you have requests, feel free to say something too.”

“A fancy meal!” said Metea. “I don’t know what that means, though...”

“Everything that we eat here seems like a fancy meal to us,” said Mary. “Hmm...”

The sisters seemed quite excited. They were swaying from side to side as they thought about it.

“A fancy meal, huh? I’m no gourmand, but the things that come to my mind are Wagyu steaks and super fatty tuna sushi,” I said.

The dishes that had popped into my head might be the kind of food that poor people would consider fancy, but to me, those felt like the natural answers.

“Hmm, I would say something like crab, I guess? Hot pot stuff like sukiyaki comes to mind too,” said Touya. “Oh yeah, now that I think about it, I haven’t eaten stuff like puffer fish by itself or in a hot pot.”

Yuki shook her head in a slightly exasperated way after she heard the food that Touya and I had listed. “You guys are aware that none of those things are easy to come by, right? We also haven’t gone to catch seafood lately, so we only have a few valley crabs left. And, Nao, orc steaks are the closest we can get to Wagyu beef.”

“There are some places that use pork in sukiyaki, but I’m fairly sure that you’re thinking of beef, right, Touya-kun?” Natsuki asked.

“We could make some sashimi from emperor salmon,” said Haruka. “The Disinfect spell should be enough to make it safe to eat.”

“All of that sounds delicious, but it also doesn’t sound that different from what we usually eat,” I said.

To an ordinary person like me, kaiseki and French cuisine didn’t seem that much better than plain old tempura at a nice restaurant; I wouldn’t really consider any of them to be a fancy meal. *I can’t be the only one out there who feels like price doesn’t necessarily mean quality, right?*

“If you want to eat something unusual, then we have the option of asking Aera-san,” said Haruka. “What do you think?”

Hmm, yeah, Aera-san can probably cook some dishes that we haven’t tried before. However...

“Well, she seems like she’s been quite busy with her café lately,” I said. “She said that she would make time for the welcome party, but...”

I still visited Aera-san's café from time to time to deliver meat and chat with her, and it seemed like business was booming—so much so that it would no longer be easy for us to reserve seats. Her business model was to provide a place where customers could take their time to relax, so the table turnover rate wasn't too high; it would never get too busy to handle. But even so, Aera-san had told me that when her café was open for business, there were almost never any empty seats at any point during the day, and it seemed like she and Luce-san had to work really hard to stay afloat.

"Mm, I figured as much," said Haruka. "In that case, we can go with some grandiose dishes."

"Grandiose? What does that mean in relation to cooking?" I asked. "Do you have an example in mind?"

"Hmm. How about something like a whole roasted tusk boar?"

"Whole roasted?! All you can eat?!" Metea was waving her arms around. She looked up at Haruka with eyes that were sparkling with excitement.

"Mm, that's right," said Haruka with a laugh. "You can eat as much as you want, Metea."

"Whoa, that sounds amazing!" Metea raised her arms in the air and jumped up and down.

"Oh, yeah, I've never eaten a whole roasted animal before either," said Yuki. "In terms of actually finding stuff like that in Japan, it was just as unrealistic as manga meat."

"Well, I don't have any reason to say no to this idea," I said. "Or rather, there's no way I could say no after seeing Metea's reaction."

On top of that, Mary had a look on her face as if she was on the verge of drooling, although her reaction wasn't as obvious as Metea's. *Hmm. Do beastmen and beastwomen of the tiger subspecies really like meat that much? That would make sense to me, since Touya mentioned that he likes meat a lot more now than he did when he was a human.*

"There are other monsters we could roast whole, but tusk boars are probably the best choice available to us," said Haruka.

“If we really want to go super grandiose, then orcs could—actually, nah, that’s not really realistic.” Touya interrupted himself and shook his head after he realized the absurdity of his initial idea.

A whole roasted orc would probably be unmatched in terms of flavor and “grandiosity,” but it would weigh a few hundred kilograms. There was the option of putting it on a spit to roast, but we would need some heavy machinery to make that feasible, and it wasn’t like this was some kind of competition, so it would have been foolish of us to go that far over the top for no reason. On top of that, I felt like it wouldn’t be possible to roast a whole orc to taste good even with the Cooking skill, so Haruka was definitely right that tusk boars were the best choice for us.

“If I recall correctly, we don’t have any tusk boars left in stock, do we?” I asked.

“Well, we don’t have any whole tusk boars left,” Natsuki replied. “We dressed all of them during the gutting process, after all.”

Tusk boars had been a great source of food for my party during our first few months in this world, but we had quickly replaced them with orcs and had continued hunting orcs ever since; orc meat tasted delicious in all sorts of dishes. It wasn’t like we would ignore tusk boars if we ran into them, but we had just recently finished gutting a lot of what we had in stock, so it was only natural that we had no whole boars left.

“In that case, Nao, let’s go hunt some tusk boars,” said Touya.

“Thanks, you two,” said Haruka. “The rest of us can make some snacks. It’s been a while.”

“Snacks!” Metea’s ears were twitching. “Are you going to use sugar?”

“Mm. We haven’t decided what we’ll make, but it’ll definitely involve sugar,” said Haruka.

“Yay!” Metea waved her hands and flicked her tail around at the same time. “Welcome parties are great!”

“Sweet snacks, huh? Wow...” Mary wasn’t waving her hands, but she must have been happy, because her tail was moving, seemingly of its own accord.

Girls can't resist sweets, huh? On a side note, white sugar wasn't easy to get in this world. You could find sugar in the market in Laffan, but it was three large silver coins per kilo, and it was more like what we would have called brown sugar back on Earth. It wasn't too expensive for us, but we used sugar pretty sparingly, which had the incidental benefit that our meals tended to be very healthy.

However, it sounded like the sisters had very different ideas about sugar. One kilogram of sugar for three thousand yen worked out to about ten yen per tablespoon, and even if that was slightly on the expensive side, it would have been perfectly affordable for normal households in Japan. However, according to the sisters, sugar wasn't considered affordable at all in this world; apparently their family had only bought a small amount of sugar, and only once a year. Basic necessities weren't too expensive relative to the average person's income, but on the other hand, luxury goods like sugar were way beyond their means, so the sisters probably weren't exaggerating at all when they expressed their happiness and excitement about sweet snacks.

"All right, let's get started with the preparations," said Yuki. "The welcome party will take place tomorrow, so we should all finish what we're doing by then."

"Mm. Touya-kun, Nao-kun, we're counting on the two of you to find a tusk boar," said Natsuki.

"Gotcha!" we replied in unison.

When Touya and I headed into the forests to hunt, it only took us a few hours to find a suitable tusk boar. I detected it with my Scout skill, and Touya slew it with ease. *Man, I remember feeling nervous the first time I encountered a tusk boar. That was around this time last year, but they're no longer a danger to us.*

We skinned and field dressed it without any trouble; we now had a whole tusk boar that was ready for roasting. Everything had gone according to plan, so the welcome party started the next day without any issues.

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I used Earth Magic to create some structures in our yard to support a spit. Metea watched with great interest as I worked. The tusk boar that Touya and I

had slain was only one and a half meters long—we'd chosen a comparatively small boar due to the fact that we were planning to roast it whole—but it still weighed close to one hundred kilograms before cooking. We already had it skewered on a spit, so after I worked with Touya to attach it to the support structures, my job was done.

"Okay, it's time to roast this boar," said Yuki, who was acting as the chef.

She lit a fire under the spit with charcoal, then started to rotate the spit and slowly roast it with high heat from a distance.

"A whole roasted tusk boar, huh?" I said.

"Yeah, a whole roasted tusk boar," said Touya.

There wasn't really anything less inane that we could say about the sight in front of us. Haruka and Natsuki were cooking inside the house, but since Touya and I had nothing left to do, we sat on a pair of chairs under the shade of a tarp we'd erected. We just relaxed and watched Yuki's hard work. The sisters, on the other hand, were standing near the pit and staring intently at the boar as it roasted. The way their tails were swaying in sync was kind of fun to watch.

"Mary, Metea, the tusk boar isn't going to get ready any faster no matter how hard you stare at it," said Yuki. "Just so you know, this is going to take a while."

Metea was beaming. "Just the smell is enough to make me feel happy!"

The delicious smell of the tusk boar had reached all the way to where I was sitting. A sizzling sound echoed through the air, and smoke rose from the fat that was dripping down into the charcoal. The smell was really appetizing. However...

"By the way, is this fire actually hot enough to cook the boar properly?" I asked.

We had sliced and spread open its belly before we skewered it on the spit, but its meat was still very dense.

"There's the far infrared effect from the charcoal fire itself, but it's not easy to cook this way," said Yuki. "In fact, if you want to eat some delicious meat, then I think it would be better to just slice it up into smaller cuts for cooking."

“I mean, yeah, that makes sense, but you didn’t have to be so blunt about it, Yuki,” I said.

Slicing up the meat would go against the concept of whole roasting, wouldn’t it? It would render all of our efforts pointless...

“Oh, yeah, I remember hearing that you would normally have to cook the meat at least overnight for a proper whole roast,” said Touya.

“One night?!” Mary and Metea exclaimed together.

They both sounded extremely shocked. However, a charcoal fire would lose heat over time just like any other fire, so Touya’s explanation made perfect sense to me. In fact, if you wanted to make a delicious whole roast, then it would probably be better to create a stone oven to cook it in. That would sort of ruin the feeling of cooking wild game, however.

“Nah, it won’t take that long, but the most realistic option for us would probably be to slice off the roasted parts to eat as it continues to cook,” said Yuki. “Even if we go out of our way to roast the entire boar, a lot of the fat will be rendered down, so it won’t end up tasting as good as it should.”

“Do you mean something like shawarma? That honestly sounds like a delicious way to eat the meat,” I said.

“It’s seasoned properly, so it’ll definitely be good,” said Yuki. “Mary, Metea, do you want to try a bite?”

“Sure!” said Metea.

“Is that really okay?” Mary asked.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” said Yuki. “Let me prepare some real quick.”

Yuki used a knife to cut some slices from the parts of the tusk boar that had been roasted to a delicious-looking brown, then placed the slices on some plates before handing them over to the sisters. I felt like the slices were a bit too large for any of them to be called “a bite,” but it was true that the boar looked like it had only lost a little bit of meat.

The sisters thrust their forks into the meat and stuffed their mouths.

“Whoa, this is delicious!” said Metea.

“Mm!” said Mary.

They seemed like they were really enjoying it; their ears were flapping. In fact, I felt hungry after seeing how much they were enjoying the meat.

“Yuki, can I have a bite as well?” Touya asked, holding out his plate.

“Oh, me too,” I chimed in.

Yuki muttered the words “Fine, fine” as she sliced a few bites for us.

I stuffed the meat in my mouth. “Whoa, this is definitely quite good.”

“There’s definitely more than just salt on this,” said Touya. “And I could definitely eat a lot without ever getting even a little bit sick of it.”

The meat didn’t have a lot of flavor on its own, but it seemed to have been seasoned, and the spices were more than enough to make it taste great. It was also juicy and felt very satisfying to eat due to its sheer volume. We had prepared some dipping sauce as well, and there was a high chance that I wouldn’t be able to eat any more before I felt an urge to alter the taste with dipping sauce.

“Oh, have you all started eating already?”

I turned around when I heard Haruka’s voice from behind me and saw her and Natsuki standing with trays in their hands.

“We’re just doing a little taste test,” said Yuki. “However, as you can see, we’re eating while we continue to roast the tusk boar. Haruka, Natsuki, do you want to start eating as well?”

“Yeah, but after we put down these plates,” said Haruka. “Come help me, Nao.”

“Sure,” I said.

“We made less of the other dishes, since there’s so much meat,” said Natsuki. “We can just make more if there’s not enough.”

Haruka and Natsuki had brought over drinks, soup, vegetables, bread, and a lot of snacks. There didn’t seem to be any Japanese sweets, probably because we had no fresh milk, but there were a lot of things that we usually didn’t eat

very often, such as cookies, pies, and sweets made from fruits. I helped Haruka and Natsuki line everything up on the table that we'd prepared under the tarp.

"This should be more than enough for everyone," I said. "Or rather, we'll definitely have a lot of meat left over."

Touya, Mary, and Metea were capable of eating out of all proportion to their physical size, but Haruka, Natsuki, Yuki, and I lacked that kind of big appetite.

The guests who had promised to drop by at some point during the evening were Diola-san, Aera-san, Luce-san, Riva, and Tomi, but most of them were light eaters aside from Tomi. The last time she'd visited, Riva had been desperate to eat as much as she could, but it seemed like she had found success selling cosmetic products like Luce-san had suggested, so she was no longer struggling for money nowadays. With all of that in mind, there would be plenty of leftover meat even if the three members of our party who had the biggest appetites each ate about twenty kilos of meat, so there was no way we could consume the entire boar unless one of us had a stomach that could fit as much as a magic bag.

Metea clenched her fists; she seemed very motivated. "I'll do my best to eat a lot!"

I hastily tried to get her to reconsider her plan. "Nah, Metea, there's no need to force yourself to eat a lot. Just eat as much as you want until you're full."

"Mm. We'll be able to enjoy delicious meat at any time in the future if we just toss the leftovers into one of our magic bags," said Haruka.

"Really?" Metea asked.

"Yes, really," Natsuki replied. "However, I feel like it wouldn't hurt to head over to the orphanage to share some of the boar with them."

"Oh, I'd like to share some of this with Remi-chan!" said Metea.

"In that case, let's go with that idea," said Haruka. "We'll probably continue to employ kids from the orphanage for quite a while, after all."

We had actually asked Ishuca-san if she was free to drop by the welcome party, but she had told us that she couldn't due to the fact that she had to take

care of the kids at the orphanage. With that in mind, I did like the idea of visiting the orphanage to share food. However, Mary was glancing at us with what seemed like unease; she must have been concerned about the fact that her younger sister's words had influenced our decision as a party.

"Um, are you really sure about that?" Mary asked. "Touya-san and Nao-san worked really hard to slay the tusk boar..."

"Hm? Oh, I don't mind at all," said Touya. "In fact, the person who had to work the hardest is probably Yuki—she's the one roasting the boar."

"Yeah, I completely agree with Touya," I said. "Hunting tusk boars isn't that much work for us, so don't worry about it."

"Whoa, that's really amazing!" said Metea. "I'll work hard too so I can become an adventurer and eat whole roasted meat every day!"

It seemed like Touya and I had earned even more respect from Metea. Meat was highly effective on beastmen and beastwomen.

"I think eating whole roasted meat every day is a bit too much, but we can certainly work hard together," said Haruka. "That includes you too, Mary."

"Of course! I'll do my best!"

"Mm. Okay, it's time for a welcome speech to start things off," said Haruka. "You're up, Nao."

"Huh? Me?"

Why did you appoint me all of a sudden, Haruka? Couldn't you have warned me about this in advance? Sure, we're all friends here, but it would have been nice to have some time to prepare my remarks. I glanced around, but everyone else seemed to be looking forward to hearing a speech from me, so it was unlikely that any of them would be willing to take over.

"All right, I guess. I'll just go with something simple." I cleared my throat and glanced at the sisters before beginning my speech. "A strange turn of fate has led us to become a family. I'm fairly sure circumstances will arise that'll make us feel frustrated with each other, which is a natural part of living together, and we'll probably end up with conflicting opinions from time to time. Whenever

that happens, feel free to express your honest feelings. It might lead to us getting into fights, but there's no need to worry about that; it isn't inherently a bad thing. You can count on us to protect you as family, and we won't irresponsibly abandon you all of a sudden. Welcome to our home, Mary, Metea."

"Mm! Thank you very much!" Mary exclaimed.

"Thanks!" Metea exclaimed.

The welcome party officially started after I had finished my speech, and the guests we had invited arrived in the evening. We introduced all of them to Mary and Metea, and everyone enjoyed the delicious food together. Some of our guests enjoyed alcohol as well, and the fun welcome party lasted late into the night.

Side Story—Will They or Won't They?

Our main task for today was sewing. Winter was approaching, and we now had Mary and Metea with us, so we had decided this was the right time to make a bunch of new clothes, especially since we had a lot more money saved up than we had last year.

Natsuki, Haruka, and I had gathered in the sewing room. Nao and Touya weren't here, since we had to take a lot of measurements. We had already finished measuring the sisters, so they were training outside with the guys. Mary seemed like she was interested in learning to sew, but becoming stronger was apparently a higher priority for her at the moment. Haruka had told her that there was no rush, since we already made clothes for ourselves from time to time, so that was probably one of the reasons that Mary had chosen to prioritize training, but the biggest reason was probably the fact that she hadn't been able to protect Metea back at Kelg. *Mm, Mary really is a hard worker and a good older sister.*

"Hmm. I think we should probably start by making clothes for Mary and Metea," I said. "They're very cute, so I think they would look good in anything."

"Mm. The main thing we need to keep in mind is that they have tails," said Haruka. "We definitely can't just throw something together like we did for Touya."

"'Throw something together'? We put some actual thought into his clothes, didn't we?" I said.

I mean, yeah, it's just Touya, but if we'd designed something that made his butt stick out, I would have felt bad.

"On the other hand, it's a bit easier to design clothes for the sisters—skirts will work just fine for them," I said. "Oh, I guess pants could work too."

"I'd personally like to see them wear matching kimono and hakama," said Natsuki.

“Oh, like kids would wear to the Shichi-Go-San festival, Natsuki? Oh, hmm, I guess Taisho-period clothes fall under the same category,” I said. “I think the sisters would look cute, but wouldn’t those kinds of clothes make it hard for them to move around?”

The sisters would definitely look good in matching outfits, but I would feel bad if it turned out that they found Japanese clothes to be tight and uncomfortable. I pointed out that risk to Natsuki, and she averted her gaze.

“...Well, movement shouldn’t be an issue if we add a sash to hold up the sleeves,” said Natsuki.

“That might be fine for someone like you who wields a naginata, Natsuki, but the sisters are using a kodachi and a two-handed sword, you know?” I said.

“It shouldn’t be an issue if they only wear those clothes around the house...”

“I mean, if you really want to make Japanese clothing for the sisters, I don’t have any complaints, Natsuki,” I said. “But before anything else we should prioritize making clothes that they can wear outside for adventurer work, right? They’re currently wearing clothes that we put together really quickly, after all.”

“...Mm, you’re right about that, Yuki,” said Natsuki. “The makeshift clothes actually fit quite well thanks to you, however.”

Natsuki looked at me as if she was trying to imply something, and I could feel my mouth twitching in annoyance. I placed my hands on Natsuki’s shoulders before replying. “What do you mean by that, Natsuki? Are you talking about my Sewing skill, or are you talking about my physique?”

Actually, the sisters were wearing some of my own clothes that I had altered for them. I’d gone that route because it had required the least amount of work.

“Please, Yuki, you’re just imagining things—making yourself feel bad for no reason,” said Natsuki. “It’s important to stay serene, you know?”

“I’m not so sure about that...”

But Natsuki gave me a flawless smile. *Hmm. Fine, I guess I’ll take your word for it.*

“*Uh, she didn’t directly specify what she was trying to imply at all...*”

“Hm? Did you whisper something, Haruka?” I asked.

“Oh, nah, not at all,” Haruka replied. “However, I’d also like to see the sisters wear cute clothes. It sounds like they’ve never had the money to enjoy or care about fashion, after all.”

“Mm. We’d normally have to worry about those kinds of clothes getting dirty, but we can deal with that thanks to the Purification spell,” said Natsuki.

“The Purification spell really is very convenient and useful,” I said. “Also, here’s the idea I came up with. What do you two think?”

I took out some paper and drew some rough sketches in order to show my ideas to Haruka and Natsuki.

“Let’s see,” said Haruka. “Oh, sailor uniforms?”

“Yeah. Don’t you think that would look good on the sisters? Metea moves around a lot, but a sailor uniform shouldn’t inhibit her at all,” I said.

“This looks decent, but I think it can be improved a bit,” said Haruka.

“Hmm. How about something like this for Mary?” asked Natsuki.

Together, we spent a while discussing and adjusting the designs. The next thing we had to do was select the materials, so we split up to look around the room for some suitable fabric. Thanks to Edith and Riva, our sewing room was stocked with a lot of high-quality cloth. All of it was extremely valuable, having been created through alchemy.

“Hmm, this should do just fine,” I said.

The cloth I chose was a bit elastic; it looked like the kind of material you would use for a jersey. It was important for the final product to look cute, but that would be pointless if the clothes made it hard for the wearer to move around. This was an alchemical material, of course. This world’s alchemy was like science mixed with magic, so it was very versatile. The only downside was the fact that it would probably be very difficult to automate alchemy completely. Science allowed you to create a product and establish a fully automated process for mass production, but in alchemy, at least some work had to be done by hand, so a cottage industry was probably the best point of

comparison.

Another reason that automated alchemy wasn't a realistic idea was its power source: magicites were the main resources used for alchemy, so large-scale production would require a constant supply of magicites. Maintaining that kind of supply would require a lot of labor from adventurers. That was probably why it wasn't currently possible to practice alchemy at an industrial scale. Many of the devices listed in the alchemist's encyclopedia sounded useful and convenient, but there was little chance of such tools becoming widely available and spreading to ordinary households. The devices themselves were quite expensive, as were the operating costs. Back on Earth, if someone had told you that running an air conditioning unit for a single day would cost about three thousand yen, there would have been very few buyers. That was more or less how people in this world looked at alchemy.

On the other hand, rich people like nobles were more likely to use magical devices, as were adventurers, who could obtain magicites for themselves. There were also some magical devices, like toilets, that even ordinary people used every day because the benefits outweighed the costs. *Whew, I'm really glad that this isn't a world where people casually throw their filth and waste onto the streets.*

"Haruka, Natsuki, what do you two think about this cloth?" I asked. "I think it would be easy to move around in..."

"Let's see," said Haruka. "Oh yeah, this should work. It looks quite sturdy, so I think it should be able to withstand the kinds of damage associated with adventurer work."

"In that case, let's cut the cloth and start sewing," said Natsuki.

Mary and Metea's clothes weren't the only ones that we planned to make, so we divided the work among the three of us. I started on some clothes for Metea, then glanced at Haruka, who was sewing clothes for Nao. All of us had lived together in the same house for some time by now, but I was curious about the relationship between Haruka and Nao.

It was obvious that Haruka liked Nao, and I was fairly sure that Nao was aware of that. *Uh, he is aware, right? He doesn't think of Haruka like a sibling, does*

he? I didn't have a childhood friend who lived right next door to me, so I have no idea what it would actually be like. Hmm. Their parents were on good terms with each other, so I guess it's possible that Nao might think of Haruka as a sibling. In any case, Haruka definitely likes Nao, but the fact that nothing has changed between them even after we started to live together is a big issue! The distance between them is exactly the same as it was back on Earth! I wouldn't really mind if the two of them suddenly disappeared to have some intimate time with each other, but they're almost never out of my sight at the same time, so there's no chance of that!

Haruka had a serious look on her face as she continued to sew Nao's clothes, and I stared at her for a bit longer before turning toward Natsuki in order to whisper to her. "*Hey, Natsuki, what do you think of the current situation?*"

"Hmm. I think it's quite decent," Natsuki replied. "We've obtained a house, and we have multiple fairly reliable sources of income due to the fact that we've grown quite strong as adventurers."

"Mm, our lives have more or less stabilized by now," said Haruka. "We have enough savings that we can afford to take two days off per week, and we can even take a long vacation when we really want to."

Huh? Why did you casually join in this conversation, Haruka? I was planning on having a secret conversation with Natsuki, you know? The stuff you brought up also isn't exactly what I meant when I said "the situation." Hmm, I guess I wasn't clear enough.

"If I had to name one potential issue, it would be the fact that the stability of our lives could easily collapse at any moment," said Natsuki. "We technically own both this house and the land it sits on, but if the lord ever decided to exile us, we would have no choice but to obey him. As for our income, it's only sustainable thanks to our magic bags. If other adventurers who also have magic bags happen to appear in Laffan, then we'll have to compete with them."

"Mm, yeah, that's definitely a possibility," said Haruka.

"For the time being, however, the chances of any of that happening seem quite low. The current lord seems like a decent person, and Laffan is a town in the countryside that lacks any real attractions," said Natsuki. "Other

adventurers with magic bags capable of holding orcs and precious wood would be able to earn more than enough money in bigger towns or cities, especially in places like famous dungeon cities."

"H-Hold up!" *I can't let them keep going on about this! I need to change the subject!* "What's with the serious topic?! It's just the three of us girls here, so it's prime time for girl talk!"

Haruka asked, "Is now really the time, Yuki?"

Yeah, it definitely is. Didn't you just say that our lives are stable now, Haruka? You're shaking your head and shrugging at me, but I know what you're really thinking.

"You're just trying to dodge the subject, aren't you, Haruka?" I asked.

"...I have no idea what you're talking about," said Haruka.

"Has your relationship with Nao changed at all?!" I blurted out. "This 'Will they or won't they?' has been bothering me for a while! It bothered me even back in Japan!"

"Hm? Yuki, didn't you mention the possibility of Haruka considering Touya as a love interest?" Natsuki asked.

"I only said that because absolutely no progress was happening between Haruka and Nao!" I thrust a finger at Haruka. "I can't believe things have been so slow for two childhood friends who lived next to each other!"

I'm not going to hold back at all, Haruka!

"Wh-What are you saying, Yuki?! It's not like that at all between Nao and me..." Haruka was muttering incoherently and avoiding my eyes.

Natsuki seemed a bit amused by Haruka's reaction. "There's no point in trying to pretend anymore when the truth is obvious, Haruka. Tell us about what's actually happened."

"You too, Natsuki? Fine, I guess," said Haruka. "Nothing at all has changed between Nao and me."

"Why?! How?!" I yelled. "You used to be neighbors, and now you're living under the same roof! With that in mind, how can you say nothing has

changed?!”

“By this point, we’ve become used to a certain distance between each other, so it’s not easy, Yuki!”

Uh, well, yeah, I kind of get what you mean. It’s a bit hard to get close to someone even if you feel like he wouldn’t mind, after all. The idea that your current comfortable relationship might get ruined if you try to get closer definitely sounds quite scary.

“Besides, I don’t know what I’d do if I ended up pregnant.” Haruka sounded a bit hesitant. She looked down and then muttered something totally unexpected and outrageous. “Childbirth in our current situation seems like a scary idea...”

“Huh?! How did you arrive at that conclusion all of a sudden?! Aren’t there more platonic things to go through first?! You know, like holding hands, going out on a date, kissing, and all that?!”

Is your idea of romance like a roller coaster or something, Haruka? Slow and steady is irritating to watch if it’s too *slow, but as somebody who lives in the same house with you, I don’t know how I’m supposed to react if you suddenly start spending time alone with Nao!*

“Well, I’ve already held hands and gone on a date with Nao,” said Haruka.

Oh yeah, that’s true. I don’t know if Nao *has thought about it in those terms, however.*

“We haven’t kissed yet, but if I tell Nao how I actually feel, then that’ll create a romantic mood, right?” Haruka was once again mumbling to herself and avoiding my eyes. “And if he happens to want to go all the way right then and there, then I probably won’t be able to say no, so, um...”

“Gosh,” I said, “you’re acting like an absolute virgin!”

“I am a virgin!”

Yeah, I’m aware, Haruka. Or rather, I would have been shocked if you’d said otherwise.

Natsuki seemed satisfied with what she’d heard from Haruka; she nodded to herself before chiming in, “It’s definitely normal to feel anxious about

childbirth, however. It would have felt scary even back in Japan, despite the accessibility of well-equipped hospitals."

"Why are you being so serious about this, Natsuki?! It's too early to be thinking about stuff like that!" I interjected. "What about all the bittersweet parts of young love—can't you enjoy those first?"

"I mean, yeah, but after Nao and I have those experiences, that's exactly what might lead to us going all the way," said Haruka. "We don't have parents or anyone else to stop us here in this world."

"Ugh, this is the recklessness of youth!"

"Well, we're technically considered adults in this world, Yuki," said Natsuki.

"Please don't bring that up right now!" *Don't fuel my imagination, Natsuki! I'll end up fantasizing about all sorts of stuff any time I see Haruka and Nao alone together! When I see them all sweaty and red in the face after training, I might start thinking they just finished a training session in bed!*



“However, it’ll be a big issue for our party if I end up unable to participate in combat for an extended period of time,” said Haruka.

“Huh? Are we still talking about this?” I asked, glancing at Haruka for confirmation.

She had a slightly unhappy expression. “You’re the one who said you wanted to have some girl talk, Yuki.”

“I mean, yeah, but I don’t know if you can really classify this as girl talk,” I said. “It’s more like adult talk, you know? It’s a huge leap from shojo manga and bridal magazines like *Zexy Premier* all the way up to maternity magazines like *Hiyoko Club*, isn’t it?” *Girl talk isn’t really enjoyable for me when it goes all the way there, Haruka.*

“It is an important topic, however,” said Natsuki. “We should create a maternity leave system for Meikyo Shisui.”

“Huh? What do you mean, Natsuki?” I asked. “Are you talking about something like a system to split earnings?”

I wouldn’t mind a system like that, but...

“No, I’m talking about a system that ensures there’s no overlap in pregnancies,” Natsuki replied. “We can probably still manage as long as only one of us has to take time off due to pregnancy, but we won’t be able to work at all if it’s more than one.”

“...You would probably get bashed and flamed like crazy if you called something like that a maternity leave system back in Japan,” I said.

A system like that would probably have been labeled exploitation back in Japan, but it was the only realistic option for us. I felt pretty confident there was no way that all three of us would get pregnant at the same time, but if we did, we wouldn’t be able to bring in any income for at least a year—and likely longer. Back in Japan, pregnant women could still work, but in this world, there was no way any of us could participate in combat while pregnant, and we would probably have to take care of our babies full time even after childbirth, since there weren’t any stores in this world that sold things like infant formula and disposable diapers. On the other hand, there was magic, but only Haruka and

Natsuki had spells that would be useful for cleaning babies. There was technically the option of hiring a wet nurse, but that would cost. With all of that in mind, there were a lot of issues to worry about even if we had enough saved up. *Mm, yeah, we definitely need to make sure there's no overlap in pregnancies.*

"More importantly, what about you two?" Haruka asked. "If I recall correctly, both of you have talked about aiming for Nao before, haven't you?"

Natsuki and I looked at each other.

"Well, I mean, it's more that being Nao's partner is probably the safest position you could hope for in this world," I said.

"Mm. The most important factor is that we know Nao-kun quite well," said Natsuki. "I've heard many stories about how differences in values are one of the biggest hindrances to a comfortable family life."

"Any romantic attraction or feelings?" Haruka asked.

Natsuki and I both paused before answering.

"...Well, if I had to be specific, then I do like Nao," I said. "Now that he's an elf, he's even more handsome than he used to be, and I enjoy being around him. And he's a very nice guy."

"I like him the most of all the boys I know," said Natsuki. "However, I can't really say I have any passionate feelings for him the way you do, Haruka."

Likewise, I probably wouldn't have thought of marriage or even telling Nao that I liked him if we had remained in Japan, and I wasn't totally in love with him, so it was possible that if I happened to meet some wonderful guy in this world, I'd fall in love with him instead. Still, there wasn't much chance of me meeting someone I felt comfortable around who was also as financially secure as Nao. Touya wasn't bad by any means, but he was dead set on marrying a beastwoman. Even if I decided I was okay with being his second wife, I had no idea if I would be able to get along with a stranger he'd married first. On the other hand, when it came to the prospect of being one of several girls married to Nao, I was confident that I would be comfortable around Haruka and Natsuki; all of us had already spent a lot of time together. The most important

thing was feeling comfortable around whoever you ended up with.

Haruka had a slightly exasperated expression after she heard our responses to her question, though. “In a way, both of your answers are quite cold. More importantly, I don’t feel *that* passionate about Nao!”

“Mm, I suppose your feelings have been smoldering for a very long time,” said Natsuki. “Don’t worry, Haruka. We can send some wind your way and fan the sparks of love.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea, Natsuki,” I said. “We can extend a helping hand and stir things up in all sorts of ways, huh? I’m down for that!”

“I don’t need your help!” Haruka yelled. “Just so you know, something like that is called an unwanted favor!”

“Hmm, I guess there might be some blowback if the spark is too intense,” I said. “That would be bad for us too. You might accidentally go all the way if we taunt you too much, and—”

“Shut up,” said Haruka.

“Okay,” we both replied in unison.

Yikes! The look you shot me could have been a murderer’s, Haruka! Oh, wait, I guess that technically does apply to me too. Ugh. I was perfectly aware of the fact that we had done the right thing according to common sense in this world, but I still felt a bit depressed whenever I thought back on it. The bandits would have killed more innocent people if we hadn’t killed them first, and slaying the bandits had been part of our job as adventurers, but I still felt a bit angry about the fact that the local army hadn’t been able to deal with them. But one way or another, the bandits had been a problem that *someone* needed to deal with, and if we’d relied on other people to do the dirty work for us, I would have ended up feeling just as bad.

“More importantly—enough about me! It’s time for the two of you to talk about yourselves!” said Haruka. “Don’t you have any stories about a wonderful encounter with a prince on a white stallion or something like that?”

A prince on a white stallion? Really, Haruka?

“Marriage happens because people stand to gain something from it, but young people tend to be too idealistic to realize that,” I said. “It’s time to face reality, Haruka.”

“Mm, I’ve heard that annual income becomes the most essential condition for marriage once you’ve reached a certain age, although I feel like that’s a mentality for people who are closer to their thirties,” said Haruka, glancing at me with an exasperated expression. “Are you actually lying about your age, Yuki?”

I shook my head. “Now, now, Haruka, you’ll upset all of the ladies out there who are *actually* close to their thirties if you say something like that. Anyway, it’s not like there are any realistic alternatives to Nao, right?”

I mean, yeah, if we journey to the capital, we might get to meet an actual prince, but people usually grow out of Cinderella stories once they’re no longer carefree elementary school students, right? I don’t think you can deal with all of the obligations of a marriage through the power of love alone. I have no idea what it’s actually like, but your life would probably be in danger on a daily basis if you actually got married to a prince, right? I bet the world of royalty is even worse than the worst kind of conflict between a bride and her mother-in-law. My mom was on very good terms with my father’s mother, but still.

“What about you, Natsuki?” Haruka asked.

“It’d be a different story if we could have enjoyed leisurely lives all the way through college, but that’s not the case in this world, so we need a different way of thinking about love,” said Natsuki.

“You too, huh? Well, I guess the old saying goes that a happy wife is one whose husband isn’t around often but still brings money home,” said Haruka.

“I’m not *that* detached about romance,” I said. “I want to do things like go out on dates just like any other girl, you know?”

I wasn’t brave enough to consider marrying a native of this world, though. The idea of marrying a stranger was something that people back on Earth didn’t really approve of, and it was considered even less respectable here. Marriage created connections between different families, so there was no way that people would allow a young relative to marry a girl who couldn’t say or prove

where she was born; it would be too risky. With that in mind, my only potential marriage partners in this world were either people who could overcome those obstacles through the power of love...or people who were in a situation similar to mine. Those conditions filtered out civil servants, artisans, and most other people with honest jobs. All that remained were adventurers and people of even lower status, who couldn't really be trusted. *Ugh, romantic relationships are way too difficult in this world. Well, there's nothing hard about romance in itself, but it's not at all easy to form the kind of relationship that leads to marriage.*

"Now that I think about it, I'm surprised that Yasue of all people was able to get married," I said.

"Mm. She definitely got lucky, but her looks undoubtedly played a role as well," said Natsuki.

"Whoa, I didn't expect you to be so frank about this, Natsuki!" I said. "I mean, that's obviously the brutal truth, but still!"

Yasue had told us that Chester was kind to her, but that was probably because she was cute. *A tsundere attitude only works for cute girls, after all! Well, a tsundere attitude in real life would come off as unpleasant to most people, even coming from a cute girl, but still.*

"In any case, I guess you two are the kind of girls who want to gain something from marriage," said Haruka.

"I wouldn't exactly go that far, but it's true that I'd even consider something like a sham marriage to be convenient in terms of heading off potential trouble," said Natsuki.

"Yep, exactly," I said. "We don't have to worry about it while we're still active adventurers, but apparently single women who have retired from work and settled down by themselves don't have easy lives—people are really prejudiced against them."

Even back in Japan, people would look at you as weird if you were still single once you reached middle age, and it seemed like it was even worse in this world. People would treat you as a woman of ill repute, which would make it hard for you to form friendly relationships even with your neighbors. If you

were an outsider to the community, then you would for sure get treated badly, so a relaxing life alone in the countryside was out of the question. In fact, if you lived in a bad area, your life could easily turn into something out of a horror movie.

"It's possible that I'll fall madly in love with someone else in the future, but for now, I'm just going to keep Nao at arm's length as a fallback option," I said.

Haruka stared at me with raised eyebrows. "Ugh, that's the worst thing I've heard so far today! Don't actually say that to Nao, okay?!"

I hurriedly tried to explain myself. "Oh, yeah, sorry, I guess that isn't really the most accurate way to put it. For one thing, it's not like I'm two-timing him. And just to be clear, Nao's the guy that I like the most right now, okay?"

It wasn't like I was planning to treat Nao badly in any way, but he had Haruka, so I personally felt like it was fine for the two of us to remain nothing more than good friends. Even if we did fall in love, going out on a date from time to time would have been more than enough to keep me satisfied; I felt like that was the best way to maintain a good relationship over a long period of time.

I was perfectly aware that my mentality might seem detached to other women, but I would rather have a relationship like that than the sudden marriages and divorces that were apparently normal for celebrities back in Japan. There were even some who got married and divorced back-to-back. It was as if they were purposely working on a smear campaign against the whole concept of marriage, especially given how many media outlets reported on those stories. In fact, I felt like that was one of the major factors in Japan's plummeting birth rate.

I laughed and shrugged. "Besides, if I muscled you aside and actively tried to get together with Nao, then that would be a problem for you, right, Haruka?"

"Uh, well, yeah, it would be a bit of a problem, so..." Haruka didn't meet my eyes as her voice trailed off.

"My point of view is fairly similar to Yuki's. We're in a different world, so I feel we have to adjust our standards accordingly," said Natsuki. "Besides, I had many acquaintances back in Japan who got married even though they hadn't fallen in love as such, and most of those cases seemed to turn out just fine."

“Oh, yeah, I guess that makes sense,” I said. “Your family was a rich one with a long history, after all.”

“Mm. Many of those marriages were arranged, and most of them happened when one of my friends identified a candidate they thought they would be able to get along with,” said Natsuki.

“But is that actually the norm for adults these days?” Haruka asked. “I knew lots of other people who were obsessed with finding a partner who met certain criteria.”

Yeah, I’m pretty sure you’re right, Haruka. In modern Japan, it’s much easier for girls to shy away from marriage simply based on their own tastes, and that’s probably one of the reasons people are marrying much later in life.

“However, just to be clear, Haruka—Natsuki and I will go easy on you, but that doesn’t mean you can afford to slack off,” I said. “Nao’s a very attractive guy as a potential marriage partner.”

Life wasn’t easy in this world, so the fact that Nao earned a lot of money was significant. On top of that, there were a lot of violent and rude people out there, so I felt like you’d have a hard time finding a nicer guy.

“There’s no need to worry quite yet, since we haven’t associated with that many people so far, but if we continue making friends in this world, somebody might appear out of nowhere and win Nao’s heart,” I said. “Keep that in mind, Haruka.”

“Well, I’m fairly sure that if a girl like Aera-san ever decided to approach Nao-kun, she would be very upfront and obvious about it,” said Natsuki. “Perhaps because she’s an elf, she doesn’t seem to mind the difference in age between them.”

“What do you think about Riva?” I asked. “She doesn’t exactly dislike Nao, does she?”

“Mm, true. She’s supposedly uncomfortable around men, but she seems to feel perfectly at ease chatting with Nao-kun,” said Natsuki.

“I feel like Diola-san’s looking for her chance too,” I said. “Sometimes she sounds like she’s joking, but she might actually be serious about it. This is kind

of rude, but I bet she's a bit desperate due to her age."

"Fine, fine, I get it!" Haruka sounded a bit frustrated, but she caved in. "I'll do my best and try to be more assertive, okay? Are the two of you happy now?"

Natsuki smiled. "Mm. Good luck, Haruka."

I nodded in satisfaction when I saw that our "encouragement" had had the desired effect on Haruka. "All right, now that Haruka has given her permission for Nao to have a bunch of mistresses, let's get back to work sewing!"

"Mm," said Haruka. "Wait, was that really what we were discussing...?"

Haruka seemed a bit confused, but I ignored her reaction and started to work on my own clothes. Cute clothes were a very important part of grabbing a guy's attention, so I had to make something that was cute enough to stand out to him. *My life plan is at stake here! Let's do this!*

Chapter 3—Let's Explore a Dungeon!

The most important things that a new adventurer needed before they could start work were armor and weapons. That being the case, we took the sisters with us to Gantz-san's place. However...

Gantz-san greeted us with a sarcastic tone. "You guys finally found some spare time to drop by, huh? You taking a break from your vacation?"

"Vacation? Um, actually, we've put a lot of time and effort into adventuring, Gantz-san," said Yuki.

It was true that we took a lot of time off, but we also produced better results than most other adventurers.

However, Gantz-san shook his head. "Well, you guys don't spend much money here, so..."

"Oh, come on, that's such a selfish reason to vent at us!" said Touya. "By the way, have you finished fixing the breastpla—?"

"Ugh, I still can't believe you broke it right away after I worked so hard to craft it!" Gantz interjected. "You got any idea how hard it is to process elemental metal?! You ever thought about the amount of sweat and elbow grease that blacksmiths have to put into their work?!"

Man, Touya, why did you have to accidentally provoke Gantz-san like that? Your breastplate was destroyed on the same day you received it, so I do actually feel a bit bad for Gantz-san.

"The breastplate was what saved Touya's life, however," said Haruka. "Shouldn't you feel proud of your own work as an artisan if it saved someone's life, Gantz-san?"

"...Tsk. I've finished your orders, so give 'em a try," said Gantz.

Based on the way he'd clucked his tongue, it seemed like he wasn't actually that angry at us. He lined up some pairs of gloves and boots for everyone in my

party. Gloves and boots were the only pieces of equipment that we had never upgraded in all our time as adventurers. It hadn't caused us any issues so far, but Touya had almost died recently. Also, we had obtained some high-quality leather from a lava boar, so we had decided as a party that this would be a good way to make use of that leather.

Yuki swiftly changed her boots and did some stepping around in them. "Whoa, these fit perfectly!" She sounded surprised. "They feel completely different from the ones we've been using!"

Haruka was testing her boots out too. She bent, stretched, and rotated her ankles before nodding in agreement with Yuki. "Mm, these are much better than I thought they would be."

I was just as surprised as the two girls were. The boots we had been wearing up to this point only covered our ankles slightly, like hiking boots, but our new boots covered all the way up to right under our knees. However, my ankles and toes didn't feel constrained at all; I could still move around vigorously and with ease. The boots fit my legs so perfectly, they felt like they were bespoke. The only real complaint I had was the fact that it would take some time to put them on, but that was probably by design; they had to fit on tightly, since it would be really bad for us if the boots accidentally slipped off during combat.

"Metea-chan, do your boots feel tight in any way?" Natsuki asked.

"Nope! Thanks, big sis Natsuki!"

"Do your boots feel okay, Mary?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah, they do. This is the first time I've ever worn such nice boots. Uh, the laces go through here, and..."

Mary struggled a bit with her boots, but she eventually succeeded at putting them on. Natsuki had helped Metea put her boots on, and she seemed quite happy as she walked around.

"The boots feel comfortable to wear and walk around in, right? It's 'cause I used shoe lasts," said Gantz. "They probably won't fit as well once your feet get bigger with age, but that shouldn't be an issue for any of you except the two over there, and..." The sisters were smiling as they looked down at their boots,

and Gantz-san watched them as he was talking to us, but then his words trailed off after his gaze shifted to Yuki.

“Hmm, I feel like somebody’s giving me a weird look!” Yuki placed her hands on her head and chest. She seemed like she was in anguish. “I don’t really want to say that I’ve stopped growing, though...”

But the truth was that we probably had stopped growing back on Earth. Several of us had been transformed into different species after we were transported to this world, but Yuki looked more or less the same after a year here, and I was fairly sure the same would have held true even if she had become an elf. However, we were adventurers and had to walk long distances over uneven terrain, so even if we were still growing, it wouldn’t be an issue: our boots would probably get worn out before we outgrew them.

“I used some extremely durable material for the shoelaces, so I don’t think they’ll break easily, but I’ll throw in some spare ones too,” said Gantz. “Let me know if any problems crop up. Problems with your boots can put your lives in danger!”

“Thank you very much, Gantz-san,” said Haruka. “We’ll keep that in mind.”

“Mm. As for the gloves, flexibility was my top priority, so I used brown eik leather. They’re cut resistant—a normal knife shouldn’t be able to slice through ’em. But their best feature is how well they fit your hands—or should, anyway.”

According to Gantz-san, the gloves had been made to order for each of us, and they were also flexible enough that we could wear them even for precise tasks that would preclude wearing ordinary gloves. We had placed an order for a main pair and a spare pair for everyone in our party, and they would cost us three gold coins per pair, so there was no doubt that they were high quality.

As for the boots, the price for one pair was twenty-five gold coins if we provided the materials, so they were far from cheap, but according to Natsuki, bespoke leather boots were even more expensive back on Earth, so twenty-five gold coins was actually a fair price if we factored in how cheap the cost of labor was in this world. On the other hand, leather boots would probably have lasted for a lifetime back on Earth, whereas we would have to replace these boots eventually. Still, good boots were a crucial part of protecting our own lives, so

they were definitely worth the high cost.

“All right, next up are the partial armor pieces,” said Gantz. “They’re made of leather, but it’s lava boar leather, so they’re actually much sturdier than your average metal armor.”

The new pieces of partial armor were for Haruka, Yuki, Natsuki, and me. All of us had encountered plenty of situations in which we’d had to fight on the front line, especially Natsuki, so we had placed orders for armor that we could wear on top of our chain mail in order to obtain as much protection as possible.

“Last are some clothes for those two kids you brought with you. I used lava boar leather to make these clothes, just like you ordered, but I feel like you’re spoiling them,” said Gantz in an exasperated tone. “The clothes provide more or less the same protection as leather armor, but they’re not something that rookie adventurers could normally afford, you know?”

Mary glanced timidly at us, seeming a bit uneasy. “Um, is it really okay for us to have these clothes? It sounds like the boots were already very expensive, so...”

However, Haruka immediately shook her head, then glared at Gantz-san.

“It’s fine, Mary. You don’t have to worry about it,” said Haruka. “Gantz-san, they’re the newest members of our party, so it would be dangerous for them to wear the same equipment as the average rookie. We’ll be taking them adventuring with us. Besides, aren’t you happy that we’re spending more money here?”

“Well, Sybil is happy. Me, I’d prefer to make metal weapons,” said Gantz.

“I see. I guess that means we’ve contributed to the peace and harmony of your household, Gantz-san!” Yuki exclaimed. “Feel free to show your appreciation by giving us a discount!”

“Please, that harmony will be disturbed if I do give you a discount! Pay up and get out!”

The sum that Gantz-san requested from us was a bit cheaper than it was supposed to be, so he had actually provided us with a discount. We chuckled to ourselves as we paid Gantz-san for everything, and then we headed out of his

store.

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Metea was walking ahead of the rest of us. She seemed elated about her new equipment. “Tee hee, I’ve become very strong!”

Mary looked like she felt a lot more nervous than her younger sister, but there were traces of happiness on her face as well. “Thank you very much for everything.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’re counting on you and Metea to contribute to our party, after all,” I said. “This is basically an investment in our own future.”

“Yep. Your new equipment isn’t actually enough to make you very strong, though, so keep that in mind,” said Yuki.

“Mm, of course.” Mary smiled and nodded.

We had actually talked a bit about what to do for the sisters’ initial equipment. One of our first ideas had been to place orders for the same kind of equipment that we used, but our armor was very expensive and worth the equivalent of one luxury car per person. It wouldn’t have been a very efficient use of money to buy that level of equipment for the sisters. For one thing, they were young and still growing, and for another, chain mail would have been too heavy for them to walk around in. Also, Mary had gone pale and started shaking her head vigorously when she found out how expensive our current equipment was, so we had settled on something cheaper, and they were still using some of our old weapons. Metea was using one of Yuki’s old kodachi, and Mary was using one of Touya’s old one-handed swords, although she had to use both hands. Still, the two weapons together were worth over one hundred gold coins. They weren’t the most powerful weapons available in this world, but they were definitely decent for rookies. Taking that into account, the sisters’ equipment was just as good as what moderately experienced adventurers would use.

“If you want to get more powerful weapons, then it’s better to earn money yourself and save up for your own stuff,” said Yuki. “It’s more fun that way too—it’s good motivation.”

“Yep. Our own equipment is nowhere close to being the strongest either,” said Touya. “I really want a weapon made of mithril...”

“Oh, um, mithril will probably be difficult to get, but we’ll do our best!” said Mary.

“I’ll hand you some mithril if I find it, big bro Touya!” Metea put in.

“Oh, I appreciate the thought,” said Touya. “Whoa, wait, hold on, do you actually intend to become stronger than me?!”

Metea had just exited the gates of Laffan, but she turned around after she heard Touya’s words and stopped in her tracks, then unsheathed the kodachi at her waist and held it high in the air.

“I’ll definitely become a very strong adventurer!” Metea’s ears and tail perked up. “This will be my first step toward that goal!”

Metea seemed very brave, confident, and motivated. However...

“Can you wait on that for a bit, Metea?” I asked. “First, let us take you to a place where you and Mary can fight.”

“Okay.” Metea nodded obediently and sheathed her sword. “I’ll listen to your commands in battle, big bro Nao.”

The rest of us had also talked among ourselves about where to go to give the sisters their first experience at combat. The average rookie adventurer would gather herbs while looking for goblins to slay, but the majority of the kids who decided to become adventurers did so around the age of fifteen. The sisters weren’t even ten yet, so there was a huge gap between their age and the norm. On the other hand, they both had some advantages: they had trained with us, and they had equipment that most rookie adventurers wouldn’t have been able to afford. That was a huge difference from the way the rest of us had started our lives as adventurers. In addition, the sisters were very agile and had shown an amount of stamina during training that was unbelievably high for their age, and they also had a lot of guts and patience in the face of adversity.

Given all of those considerations, the place we had selected to train the sisters was the dungeon in the abandoned mine. Dungeons were normally too dangerous for rookies, but it was actually easier to control the flow of battles in

the abandoned mine than it was in the forest. In the forest, you had to stay alert to your entire environment, but in the mine, you only had to pay attention to your front and back. There weren't any bind vipers that could sneak up on you from above, and even if you made noise, scalp apes wouldn't surround you. On top of that, ogres wouldn't abruptly close distance with you, and as far as we knew, you probably wouldn't encounter unusual monsters such as lava boars. Aside from skeletons, the foes you would encounter in the dungeon were only about as strong as an ordinary goblin, so it would actually be a decent place to train adventurers if we could handle the hurdles on the journey to the mine.

"All right, let's blaze through the journey to the mine this time!" said Yuki. "I'm counting on you to choose the paths with the least foes, Nao!"

"Sure. But for extra exercise, let's jog all the way there," I said. "Mary, Metea, let us know if either of you start to feel exhausted."

"Okay!" they replied in unison.

After I heard their energetic responses, I nodded and broke into a run, simultaneously activating my Scout skill. I picked the paths that allowed us to dodge monsters most of the time, and when we did run into monsters but a detour to fight them would have taken too long, we used magic to slay them swiftly. Eventually, we arrived at the abandoned mine.

"We're here! Whew." Yuki ran ahead of me and stopped outside the entrance to the mine before turning around to talk to the sisters. "Mary, Metea, do you two feel okay?"

Metea still seemed to be very energetic. "I'm perfectly fine! It was awesome!"

"Y-Yeah, I feel fine as well," said Mary. "I'm just a little bit tired, that's all." She certainly sounded like it, but that fatigue was probably mental rather than physical, since she seemed very nervous.

On our way here, we had blasted off the head of a large orc, and the sight of a monster like that collapsing to the ground with its head gone was pretty gruesome, so Mary's reaction was perfectly normal. In contrast, the fact that Metea had reacted with the words "That was awesome!" made her unusual and special.

“I’m really impressed that the two of you were able to keep up with us,” said Haruka. “I thought we would need to take breaks from time to time, but I guess I was wrong.”

“They might actually be much better than the average rookie in terms of stamina,” said Natsuki.

“R-Really? Thank you very much for the praise.” Mary smiled and seemed very happy.

Metea puffed her chest out proudly. “Tee hee, I have a lot of energy!”

Their reactions were perfectly reasonable, however. We had actually run all the way here without stopping except to retrieve the carcasses of the monsters that we had slain. We’d just been jogging lightly, but it was still surprising that the sisters had been able to keep up with us given that we were traversing a forest.

“I already knew the two of you had a lot of stamina from our training and jogging sessions, but I’m still very impressed,” I said.

“U-Um, yeah, but we didn’t have as much stamina back when we were living in Kelg,” said Mary.

“It’s probably because we’ve been eating delicious food every day!” said Metea.

We considered the ability to flee rapidly to be the most important asset that an adventurer could have. That opinion hadn’t changed after a year in this world, so we continued to jog regularly. The sisters were now joining the rest of us without skipping any of the sessions. Their running form had been kind of bad at first, but we had taught them how to improve their posture. They learned very quickly by copying us, and in no time, they were able to keep up.

“Food, huh?” I said. “Is that actually possible?”

Metea’s theory that their improved stamina was the result of eating good food felt a bit implausible to me at first, but after all, your ability to keep moving was proportionate to the calories you consumed. *Hmm. Metea eats much more than I do, so...*

“...Well, one way or another, being energetic is a good thing, yep.” For now, I decided to set aside the peculiarities of beastperson biology. I turned to face the dungeon. “All right, let’s head inside. Mary, Metea, do you feel any pain right now?”

“Let us know if you feel anything weird, like a twisted ankle or blisters,” said Haruka. “We can heal you right away.”

The fact that we had healing magic was one reason we hadn’t worried about making the sisters run alongside us on the way to the dungeon. They both shook their heads to indicate that they felt fine.

“All right, let’s get going,” said Touya. “I should be out in front, right? What should we do about monsters?”

“Let’s slay undead monsters using the Purification spell and practice combat against anything else,” said Haruka.

Touya nodded and started walking. “That leaves night snakes, kevan kobolds, and giant bats. Hmm. Yeah, those monsters should be fine for kids.”

The rest of us followed Touya, positioning ourselves so that the sisters were in the middle. Of the three types of monsters that Touya had brought up, night snakes were the most dangerous for rookies, but they weren’t a threat to us due to the fact that we had access to the Cure Poison spell. Metea seemed happy and carefree at first, but she donned a serious expression and appeared very focused when she and Mary began observing our surroundings.

“...It’s actually quite cool inside of a dungeon, huh?” said Mary.

“Yep. The temperature stays the same all year, so it’s actually a perfect place to explore during the summer,” said Yuki.

“Man, I wish the monsters in here were a bit stronger,” said Touya. “We could use this place to earn a lot of money.”

“Mm. We cleared out all of the skeletons that offered us bonus sources of income,” said Haruka, sounding a bit disappointed.

The engraved swords were the reason we had initially earned a lot of money from the skeletons in this dungeon, but the skeletons that only offered

magicites were close to worthless.

“Oh yeah, now that I think about it, Diola-san asked us to think of a name for this dungeon,” I said. When I had visited the guild the other day with the sisters, Diola-san had actually asked me to pass that message along to the rest of my party.

Everyone else seemed a bit surprised by my words.

“Wait, really?” Haruka asked. “We get to name this dungeon?”

“Apparently the guild will name the dungeon if we don’t, but the adventurers who discover a new dungeon get the right to name it,” I replied. “It’s in compensation for the fact that you don’t actually receive any other reward for reporting a new dungeon to the guild.”

According to Diola-san, the guild hadn’t yet made a final decision about what to do in regard to the new dungeon, but she needed a name in order to complete the registration documents.

Mary and Metea looked at us with sparkling eyes.

“N-Nao-san, does that mean your party’s name will go down in history?!” Mary asked.

“Whoa, that’s amazing!” Metea exclaimed.

Although they were excited, our reactions were a lot more neutral.

“I mean, yeah, I guess it is amazing, but I don’t really care that much,” I said. I wanted to build up a reputation such that other people wouldn’t look down on us, but I didn’t crave fame or want to make a mark in history.

“Mm, there’s nothing good about standing out too much,” said Natsuki. “Why don’t we just name the dungeon after Touya-kun?”

“Do you mean something like ‘Touya’s Dungeon,’ Natsuki? I don’t really like the sound of that,” said Touya. “Wanna come up with something else, Yuki?”

“Me? Hmm. Let’s go with ‘Summer Resort Dungeon,’” said Yuki.

Yuki’s idea sounded like something that had just popped into her hand, but the girls seemed fine with it, so that was the name we settled on. However,

Mary and Metea had awkward looks on their faces, so we would probably end up using that name exclusively among ourselves.

“Okay, the next time I see Diola-san, I’ll tell her the name we agreed on just now,” I said. “More importantly, monsters are approaching us.”

“Yeah. They seem to be kevan kobolds,” said Touya. “Mary, Metea, are you two ready?”

“Yeah, I’ll do my best!” said Mary.

“I’ll slay them!” said Metea.

The sisters pulled out their weapons simultaneously. They had serious looks on their faces as they stared down the passageway ahead of us, and soon, four kevan kobolds appeared. They were dashing right at us, so Haruka and I shot Fire Arrows at them and slew two right away. The remaining two kobolds flinched in fear and slowed down when they saw their companions fall, and the sisters took advantage of that opening and leaped at them. Mary held her sword above her head, while Metea held her kodachi down and to the side and lowered her body as she ran. Their fighting styles were almost exactly opposite, but they were equally agile.

The sisters made contact with the kevan kobolds before they could recover, and Mary smashed the head of the kobold in front of her without holding back at all. Meanwhile, Metea used her kodachi to slice halfway through the neck of the other kobold as she ran past it, and its body slumped to the ground. The sisters turned back to look at us, and both of them smiled as if they were very proud of what they had accomplished. Their smiles were very innocent, but blood was leaking from the carcasses on the ground in front of them. On top of that, there were two headless kevan kobolds nearby that Haruka and I had slain with our magic. After some time in this world, we had become somewhat used to such things, but the sight in front of us felt ethically questionable for some reason.

“...Uh, are all beastpeople this strong from a young age?” Yuki asked.

“W-Well, I don’t think so, but Mary and Metea are certainly capable of fending for themselves in combat,” said Haruka.

“Mm. They already proved themselves capable during training, and it seems we don’t have to worry about them at all during actual combat either,” said Natsuki.

We had brought the sisters with us because they had seemed like they were strong enough based on their performance during our training sessions, but there had been no guarantee that they could pull off the same feats in real combat. However, apparently any doubts we’d harbored had been misplaced.

“If anything, I think they’re *stronger* when it comes to actual combat,” I said. “You know, they showed no hesitation at all...”

“Yeah, it might actually be more relaxing for them to fight monsters rather than sparring with us,” said Touya.

The smiles on the sisters’ faces had faded away a bit, so it seemed like our initial reactions had made them a bit uneasy.

When Touya saw that, he said, “Mary, Metea, good job! Both of you did very well!”

The rest of us hastily nodded in agreement and ran over to the sisters with smiles on our faces.

“Kevan kobolds aren’t very strong monsters. Both of you looked like you had an easy time,” I said. “Do you feel okay?”

“Mm. Do you feel strange or uncomfortable after seeing blood?” Haruka asked.

The sight of blood had been mentally taxing for us when we first arrived in this world, but the responses we heard from the sisters were very reassuring.

“I’m fine!” said Metea.

“I’m fine too,” said Mary. “I’m used to seeing blood from gutting monsters.”

The sisters had actually participated when we dressed some monsters the other day. The process of dealing with monster carcasses was something they absolutely had to learn as adventurers, and we had hoped that it would help them feel mentally prepared for fighting live monsters. Now it seemed like experience had been much more effective than we had assumed it would be.

Hmm. Actually, now that I think about it, they were never really averse to the idea of gutting monsters. I recall them being happy to see a lot of meat. Mm, yeah, I guess the sisters might actually be much tougher than us mentally.

"I see," said Haruka. "In that case, keep it up, Mary, Metea. Let's continue through the dungeon, but don't push yourselves too hard, okay?"

"Okay!" they replied together.

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One downside to the dungeon we had picked as a place to train our two newbie adventurers was the lack of variety in the monsters that you could encounter inside. I made use of my Scout skill to seek out and slay monsters, but relative to how deep we traveled into the dungeon, we didn't actually engage in a lot of combat. Our battles against night snakes and giant bats ended very quickly, just like the initial encounter with kevan kobolds, so none of the combat proved useful for training. However, one reason for that was that the rest of us whittled down the numbers of monsters so that there were never more than two for the sisters to fight. As a result, they seemed like they still had a lot of stamina remaining by the time we arrived at the place where we had slain the skeleton king.

"So far, we haven't encountered any undead monsters this time," I said. "Did we slay all of them during our previous visit?"

"That might be the case," said Haruka. "I think the undead monsters were a bit different from the monsters that the dungeon itself creates."

The loot on the zombies and skeletons had been evidence that they were miners and knights in life. They had been much stronger than the other monsters in the dungeon, but it seemed doubtful that they would respawn after we'd purified them.

"I'm personally glad that we don't have to put up with that horrible smell," said Touya.

"I think the monsters we've fought so far have been a bit too easy, though," said Yuki. "Mary, Metea, what do you two think?"

"Yeah, I want to fight more challenging monsters," said Metea.

“Mm, I feel the same way,” said Mary. “I know part of the reason it’s so easy is that everyone is supporting us, but...”

Metea and Mary looked like they were hoping for something, and the rest of us all looked at an open hole in a nearby wall.

“We probably have to advance deeper into the dungeon if we want to encounter new monsters,” I said. “It seems like nothing has changed here.”

“Mm. It doesn’t seem as though the boss monster will respawn here either,” said Natsuki. “I’m fairly sure that this place is a dungeon, however.”

The other day, we’d bought some books that contained information on dungeons, including some text about boss monsters. Apparently there were recorded instances of a new path opening after a boss monster was slain, and there were also instances of boss monsters respawning after some time had passed.

“Well, it seems like no two dungeons are exactly alike,” I said. “More importantly, we need to decide whether or not to advance farther. What do you guys think?”

“I’m down for advancing deeper into the dungeon,” said Touya. “Based on what we read, it doesn’t sound like the monsters will suddenly get a lot stronger, but we’re prepared for that too, right?”

“I’m down too,” said Yuki. “Anyway, the plan was to explore deeper regardless of what happened.”

Yuki was right that we would probably have attempted to explore more of the dungeon even if we hadn’t met the sisters. There wasn’t really anything interesting or attractive about it, but it was still a new dungeon; no adventurer had cleared it yet. So far, there had been nothing but garbage in the treasure chests we’d found, but it was possible that we could discover awesome loot if we ventured deeper into the dungeon. Money wasn’t an issue for us, but the idea of stumbling upon something valuable was very exciting.

“I’m more or less down as well, but I have a bad feeling about the passageway ahead of us,” said Natsuki, glancing down the slope that led deeper into the dungeon. When we’d exited the dungeon the previous time, she had

mentioned the possibility of traps ahead. Since she had the Traps and Snares 101 skill, we couldn't afford to ignore her warning, so we had prepared a bunch of supplies for a long expedition.

The first thing we had prepared was food. Traps that blocked your path backward were very common in dungeons, so the girls had made a lot of extra food for us to pack in our magic bags, and we had also stocked up on condiments in case we absolutely had to survive off meat from monsters. In fact, we had actually stocked up enough to survive for at least a year inside of a dungeon if necessary, so our goal was to be able to remain calm no matter what unexpected events might befall us.

Next, we had prepared tools. We had stocked up on shovels, pickaxes, rope, and anything else that seemed potentially useful in one way or another. We'd already bought some tools for quarrying too, although they had yet to see the light of day, so we could probably dig a path out even if we happened to become trapped inside of the dungeon. Magic would probably be a more effective way to free ourselves, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

I glanced at Haruka to see how she felt, and she nodded back at me.

"Hmm, I see. Mary, Metea, just so you know, we might end up stuck here for a very long time if we explore deeper into the dungeon," I said. "Are you still sure about wanting to venture ahead?"

I had a serious look on my face, but they blinked and tilted their heads.

"Um, we'll all be together, right, Nao-san? If that's the case, then I think we'll be fine," said Mary.

"It doesn't matter where we are if we're all together!" said Metea. "I'm not worried at all!"

Exploring the dungeon was the sisters' first adventure. Most people would have hesitated in fear in a situation like this, but it seemed the sisters weren't scared at all. In fact, both of them were looking at us as if they had nothing but full trust in us, and I chuckled after I saw that.

I patted each of them on the head. "All right, then. In that case, let's venture ahead. I'm counting on you to lead the way, Touya."

“Sure, leave it to me!”

We headed down the slope. Touya led the way as usual, and I walked behind him to stay alert against ambushes, a task I was uniquely suited for as someone who could use both a spear and magic. The passageway was a bit too narrow for two people to walk abreast, and the ceiling was only two meters overhead. The passageway itself wasn’t too steeply inclined, but it was definitely longer than I had thought it would be.

It took about thirty minutes of walking before we finally saw the end of the passageway ahead of us under the glow of the Light spell. We’d arrived at a cave that looked much the same as the previous areas of the dungeon. It was very spacious, just like the area at the top of the slope, and there was a door that stood out in a slightly unnatural way. I had been expecting a more drastic change due to the fact that we were in a dungeon, but the dungeon had disappointed me. There didn’t seem to be any foes nearby either.

“It’s hard to believe that we’re in a dungeon—nothing about our environment has really changed so far,” I said. “Well, the door looks really suspicious, but that’s about it.”

“Well, it would be really bad for us if the environment suddenly turned ridiculously cold or hot, right?” said Haruka.

“I mean, yeah, of course,” I said. “There’s nothing better than a comfortable environment.”

According to the books we had obtained, dungeons had been discovered that contained impossible and unnatural features, such as stairs that would abruptly lead to a scorching-hot environment. There were also dungeons that contained wide-open areas, blindingly bright areas, and areas that appeared to be exactly the same as the landscape outside of the dungeon. One of the theories the books had offered was that each floor of a dungeon was connected to a different world, but the only evidence for that theory was circumstantial. In any case, it sounded like it was fairly common for the interior of a dungeon not to match the terrain outside the entrance. However, given the existence of Time Magic, which could be used to make things like magic bags, I felt like the theory that dungeon floors led to different worlds was a bit too extreme and absurd.

“Well, there don’t seem to be any traps here,” said Touya, sounding relieved and annoyed at the same time. “I was actually pretty nervous, but I guess it was all for nothing.”

Natsuki seemed to feel kind of guilty. “I’m sorry about that, Touya-kun. It was merely an intuition of sorts...”

“No, it’s a good thing that there aren’t any traps,” I said. “This way, we don’t have to dig through anything.”

The passageway had proved to be much longer than I had thought it would be, so the idea of having to dig through all of it sounded extremely annoying. The fact that Natsuki couldn’t locate traps with a high degree of accuracy was a bit worrisome—her skill only provided her with knowledge *about* traps and snares; it didn’t allow her to detect them directly. With all of that in mind, I actually felt glad that Natsuki had been wrong.

“Mm. Let’s get going,” said Natsuki. “I’m sorry about this, but can you take care of mapping duty again, Yuki?”

“Yeah, sure, I don’t mind,” said Yuki. “It’s a lot easier for me now that I have the Mapping skill, so don’t worry about it.”

Yuki had already mapped out the entire area of the abandoned mine above us, but we were about to explore a completely new area. Before placing our hands on the door, the rest of us waited for Yuki to take out the tools she needed, but...

“Eeeeep?!”

A dull, heavy sound echoed behind us, and Metea flinched. I spun around and saw that the sound was coming from the passageway we had just descended. A cloud of dust was pouring out of holes in the walls and enveloping the room.

“Seriously? A delayed trap?” said Touya.

Natsuki had an awkward look on her face, probably because what had happened was bad for us even though her concerns had been justified. “Mm, so there was a trap after all.”

Touya looked at the passageway, but he swiftly turned around and shook his

head. “Looks like we’re completely blocked off.”

After the sound had subsided, the rest of us approached the passageway, but Touya was completely right. The earth and sand that had fallen into the passageway were blocking it completely, and although we brought the Light spell close to the ceiling to double-check, there didn’t seem to be any visible gaps. The passageway had probably been at least three hundred meters long, but it would have been too optimistic to assume that the earth and sand had only blocked off one part of it.

“Well, we assumed there might be a trap that would block the path backward,” said Yuki.

“Yeah. It’s kind of annoying, but we do have the option of digging through,” said Touya. “Magic should work fine for that, right?”

After pausing in thought for a moment, I shook my head. “...To be honest, I actually want to continue exploring the dungeon.”

Touya glanced at me as if he felt surprised. “Really? Like, yeah, we prepared a lot of stuff for exploring the dungeon, but...”

“Mm. We do have the option of digging through and clearing the path if it comes down to that, but if the dungeon is trying to trap us, it’s possible that more earth and sand will fall down,” I said. “Fortunately for us, we have plenty of food, and we can cast the Create Water spell when we need to.”

We couldn’t take a bath in the dungeon, but the Purification spell would be enough to keep ourselves clean, and we had portable toilets as well. With all of that in mind, life in a dungeon wouldn’t be too bad if we could stand living in an enclosed space.

“Besides, if we explore deeper in the dungeon, we might be able to find other exits or return devices that can send us outside,” I said.

Apparently dungeons with multiple exits weren’t very common, but return devices that could instantly teleport you outside had been discovered in many dungeons. I felt like reaching one of those return devices was the proper way to clear a dungeon, and it would probably feel more satisfying to have a realistic goal rather than taking a gamble on the possibility of digging through the

passageway behind us.

“Mm, that’s a good point, Nao-kun. In an ordinary cave, we would probably have to worry about the air, but there’s probably no risk of suffocating to death in a dungeon,” said Natsuki. “Well, that’s only if there aren’t areas filled with poisonous gas, but that’s a different issue.”

Oh, right, sometimes the air inside caves isn’t breathable. Surely we don’t have to worry about that inside of a dungeon, though? Hmm...

“...If the air starts to feel hard to breathe, we can just ask Haruka to use the Purify Air spell for us,” I said.

“Oh, right, I forgot that you can’t use that spell yet, Nao,” said Haruka. “I mean, I don’t mind, but you should try to get better at magic as well.”

“Me? Hmm, yeah, I guess you’re right about that,” I said. “I should probably work on leveling up my Wind Magic soon.”

Up to this point, I had tried to avoid practicing the same kind of magic as the others, but Haruka made a good point...

“No, I’m talking about something else,” said Haruka. “If you practice around the clock for an extended period of time, you’ll get to the point of being able to teleport things, right? I feel like a year should be enough to accomplish that.”

“What kind of impossible request is that?!” I exclaimed.

There was a Level-6 Time Magic spell called Teleportation, but my Time Magic was currently Level 4. Level 6 was realistically within my reach, but the Teleportation spell could only be used to teleport yourself. As a result, I had to learn a higher-tier spell called Area Teleportation if I wanted to teleport everyone in my party at the same time.

However, teleportation spells weren’t easy to master by any means. They wouldn’t even be useful immediately after you learned them; in the beginning, you would only be able to teleport within your range of vision, so you would have to practice even longer in order to become capable of teleporting to faraway places. Fire Magic spells were useful the moment you learned how to cast them, but it was a different story for Time Magic. Time Magic was known as a rare and difficult type of magic, and it was definitely different from the

other types of magic in all kinds of ways.

“Also, by one year, do you mean that you’re planning for us to stay here that entire time?!”

“It all depends on your efforts, Nao. I’m just trying to be considerate toward you so that you won’t drive yourself too hard, you know?” said Haruka. “You can rest easy, however.”

“...What do you mean by that?” I asked, looking at her doubtfully.

She smiled and patted me on the shoulder before responding. “I already paid Ishuca-san enough money to cover management fees for one year, so you don’t have to worry about our house falling into ruin.”

“Whoa, I’m glad to hear that, Haruka! I guess I’ll do my best to practice Time Magic until I can properly use the Area Teleportation spell...”

“Will that really work?” asked Touya. “If we can’t clear the passageway behind us, we’ll have to rely on Nao’s magic as a lifeline. Is there any way to help him improve faster?”

“Well, there are magical devices called teleportation markers that could assist me,” I said. “However...”

Teleportation markers were magical devices that drew on the user’s mana to make teleportation easier, but they could only be made through alchemy, and you also had to set them up ahead of time in the place you wanted to teleport to.

“I guess that means they’re no good in our current situation,” said Touya.

“Yeah,” I said, “especially since I can’t even use any teleportation magic yet.”

Hmm. Should I have asked Haruka for help preparing and setting up a teleportation marker back at home beforehand? Actually, nah, this dungeon is way too far from home, so it would be pointless. Oh well.

“I’m sure you’ll be able to do it, Nao,” said Haruka, sounding very nonchalant.

Natsuki smiled. “Mm. Nao-kun definitely won’t disappoint us.”

“I’m looking forward to teleporting, big bro Nao!” Metea said excitedly.

“Nao-san, we have a lot of time, so you can take it easy,” said Mary. She was clearly trying her best to cheer me up. “I believe in you.”

“Good luck, Nao!” Yuki was grinning and giving me a thumbs-up, but...

“Ugh, you’re all expecting a bit too much from me!” I exclaimed. “Also, Yuki, why are you acting like this has nothing to do with you when you can use Time Magic as well?!”

“I mean, I’m no match for you at all, Nao,” said Yuki. She had an expression of disbelief on her face. “You’re an elf with a natural aptitude for Time Magic, so yeah.”

I was shocked at her expression. She was right that I had an advantage over her, but she was actually a fast learner herself, and she had the Magic Aptitude: Time skill.

In addition, it would have been too stressful for me to practice Time Magic by myself while we were stuck inside the dungeon. We had plenty of food in our magic bags, but our supplies weren’t unlimited. The pressure to find a way out was too much for me to shoulder alone. *Come on, Yuki, it wouldn’t hurt you to tag along with me and practice Time Magic, right? You’re not going to leave me all on my own, are you?*

Staring at Yuki, I clenched my fists and grinned. “You’ll join me to practice Time Magic, won’t you, Yuki?”

“...Yeah, of course.”

Whew, I’m glad that you recognized the earnestness in my eyes, Yuki. It definitely wasn’t my fists that did it, yep!

“There’s no need to worry too much about this.” Touya chuckled and shrugged, effectively bringing the conversation to an end. “We just need to find a return device, right? Let’s get going.”

We turned to face the door and opened it.

“Whoa, the environment ahead looks completely different,” said Touya. “It really looks like a normal dungeon.”

“Mm, I’m glad that it’s a dungeon made of stone,” said Yuki. “A normal

dungeon is a lot easier to map out.”

Yuki was right: the area beyond the door appeared to be made of stone. The passageway was quite spacious—about four meters in width and height. On top of that, it was a straight path and only ever turned at right angles. With all of that in mind, it would definitely be much easier to map than a tunnel with a lot of twists and diverging paths.

“All right, I’ll label this as the second floor of the dungeon,” said Yuki. “It’s our first time exploring this place, so I’m counting on you to protect me, Nao.”

“Of course. I’ll stay on alert against monsters.”

Mapping was no easy feat, so it would only be fair for me to protect Yuki while she was hard at work. I nodded, then focused on using my Scout skill.

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“You know, this is actually a perfect place for training rookie adventurers,” I said.

“Mm, I completely agree,” said Haruka. “In fact, I’d go so far as to say that we’re lucky to be here.”

The monsters that we had encountered on the second floor of the dungeon weren’t very strong at all, but we had expected that, since the first floor had been easy as well. On the second floor, we had encountered more giant bats and night snakes. Both kinds of monsters were hard to notice, but the sisters seemed to have good ears and eyes, because they generally found the night snakes before I could announce where they were located. The giant bats never caught them by surprise either; the sisters were able to hear their ultrasonic chirps.

The only new monsters that we had encountered on the second floor were goblins; many different types had appeared, including normal goblins, scouts, fighters, archers, and leaders. They weren’t very strong individually—after all, they were just goblins—but they had been somewhat annoying to deal with because they worked together in groups to attack us.

However, the goblins had also been perfect targets to test how well we could work together as a party of seven. We had experimented with different tactics,

varying the number of people who took part in combat and the number of spells we cast. Whenever we'd fought multiple battles in a row and the sisters were beginning to show signs of fatigue, we swiftly slew the remaining goblins. In the end, we found the stairs that led to the third floor in no time.

"Goal!" Metea yelled.

"Tee hee. Well done, Metea-chan," said Natsuki. "Would you and Mary-chan like to drink some juice?"

"Sure! Thanks, big sis Natsuki!" said Metea.

While Metea and Mary sat down on the ground and happily accepted the flasks that Natsuki extended toward them, Yuki frowned at the map in her hands. "I think I've mapped out most of the second floor, but I feel like it's a lot smaller than the first floor."

"Really? Are you sure there isn't a lot more space ahead in the areas that we haven't explored?" Haruka asked.

"Nah, I don't think so," Yuki replied, shaking her head. She handed the map to Haruka. "Take a look. You can see that the areas we've explored are more or less surrounding the areas that we haven't, right?"

I stretched my neck to take a look at the map as well.

"Oh yeah, you're right, Yuki. It's kind of a good thing for us, however," I said. "It would probably take a very long time for us to completely explore the second floor if it were as big as the first. I hope we can complete the map of the second floor by the end of today."

"Yeah, I completely agree," said Touya. "However—Mary, Metea, do you two feel exhausted?"

Mary stood up right away. "No, I can keep going. Um, are we going to move on to the next floor once we've completely mapped out this one?"

Metea, however, remained on the ground, sipping some juice from a cup, so she was probably a bit tired. She was, after all, younger than Mary.

"Yeah, that's what we'd usually do," said Yuki. "There might be treasure chests that we haven't found yet, but let's stop for tod—"

“Treasure chests!” Metea hopped up before Yuki could finish her sentence. “I feel better now!”

“You really like treasure chests, huh, Metea?” I asked.

“Yeah! Treasure chests are filled with hopes and dreams!”

Actually, we had already found a single treasure chest during our exploration of the second floor. The loot inside had been the same kind of weak potion, just like the one that we had found on the first floor, but Mary had been very happy about it, since it was her first time finding a treasure chest, and she was obviously looking forward to finding more.

“There’s no guarantee that we’ll find more treasure chests, however,” said Haruka.

“That’s fine with me! I can hope and dream about finding another one!” Metea had a childish smile on her face, but her words sounded a bit profound coming from a kid. The rest of us chuckled before we resumed searching the dungeon for hopes and dreams.

In the end, we found a treasure chest, but all it had inside was a single rusty dagger. However, Metea seemed quite satisfied with the loot. We returned to the stairs that connected the floors of the dungeon, and as she helped us set up camp, she was still happy.

“Well, I guess I do understand how opening a treasure chest could be enjoyable in itself,” I said.

“Huh? Oh, you’re talking about Metea,” said Haruka. “Yeah, I don’t think it’s a bad thing, but it would be nice if she could somehow learn the Trap and Snares 101 skill.”

“Mm, indeed,” said Natsuki. “I wish I could teach her the skill, but mine is still Level 1...”

“Yeah, same here,” I said. “But even though we’re at the same level, Natsuki, you’re much better than I am at detecting booby traps.”

“I guess we have no choice but to try leveling up our skills,” said Natsuki.

“That includes Metea.”

While we were chatting, Metea suddenly dashed over to us. The preparations must have been finished.

She pulled on my hands and urged me to hurry. “Everything’s done! Let’s eat!”

“Yeah, sure, let’s eat,” I said.

We followed her to a spot by one wall of the dungeon where we’d lined up some cots, and we all sat down. We had gotten used to setting up camp inside of a dungeon; it no longer took much time now that all we had to do, more or less, was line up our cots and belongings on the ground. We would sometimes start a bonfire if we felt like it, but we had a limited amount of fuel on us. We usually wouldn’t pitch a tent; it was easier to watch out for danger with the ceiling visible above our heads. The only annoying thing was the need to maintain the Sanctuary spell, which made me feel exhausted after I’d sustained it for a while, but setting it up didn’t take that much time, since it was magic.

Haruka took some meals out of our magic bags and distributed them to everyone. “We’ll probably be eating premade meals for a while,” said Haruka. “We didn’t bring a lot of fuel with us, did we?”

“Mm. Based on the amount of charcoal we’ve consumed so far, the amount that we have stocked up will probably last us a month or so.” I had arrived at that estimate after considering all sorts of factors, such as brewing tea while resting and cooking some simple meals real quick.

“I see,” said Haruka. “If we had known we were going to end up in a situation like this, we would probably have prioritized making a magical device that worked as a portable stove.”

“I mean, yeah, it would be great if we had something like that, but it’s not like we really need it,” I said.

Metea had a sad expression on her face as she looked at the dish in her hands. “It’ll be bad if we can’t eat delicious meals.”

I shook my head, then patted Metea on hers. “Don’t worry, Metea. We can use magic to heat up water and cook food too.”

The main reason we used charcoal to brew tea was because it made for a refreshing change of pace. We could easily boil water with magic, and we could use the Heat spell on our cast-iron skillet; the only disadvantage would be feeling a little bit tired from the lost mana. We could also use magic to stay warm, so charcoal wasn't an absolute necessity.

"Really? That's great to know!"

"Oh, Met, I can't believe you've gotten so pampered," said Mary. "You should be glad that we actually have food to eat any time we want, you know?"

"Yeah, I really appreciate it," said Metea. "Um, can I start eating?"

"Tee hee, sure," said Natsuki. "Let's dig in."

We clapped our hands before we started to eat, and the sisters copied us, then started stuffing their mouths. They didn't look tired, but...

"Mary, Metea, how was today?" I asked. "Do either of you feel tired?"

Today had been fairly relaxing for us, but it was the first time that the sisters had ever gone adventuring. They glanced at each other before shaking their heads.

"I feel a bit tired, but I can keep going," said Mary. "We sure have been slaying a lot of monsters, though. Is it the same for other adventurers?"

"Uh, I have no idea," said Yuki. "We don't have to waste time gutting monsters on the spot, so that's one reason we're fast."

We would actually toss the monsters that we'd slain into our magic bags instead of gutting them on the spot. When it came to monsters like goblins that were totally worthless, we could simply discard their carcasses after we retrieved their magicites, but in this world, unlike in a video game, the carcasses of slain monsters didn't disappear right away; they went through the ordinary process of decay, although it did happen noticeably faster inside dungeons. With that in mind, It would have been a bad idea to leave carcasses lying around inside a dungeon if there was any chance we would ever return to or pass by the same spot.

"Just so you know, we can slow down if it's a bit too tiring," said Haruka.

“It’s fine,” said Mary. “I’m fairly sure that I can keep up our current pace.”

“Yeah, same here!” Metea sounded very energetic. “Let’s keep slaying monsters so that I can get stronger!”

Mary nodded in agreement before looking up at us. “By the way, has it really only been a year since you first became a party? That’s what Diola-san told me, but I wanted to make sure.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Touya. “But I don’t think that getting as good as us in one year is a realistic goal for you...”

“Mm, I know. There’s a big difference in age between us, and I heard that all of you trained together for a few years before becoming adventurers,” said Mary. “It sounded like other adventurers are no match for you.”

“...Oh, now that I think about it, I remember us telling Diola-san that we borrowed magic bags from an elf who was our instructor,” I said.

Diola-san was aware that we were capable of making magic bags, but given all of the capabilities we had as a result of our skills, it would have been perfectly logical to conclude that we must have trained under someone for a few years. At any rate, it would have been more natural than concluding we had actually been transported to this world by a god.

“Hmm, I see. What should we do?” I was implicitly asking the others whether or not we should tell the sisters about our actual circumstances.

Everyone else paused in thought, but eventually, they all nodded.

“...Well, I think it’s fine to tell them,” said Haruka. “They probably won’t spread the information around.”

“Yeah, I agree with Haruka,” said Yuki. “These days, it’s not like it’d be an issue for us even if other people found out, right?”

“Mm, I don’t mind either,” said Natsuki. “We know by now that Advastlis-sama isn’t truly an evil god.”

“I’m down to tell them,” said Touya. “I feel like it’d be more convenient in all sorts of ways if they knew.”

Mary looked a bit uneasy when she saw our reactions, and Metea temporarily

stopped eating and glanced around at us.

“Um, what’s going on?” Mary asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing serious,” I replied. “You see, it’s just that Advastlis-sama actually transported the five of us to this world from a different one.”

I tried my best to tell the truth in a casual way, so as not to put Mary and Metea ill at ease, but they cocked their heads.

“What’s a different world?” Metea asked.

“Uh, hmm. I’m not really sure how to explain that,” I replied. “It’s a place that’s very far away, I guess?”

Come to think of it, I had assumed that we were in a different world based on the existence of things like magic that were totally different from anything in our world, but it was possible that we were actually in an extremely advanced cybernetic realm or that we had been captured by aliens and abandoned on a completely different planet. Both of these theories seemed absurd and unrealistic, but the same was true of our current circumstances as we understood them. One way or another, I could only offer the sisters with a very ambiguous explanation.

“Uh, did a god help you move here from a far away place?” Metea asked.

“Move here?” Yuki laughed at that simple metaphor. “Hmm. Yeah, I guess that’s one way to put it.”

Metea nodded; she seemed very relieved by Yuki’s reaction. “I don’t get it, but all that matters is that you’re here with us!”

“Mm. I don’t really understand myself, but it sounds like Advastlis-sama indirectly saved our lives,” said Mary. “We would have died if we hadn’t met your party, after all.”

“Yeah!” Metea exclaimed. “I’ll say a thank-you prayer the next time we go to a temple!”

“Mm, it’s definitely important to offer thanks,” said Haruka. “Advastlis-sama has helped us out in a lot of ways.”

With that conversation over, the rest of us chuckled at the nonchalant

reactions we'd gotten from Mary and Metea. I personally felt a bit relieved. I hadn't been too worried, but I was still glad that the sisters had accepted us for who we were.

"Okay, let's explore the next floor starting tomorrow," I said.

"Yeah!" Metea shouted. "I'll do my best tomorrow too!"

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When we resumed exploring the dungeon the next day, both the third and the fourth floors proved to be full of goblins—more or less the same as before. As we got deeper, the number of goblin leaders did increase relative to the other types of monsters, and the monsters also started appearing in larger groups, but neither of those things really made a difference to us. In fact, the slow increase in the numbers and strength of the monsters had been very convenient for the purpose of training the sisters, and they had gotten quite strong after all the battles they'd experienced on the third and fourth floors. We eventually reached the end of the fourth floor, where we found a door rather than stairs.

"I feel like things are going to be different from here on out," I said. "There weren't any doors on any of the preceding floors."

It was fairly common for dungeons in games to have rooms behind doors, and there might be foes or treasure chests inside. As we explored the dungeon, we had already discovered some rooms, but none of them so far had had doors.

"Hmm, I feel like there are some foes beyond this door," said Yuki.

"Oh, can you actually detect them, Yuki?" I asked.

"Yeah, somehow. Oh, wait, apparently I've actually learned the Scout skill! Yay!" Yuki sounded very happy, but she was just staring into space, so she must have been checking her status display screen. I turned away when I saw Yuki's reaction.

Natsuki hesitantly raised her hand. "I also learned the Scout skill not too long ago."

"Seriously? Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

“It’s because you made a fuss about an identity crisis, Nao.” Haruka smiled as she placed a hand on my shoulder. “By the way, I’ve learned the Scout skill too.”

“Well, thanks for being sensitive to me,” I said. “I guess this means everyone has the Scout skill now, huh? That’s a good thing, but I should probably try leveling up mine.” I nodded to myself; my Scout skill was currently Level 5, so the others probably wouldn’t be able to overtake me as long as I didn’t slack off.

“...Um, what do you mean by skills?” Mary asked.

“Skills are special things people can do, big sis.” Metea puffed out her chest. “I happen to know that already!”

Mary laughed and patted her on the head. “I know that too, Met. But it sounds like they’re talking about something else.”

“Both of you are right, tee hee. We told you about this yesterday, but Advastlis-sama transported us to this world,” said Natsuki. “During that process, we were granted the power to see our capabilities in the form of numbers.”

Mary paused in thought, then looked up at us and asked, “Um, that’s very convenient, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s nice that we can see an objective measure of our own capabilities,” said Haruka. “It helps keep us from becoming overconfident.”

“Mm. I’m actually kind of jealous,” said Mary.

“Really? I don’t really get what it’s like, but I’ll ask a god to grant you that power too, big sis!” The conversation had apparently gone over Metea’s head, but she was talking like she planned to casually ask a favor from someone she knew on her sister’s behalf.

Of course, based on Advastlis-sama’s personality, he might actually grant her wish, so the rest of us glanced at each other and laughed.

“Ha ha, yeah. I don’t know if Advastlis-sama will listen to you, but it’s worth a try,” I said. “But for the time being, let’s focus on the foes beyond this door.”

“Oh, right! I’m sure it’ll be a boss battle!” Metea frowned and clenched her fists. “I’ll slay the monsters! No mercy!”

She looked very motivated, but also annoyed, and not without good reason.

For one thing, the night snakes and giant bats had more or less vanished as we explored deeper into the dungeon. The latter were more important from our perspective. Giant bats were the only monsters with edible meat that had appeared from the second floor onward, and we could only obtain magicites from goblins. We had plenty of food stocked up, but it seemed like Metea was unhappy because slaying goblins felt different from hunting prey for meat. Mary, however, didn't seem to have any qualms about slaying goblins, so her little sister's bloodlust wasn't simply the result of her primal instincts as a beastwoman.

For another thing, we had yet to find any treasure chests today. I was fairly confident that the loot would have been garbage even if we had, but Metea seemed to be really disappointed.

Haruka gently chided her. "Calm down, Metea. I don't think you're quite ready to tackle a boss battle yet. Right, Nao?"

I nodded. "Yeah. There seem to be multiple foes ahead, and the strongest ones feel stronger than goblin leaders."

Metea twitched her ears and folded her arms. "Oh, yeah, goblin leaders are still hard for me. I guess I'll let the monsters off easy this time."

The rest of us burst out laughing when we saw her cute and haughty demeanor, but we quickly stifled our laughter and glanced at each other with serious expressions.

"Tell us more, Nao," said Haruka. "What types of goblins are stronger than goblin leaders?"

"Captains, generals, and kings," said Natsuki. "Kings would be difficult foes for us to defeat even now, wouldn't they?"

"If it works the same way it does with orcs, then a goblin king commands at least ten thousand normal goblins," said Yuki. "I doubt a goblin king is actually as strong as ten thousand normal goblins, but if it's accompanied by goblin generals and captains, it'll be a huge pain to deal with."

I concentrated to sharpen my senses, but then I shook my head. "Nah, I don't

think there's a goblin king beyond this door. It feels like a goblin general accompanied by some captains, leaders, and weak normal goblins."

"Mm, we can probably handle that just fine," said Haruka. "However, we should retreat immediately if any of us think that we can't win, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," said Yuki. "Let's start the battle the same way we usually do—and I should stay with Mary and Metea, right?"

"That sounds fine to me," I said. "We'll start by striking down any strong foes with magic. As for Touya..."

We had been fighting monsters together for a year, so at this point, we no longer took the time to discuss a detailed plan before every battle, but this would be our first time fighting powerful foes with Mary and Metea, so we had to be fully prepared. Once we were all on the same page, we stood before the door. Touya was in the front, and he turned to look back at us before nodding and swiftly opening the door.

"There's one general, three captains, five leaders, and a bunch of other weak monsters! I'll start from the right!" He charged into the room.

Natsuki dashed forward too. "I'll start from the left!"

All of the monsters were goblins, so there was no need to use the Third Eye skill on them. At the back of the room were four goblins, all larger than the norm. One of them was wielding a giant sword, so it had to be the goblin general. The other three must have been the goblin captains.

"*Fire Arrow!*"

Haruka, Yuki, and I cast our Fire Arrows at exactly the same instant, all targeting the goblin general. We'd prioritized speed over potency, so the Fire Arrows reached it immediately, and it looked like they were about to pierce through it, but then it swung its sword, and one of the arrows vanished in midair.

We were shocked, but it was only able to react to one of the three Fire Arrows that had been flying at it. Another gouged out its shoulder and took its whole arm off, while the final arrow blasted off about a third of its face. There was no way it could have remained standing in that condition, and it collapsed

forward and stopped moving.

After Yuki saw that the goblin general was dead, she took the sisters with her to back up Natsuki, who was facing off against two goblin leaders, two fighters, a scout, and an archer. It probably wouldn't have been easy for Natsuki to contend with all of those foes by herself, so I had no qualms about Yuki's decision. However...

"Am I supposed to deal with all three goblin captains?!" I yelled.

Touya was fighting a similar combination of foes, plus one extra goblin leader. Given how many monsters he was holding off single-handed, I probably shouldn't have complained, but I wasn't a frontline fighter like Touya or Natsuki; there was no way I could handle three new foes on my own.

"I'll help you out, so stop complaining, Nao," said Haruka. "Besides, we'll whittle their numbers down quickly!"

She shot a physical arrow at one of the goblin archers that had been aiming at Touya, and soon after, one of her Fire Arrows landed on a goblin captain.

"Yeah, you just have to hold your ground for a bit, Nao," said Yuki. She was fighting alongside Natsuki. She swung her kodachi with one hand; with the other, she launched a Fire Arrow at a goblin captain. Haruka finished off the wounded captain with her magic.

"Oh, yeah, it shouldn't be too hard to deal with just one goblin captain!" I cast a Fire Arrow of my own and blasted off the head of one of the two remaining captains, then attacked the last one with my spear; it had panicked when it saw my magic.

"Hey, Haruka, can you help me out here?" Touya hollered. "I feel like I'm the one who has the most to deal with!"

I glanced at Touya and noticed that he was actually struggling a bit against his opponents. He had managed to slay one goblin leader thanks to Haruka's help earlier, but there were still two leaders remaining, and the other three goblins were still up and acting as a distraction. It looked like he couldn't find an opening to deal finishing blows against the two leaders.

"Um, well, Nao said that he would cry really hard if I didn't help him..."

“I didn’t say anything like that, Haruka!” I exclaimed. “I’ll be fine, so feel free to help Touya!”

“Really? Okay, then. *Fire Arrow!*”

Haruka cast multiple Fire Arrows in Touya’s direction, and they instantly slew the two goblin leaders, both of which had their backs to me. After that, the battle was pretty easy. Touya slew the remaining goblins while I slew the last goblin captain. Natsuki’s group seemed to be having an easy time of it—so much so that she’d allowed Mary and Metea to fight a goblin leader—and soon enough, it was all over.

“Hmm, it doesn’t look like anybody got injured,” I said. “I panicked a little when I saw that goblin general slice through a Fire Arrow, but everything turned out just fine.”

Metea puffed out her chest, looking satisfied. “Me and my big sis managed to slay a goblin leader!”

Mary seemed happy too, but she gently chided Metea for her behavior. “We were only able to do it because Natsuki-san had already hurt it a lot, Met. Don’t get too cocky, okay?”

“Yeah, of course.” Metea nodded, then bowed toward Natsuki. “Thank you very much for your help, big sis Natsuki!”

Natsuki smiled and gently nodded, as though to herself. “Tee hee, don’t worry about it. It’s also true that both of you have become quite strong.”

“Oh, I’m really happy to hear that,” said Mary, blushing shyly.

It was a heartwarming sight, but it was sort of ruined by all of the dead goblins strewn around the sisters. However, only a fool would have tried to point out exactly who had created the mess, so Touya and I kept quiet as we retrieved the magicites, three rusty swords, and the sword that the goblin general had been wielding.

“Hmm, these swords look like rusty garbage,” said Touya. “Apparently this one is called a goblin general’s sword. It cut your spell out of the air, so could it actually be worth something?”

“Well, our elemental metal weapons should be able to break it, but I don’t know if weapons made of white iron would be able to do so,” I said. “I bet it’s a little bit better than a white iron weapon.”

“Whoa, that sounds like it’ll be a nice source of bonus income for us!” said Yuki. “Yay!”

“The name is rather lame, however,” said Natsuki.

“Yeah, it really is,” said Haruka. “Do you want to use it, Touya?”

“Hell no! I don’t need it!”

The goblin general’s sword looked a bit shabbier than a normal sword, so it was probably way worse than any of our weapons. We tossed it into one of our magic bags so we could turn it in to the guild at a later date, then took a look around the room.

“It doesn’t look like there are any stairs, but there is a door at the back that wasn’t there in the beginning,” I said. “I think the stairs are probably behind that door.”

A new door had appeared after we had prevailed in the boss fight—probably the kind of thing that would only happen in dungeons. Nothing else stood out to me, however.

“Yeah, you’re probably right about that,” said Touya. “There might also be a return device waiting for us.”

“That’s possible, but it feels unlikely considering that you’re the one who mentioned it, Touya,” I said. “You’ve jinxed us a lot.”

“Oh, come on, dude, don’t roast me like that,” said Touya.

In spite of his objections, he laughed and, after using the Scout skill to scan for foes, opened the door.

“Oh, it’s just a small room,” said Touya. “There are some stairs at the back, and it doesn’t look like there’s a return device, but I see a treasure chest.”

“A treasure chest!”

Metea dashed forward the moment she heard Touya’s words, but I hastily

caught her in my arms.

“Metea, you need to be careful at all times just in case, remember?” I asked.

“Oh, right. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay as long as you understand,” I said. “I’m pretty sure there isn’t anything dangerous here, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Metea let her head hang dejectedly, and I nodded to myself, then looked around the small room. It seemed to be about eight square meters in area, and there was a single chest in the center. There were some stairs at the back but no foes in sight. However, we entered the room hesitantly, since there was still the risk of traps.

Once we were inside, we examined the treasure chest.

“Is this treasure chest a first-time reward for beating the boss fight, like in games?” Touya asked.

“I hope so,” Yuki replied. “It’d be awful if this were actually a mimic.”

“I don’t think the dungeon would be that unfair,” I said. “It should be fine, I think.”

I couldn’t detect any signals with my Scout skill, but it was possible that mimics had a high-level Sneak skill that prevented people from distinguishing them from actual treasure chests. I wanted to believe that a dungeon wouldn’t be that cruel to adventurers right after they’d just finished a boss fight, but it was better to be safe than sorry, so Natsuki, Metea, and I checked it carefully.

“Hmm, the treasure chest doesn’t seem to be booby trapped,” I said.

“Yes, I concur, Nao-kun,” said Natsuki.

Metea glanced up at me with excitement in her eyes. “Can I open it?”

I nodded, and she opened the chest to look inside, then stuck the whole top half of her body inside and reemerged with loot in her hands.

“I found this inside of the treasure chest! It looks very pretty!”

The object that Metea was holding up for our inspection was a single small necklace. The pendant was a light blue gem; it was the size of a thumbnail and

was attached to a metal chain.

“Jewelry is good loot, but it doesn’t look very impressive,” I said. “Touya, use your Appraisal skill on it.”

“Sure,” said Touya. “Hmm. Apparently it’s a corundum pendant.”

“Corundum? What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s a type of sapphire,” Natsuki replied. “Well, to be more accurate, sapphires are a type of corundum.”

“Rubies are also a type of corundum,” said Yuki.

“Oh yeah, I remember hearing about that before.” *The color of corundum differs depending on its impurities, right?*

“Um, is this something that’s very valuable?” Mary asked. “It looks really pretty, so...”

Touya shook his head. “I have no idea, but it seems to be a magical device.” His Appraisal skill must not have provided him with very much information. “I think our resident alchemists would know more about this.”

Man, I wish the Appraisal skill were a bit more powerful.

“I’m afraid that my current level of Alchemy isn’t enough to give me detailed information about this device,” said Haruka.

“A magical device, huh? I wonder if you’ll get cursed by wearing it,” I said.

Metea, who still had the pendant in her hands, flinched when she heard my words, but Haruka chuckled and patted her on the head to calm her down.

“That’s possible, but I have a hunch that wearing this pendant will actually provide you with a positive effect,” said Haruka.

“Yeah, I feel the same way,” said Yuki. “If that’s true, this is definitely worth a lot more than a normal accessory. That fight was pretty easy for us, but this reward would probably represent a decent amount of income for adventurers who were evenly matched against the boss.”

So it would be a decent amount of income for the kind of adventurers who have to work really hard to defeat a goblin general? Hmm... “I guess that

implies it's worth a lot less than we usually earn."

Yuki tilted her head and laughed awkwardly. "I mean, yeah, that's one way to look at it, but it all depends on the effect of the pendant itself. If it's cursed, it's probably worth nothing, but if there's a positive effect that's really good, we might be able to earn a surprising amount of money."

"If I recall correctly, we can ask the guild to investigate this kind of thing for us, can't we?" Natsuki asked.

"Yeah, that's technically an option available to us," Haruka replied. "I'm not sure if the guild at Laffan can handle this, however."

According to Haruka, you could pay the Adventurers' Guild to appraise the loot that you found in dungeons. It was a service that every branch of the guild offered, but adventurers rarely required that service in towns like Laffan, so most of the time, the guild wouldn't station capable people in outlying territories like this one. As a result, the loot had to be shipped to a different town for appraisal at the branch there, and you had to wait a while before learning the results.

"By the way, how much does the appraisal service cost?" Touya asked. "It doesn't cost as much as you'd get selling the loot itself, right?"

"Nah, I don't think the guild would rip us off like that," I said. "They're not like Boltac's Trading Post in the *Wizardry* games."

A system like that would have been way too harsh for adventurers trying to make a living. You could infer the value of an item simply by asking the cost of appraisal, but that would still have been a terrible deal.

"I don't remember the exact details, but I think there's a fixed fee for the appraisal services," said Haruka. "That also means there's a risk of ending up in the red, however."

"Oh yeah, I guess it could be a net loss if the loot turned out not to be worth much," I said.

"Mm, yeah, but the people who appraise the loot need to earn a living as well," said Haruka.

The appraisal process would cost money regardless of what the loot was, and if it had to be shipped to a different town, there would also be the cost of transportation.

“Well, we can discuss what to do with this pendant after we return home,” said Haruka. “This room seems safe enough, so let’s set up camp here.”

“Mm, I think it’s probably about time to rest,” said Natsuki.

“Yeah, good point,” I said. “Let’s stop for today and explore the next floor tomorrow.”

We estimated that we had spent about two days per floor from the second to the fourth floor. We would usually set up camp about two times per floor—first, when we’d explored half of the total area, and then again when we found the stairs that led to the next floor. Every floor from the second onward had all been smaller than the first, but the main reason we’d been able to explore a full dungeon floor every two days was that the floors were easy to map out. Yuki had gotten used to mapping duty by now, and it was also much easier to maintain our sense of direction in passageways made of stone than it would have been in a natural cave, so there had almost never been a need for us to stop in our tracks and make sure that we weren’t lost.

But two days per floor was just an estimate, as we had no way to accurately keep track of time. We could estimate how much time had passed based on how hungry we felt and the number of times that we had set up camp, but there was no way for us to tell for sure since we couldn’t see the sun. Haruka and Yuki said it was imperative that we create watches, so keeping track of time probably wouldn’t be an issue the next time we explored a dungeon, but first we had to successfully escape this one. I felt slightly uneasy wondering whether or not we could escape, but I kept silent about it and helped with setting up camp.

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“All that’s left is the boss room,” I said.

“Yep. We’re finally done with the sixth floor...” Touya sighed in exhaustion, as did the sisters.

So what about our adventures on the fifth and sixth floors? I didn't even want to think about that. Both floors had been packed with undead monsters.

Skeletons were one thing, but there had been a lot of zombies as well, and their rotten stench had rendered the air close to unbreathable the whole time. It was an awful environment for our beastpeople party members with their sensitive noses, and slaying undead monsters didn't even leave us with edible meat.

We hadn't been able to find any treasure chests either, so Metea's mood had soured a lot; all of her elation at slaying a goblin leader was gone now. She had spat out the words "Undead are shit," and although Mary had scolded her for swearing, Metea's feelings were absolutely relatable.

The only monsters we had encountered were zombies and skeletons, and there weren't even any knights among the skeletons, so our prospective earnings were looking pretty bad. As a result, we had assigned Haruka and Natsuki to immediately delete most of the undead monsters with their magic. I had also used some of them as targets to practice my own Light Magic. Using that strategy, we blazed our way through the monsters until we got to the area outside the boss room at the end of the sixth floor.

"I get a bad feeling from something in the middle of the boss room, though," said Yuki. "Is the level of my Scout skill too low?"

"Nah, I also have a bad feeling, so your Scout skill is working fine," I said. "I'm pretty sure the boss that's awaiting us is much stronger than anything we've fought so far."

In fact, it felt like it was even stronger than a skeleton king. It seemed way too strong for the boss of a floor that only contained normal skeletons and zombies, but the Scout skill had helped us out a lot of times in the past, so I felt fairly sure that it wasn't wrong now.

"The boss is probably an undead monster too, right? I really hope it isn't a zombie type of monster," said Yuki.

"I don't like stinky monsters," said Metea.

"I think that's a faint hope," I said. "We've been encountering so many

zombies.”

“Well, I hope I don’t faint from throwing up,” said Touya.

“That’s a different kind of faint, Touya!” I exclaimed. “This isn’t the time for joking around!”

I mean, I want to puke too, but I can’t dwell on it. Zombies smell really bad.

“For your sense of humor, Touya, I’d like to reward you with the privilege of opening the door to the boss room,” said Haruka.

Touya chuckled. “I open all the doors anyway!”

He placed his hands on the door and opened it. Immediately, we saw a large monster that looked like a reptile. It was rotting just like a zombie.

“Huh?!” Touya exclaimed.

I couldn’t hold myself back from yelling in fear. “Wait, is that a zombie dragon?!” Based on what we’d read, zombie dragons were way stronger than us.

Touya fell silent for a moment before saying, “Relax, Nao. It’s actually a zombie lizard.”

“I would say I can’t relax facing this kind of monster, but I guess you have a point!” In fact, I would normally have felt uneasy about facing any monster I’d never heard of, but it didn’t seem likely that this lizard was more dangerous than a zombie dragon. I used my Third Eye skill on it.

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  Race: Zombie Lizard
Condition: Healthy
Skills: Charge, Bad Breath, Venomous Teeth
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The length of its body from head to tail was about six meters. It looked like a Western-style dragon, albeit uglier, but apparently it was actually nothing more than a lizard. The majority of its body seemed to have decayed and rotted away, and it looked like it might shed its remaining flesh and become a skeleton at any point during a battle. Its skills sounded quite dangerous as well. The

rotten odor was bad enough, but the combination of Bad Breath and Charge seemed like it would be an absolute nightmare for us.

“Yikes, I don’t want to get anywhere near that monster.” Touya pinched his nose and stepped back from the door.

Yuki nodded as she, too, stepped back to make room for our experts in dealing with the undead. “Yeah, I completely agree. Haruka, Natsuki, we’re counting on you two to take care of this!”

“Okay,” they replied in unison. “*Purification!*”

Even as the zombie lizard began crawling toward us, their spells flew at it. In this world’s dungeons, there was no system that compelled you to enter the boss room; it was possible to attack the boss from outside if you had ranged attacks that could reach it. On the other hand, there weren’t any restrictions on the boss’s movements either, and apparently some bosses could pursue you outside of the boss room. In this case, however, there was almost no way the zombie lizard could have fit through the door given its sheer size. Its body was slowly vanishing around the edges due to the double Purification spells from Haruka and Natsuki, but it was still crawling toward us.

“This is using up a lot of our mana,” said Haruka.

“Mm, but we should probably try to finish it off in one go,” said Natsuki.

Based on what Haruka and Natsuki had told me in the past, the potency of the Purification spell scaled with the amount of mana that you used, just like other spells. For example, if you used it at normal strength, it could clean dirty clothes decently well, but if you used twice the ordinary amount of mana, the clothes would turn sparkling white. The spell worked the same way against undead monsters. A normal-strength Purification spell would make common zombies disappear instantly, but it would take some time to purify stronger undead monsters unless you used a lot more mana.

Haruka and Natsuki had definitely used more mana than usual this time, but it didn’t seem to be enough to hold off the zombie lizard. However, neither was the lizard strong enough to repel their magic.

It seemed like Haruka and Natsuki were intensifying their mana output, and

the zombie lizard started to vanish even faster. In the end, the zombie lizard was completely purified and vanished before it could even move two meters from its initial position, and a pretty big magicite dropped to the ground.

“Whew, it was a bit exhausting to purify an undead monster of that size,” said Haruka.

“It feels like I’ve used up about a quarter of my entire mana pool,” said Natsuki.

Haruka and Natsuki both breathed sighs of relief. It was definitely more exhausting to use a lot of mana at once versus spreading it out over time, even if the total amount of mana expended was the same in both cases. Depending on how much you’d lost, you could even feel nauseous.

“Haruka-san, Natsuki-san, thank you very much for working very hard to purify the zombie lizard,” said Mary.

“The way you purified the giant zombie lizard was amazing!” said Metea.

Haruka and Natsuki smiled at those words of praise, and then they looked at the fallen magicite.

“Thanks! I don’t think it would have been easy for our party if we’d had to deal with a lot of zombie lizards at once, however,” said Haruka. “Nao’s Purification isn’t sufficient to hold back undead monsters as strong as zombie lizards.”

“Mm. Haruka and I can probably stop one zombie lizard each, but any more would be a bit too much,” said Natsuki.

“Oh, I guess that means Touya will get covered in rotten meat if we ever encounter three or more zombie lizards at once.” Yuki grinned and gave Touya a big thumbs-up. “Good luck, Touya!”

Touya pointed to himself with a look of shock on his face. “Me?! By myself?! You can deal with zombie lizards too, right, Yuki?!”

“Nah, I don’t think I can deal with a monster that size with a kodachi,” said Yuki. “My magic isn’t really an option either. For example, if I used something like the Fireball spell, it might explode and scatter juices and rotten meat all

over the place, you know?”

“Ugh...”

Everyone grimaced at Yuki’s words; we were all clearly imagining the same scenario. The Fireball spell detonated after landing on a target, so Yuki was right that it would make a huge mess. It wouldn’t be an issue if you used the Fire Arrow spell instead, but that spell could pierce all the way through its target, and I felt like punching additional holes in the body of a zombie lizard probably wouldn’t be very effective. In addition, zombie monsters stank when burned, so it would be ideal just to avoid using normal Fire Magic spells against them.

“The same restrictions on magic apply to me,” I said. “We’ll probably have to rely on Touya to handle extra zombie lizards until I learn the Holy Fire spell.”

“Bro, your weapon is a spear! You’ll help me out, right, Nao?!”

Touya firmly grabbed my shoulders, but I just smiled at him. “Oh, Touya, there’s a magicite on the ground. I’ll go retrieve it, ha ha!”

“What’s with the forced smile?! What’s with the forced laugh?!”

I slipped past Touya to retrieve the magicite from the ground and then walked toward the door that had appeared at the back of the room.

“Whew, I’m glad that’s finally over,” I said. “We’ll probably be past the undead area of the dungeon once we venture through the door.”

“Hey, don’t ignore my question, Nao!” Touya shouted after me. “Also, you should really work on leveling your Light Magic!”

It sounded like someone was mumbling behind me, but I felt fairly sure that it was just my imagination. I investigated the door to make sure it wasn’t booby trapped before opening it to see what was ahead.

“Yep, there’s a small room beyond the boss room, just like I expected,” I said. “Oh, nice, there’s a treasure chest too.”

“A treasure chest! I’ll open it! I’m glad that this shitty floor actually has something nice!” Metea dashed over to me; she seemed quite happy.

Mary followed behind, scolding her younger sister. “Met, I told you not to use vulgar words like that!”

A sigh of resignation escaped Touya's lips when he saw their reactions. "...Fine, I guess I'll drop the subject for now. I'll just push you into the fray when it comes down to it."

Whoa, I don't like what I just heard from you, Touya. I guess I better watch my back whenever we encounter a large number of zombies.

"Now, now, Touya-kun, we'll all do our best to help out," said Natsuki. "I'm fairly sure that Nao-kun is just playing around with you, right?"

"Yeah, I was just joking," I said. "I'll do what I can, Touya."

Touya sighed; his shoulders slumped. "I guess I'll take your word for it. It's really painful for a beastman like myself to fight zombies, you know?"

It was true that I had been joking, but it was also true that I wanted to avoid close combat against zombies if possible. With that in mind, I probably had to work on either leveling up my Light Magic or Fire Magic to learn the Holy Fire spell as soon as possible. Time Magic was a higher priority at the moment, however.

"The smell of zombies is pretty painful for elves as well," said Haruka. "Should I try to make something like a mask that can deodorize the air?"

"Huh? Can you actually make something like that, Haruka? If you can, then I would love to have one," said Touya.

"Yeah, I think so. Right, Yuki?"

"Mm, it's possible. However, you have to install that function in a normal mask instead of something completely closed off like a gas mask, so I don't know how effective it will actually be."

According to Yuki, it was similar to spraying an air freshener on a piece of cloth.

"I-I'd like to have something like that too, if possible," said Mary.

"Yeah, zombie monsters smell really bad!" said Metea.

"Please make something like that!" Touya exclaimed. "I'll pay all of the costs out of my own pocket money!"

“Nah, we’ll all use the masks, so the costs will fall under shared expenses,” said Haruka. “In any case, I’ll work on making some soon.”

“Thanks, Haruka! Much love!”

Touya tried to hug Haruka to express his gratitude, but she casually raised one arm to ward him off, then walked toward me. “Yeah, yeah, sure,” she said with a laugh.

I was standing near the treasure chest with Natsuki and Metea at my side.

“So, was there anything good inside of the treasure chest?” Haruka asked.

“There was a lamp! It looks useful!” said Metea. “Oh, wait, our party doesn’t use lamps...”

“Mm, we use the Light spell to see,” said Natsuki. “I hope it’s not just a normal lamp.”

“Yeah, we don’t have any use for a normal lamp,” I said.

Nothing about the lamp stood out, but I had some hopes simply because it was a first-time reward for defeating the boss of this floor. Mary and Metea said that back when they had lived in Kelg, they had lived without lights most of the time; when they absolutely needed one, they would use oil plates or torches made of kindling.

“Man, there’s no return device here, huh?” I muttered after looking around the room.

Haruka patted me on the back. “We’re only on the sixth floor of the dungeon, Nao. It hasn’t even been two weeks since we first entered this place, you know?”

“Mm. However, the intervals between boss rooms have been quite short, so we might actually find the return device soon,” said Natsuki.

“Oh yeah, I had similar thoughts,” said Yuki. “There was a boss room on the fourth floor, and there was one here on the sixth floor, so the boss rooms have been more frequent than the books said.”

According to the books we’d purchased, powerful boss monsters were located throughout a dungeon, and you had to defeat them in order to explore

deeper. Usually, you would only run into them once every ten floors, but there were some dungeons with bosses every five floors. There were also dungeons with shorter intervals between boss rooms, but they seemed to be much rarer than the other kinds. Slain bosses would respawn after some time, so you couldn't simply bypass them—unless another adventurer had slain them earlier and they had yet to respawn.

"There have been three boss rooms so far if we include the room with the skeleton king on the first floor," I said. "I wonder if this is a special type of dungeon..."

Hmm. Yeah, I guess Natsuki might be right—there might actually be a return device located on a shallower floor of the dungeon. For now, I'm not worried about food. I hope nobody else will end up stressing out too much.

"Metea, Mary, are you two feeling okay so far?" I asked. "We've been in this dungeon for quite a while..."

"I'm perfectly fine," Metea replied. "I've been able to eat a lot of food and stay clean, and the cots that we sleep on are comfortable too."

"I feel fine as well," said Mary. "It's been a while since we've gotten any sunlight, but it doesn't really bother me. To be honest, our time in this dungeon has been more comfortable than our lives back in Kelg..."

I had asked the sisters about how they felt because they weren't as accustomed to camping outside on an adventure as the rest of us, but their responses were very reassuring. In a way, the sisters were probably tougher and better at adapting to different environments than the five of us. We had all led pretty soft lives on modern-day Earth.

"I'm pretty sure we're nowhere near our limits." Touya grinned. "After all, our lives inside of this dungeon are much better than the average adventurer's, and it's all thanks to the cots that I made!"

"What's with the bragging all of a sudden, Touya?!" I laughed and then shrugged. "Well, I mean, the cots *are* comfortable to sleep in, so I guess you have the right to brag."

I had been half joking when I praised him, but then Haruka and Yuki joined in.

“Mm, sleeping on the cots consumes much less energy than sleeping on the ground,” said Haruka.

“The cots aren’t as good as our actual beds back at home, but they’re a pretty decent substitute,” said Yuki. “Good job, Touya! I’m impressed by your excellent craftsmanship!”

“H-Huh? What is this, Talk Up Touya Day?” He looked at us warily. “What’s the catch?”

Yuki smiled when she noticed his uncertainty. “Oh, it’s nothing at all, Touya! Look at my cute smile—there’s nothing suspicious about it, right?”

“R-Really? W-Well, I did work very hard to make these costs, so—”

“I’m definitely not just flattering you so you’re willing to take care of any future zombie lizards for us, nope!” Yuki stuck her tongue out at Touya.

“Ugh, I knew it was going to be something like that!” Touya stamped his feet in an exaggerated manner. “Damn it!”

The rest of us laughed loudly when we saw his reaction.

When we descended to the seventh floor of the dungeon, it turned out to be a cave level, something we hadn’t seen in a while.

“Ugh, it’s gonna be a pain to map out this kind of floor again,” said Yuki. “Well, I leveled up my Mapping skill, so it’s a bit easier for me now, but still...”

“Oh, your Mapping skill is already Level 2?” Haruka asked. “Actually, maybe ‘already’ isn’t the right word.”

“Yeah, I’ve mapped out six whole dungeon floors. I’d feel sad if all of that wasn’t enough to level up my skill,” said Yuki.

Right, we’ve left all of the mapping work to Yuki. Hmm. “Yuki...I deeply regret having foisted this burden upon you.”

“Please, sir, think nothing of it,” said Yuki, but then she cocked her head and looked at me. In a more normal tone, she added, “I think you should learn the Mapping skill too, though.”

She was right that Mapping was the kind of skill that all of us would normally have needed to learn, but...

“Well, I doubt we’ll ever split up, so I haven’t really felt the need to try and learn the Mapping skill,” I said.

Yuki was also the best suited for the mapping role in terms of efficiency, and because of her physical position in our party whenever we were exploring. I had tried to come up with a way to imply all of that, but Yuki just covered her mouth with her hand and laughed.

“Oh my, is that your way of proposing to me? You’re saying that you’ll never leave my side for the rest of your life, Nao? Well, if you insist, I’m not exactly against the idea—”

“No, that’s not what I meant at all!” I interjected. “Don’t put words in my mouth like that!”

“Huh? I was just reading between the lines,” said Yuki. “Did I read wrong?”

“Yeah, you did!”

“Hmm, I’m not so sure about that.” Yuki cast a glance over my shoulder, and her face suddenly turned serious. “But actually, that’s enough playing around for now.”

I turned around out of curiosity, but all I saw was Haruka smiling serenely at me. *Hmm. I probably shouldn’t ask any questions, yeah.*

“In any case, we’re in a different environment now, so we need to be on alert against different kinds of monsters as well,” I said.

“Yep. I’m really glad that the air here doesn’t smell rotten at all. I’m looking forward to seeing what kinds of foes we run into!” Touya grinned and put his hands on the hilt of the sword he wore at his waist. He was probably excited because he hadn’t gotten to enjoy a proper battle on the previous two floors. Mary and Metea vigorously nodded when they heard Touya’s words, so they must’ve felt the same way.

“I see. Well, I have some good news. There are some foes approaching us right now, and they’re coming pretty fast.”

My Scout skill had detected them approaching rapidly, so I told everyone to prepare themselves for combat. Not too long after we'd gotten readied ourselves, something popped out of the passageway ahead.

"Oh, hey, it looks like some relatives of yours have dropped by unexpectedly, Touya," I said.

"Huh?! I'm definitely not related to those monsters!"

A pack of six wolves had appeared in the passageway ahead. One in particular looked slightly bigger than the others; it must have been the leader of the pack. The wolves were dashing toward us, but they slowed down the moment they entered the area of Natsuki's Light spell. Their fur was so black that they blended into the shadows of the dungeon, and their footsteps were very quiet. They were fast too, so they seemed like they would be difficult foes to contend with. I used my Third Eye skill to obtain some information.

```
  Race: Howling Wolf
Condition: Healthy
Skills: Bite, Claw Strike, Howl
```

"These wolves have the Howl ski—"

"Awooo!"

Before I could get the words out of my mouth, the leader of the pack howled at us, and we all froze in place.

"Grrrrr!"

Touya roared back, and the wolves flinched.

"I knew you guys were related!" I said.

"Look, you're wrong about that!"

Touya must have used his Roar skill on the howling wolves. It seemed to have functioned the same way as their Howl. If my guess was right, both skills made your foes flinch in fear. I felt like the skills could be highly useful in certain situations, but Touya hadn't had many opportunities to use his Roar; our party

as a whole wasn't really fond of it. It didn't harm Touya's allies, but it was still really loud, and the echoes would have been annoying inside a dungeon. However, the main reason that Touya hadn't used the Roar skill was because we usually worked in the woods, where a loud voice would attract other monsters. A skill that made it easier to defeat monsters would be pointless if it attracted reinforcements to their side. Additional monsters wouldn't be an issue if your objective was to earn experience points, but they would be a hindrance while we were gathering precious wood or other materials.

"They're coming!" I exclaimed.

It seemed that retreat wasn't an option for monsters. The six howling wolves dashed at us again, two of them toward Touya and Natsuki on the front line. As for the rest...

"Huh?!"

The remaining four wolves dashed along the walls, which were extremely smooth and perpendicular. *Hold on, are they aiming for Mary and Metea?!* It was logical that predators would target the weakest individuals among their prey, but there was no way the rest of us would allow them to do that. I swiftly shifted over next to Metea, and Yuki covered Mary. While the two of us were still in motion, Haruka got off an arrow, which struck one of the wolves right in the middle of the forehead.

"The howling wolves are a bit nimble, but that's about it," said Haruka. "They don't seem very challenging at all."

"I see. In that case, we can probably use their fur for stuff like coats," said Yuki. "Mary, try your best to kill the wolves without damaging their fur!"

"Huh?! O-Okay, I'll do my best not to cut them!"

The howling wolf that Haruka had slain was one of the two that had been dashing toward Yuki and Mary. Yuki seemed to be leaving the remaining one to Mary. *Hmm, I guess I can let Metea try to take on one of the two wolves that are heading our way.*

"I'll aim for the neck!" yelled Metea.

"Sure, but remember to be careful, Metea," I said. "As we explore this floor,

we'll probably encounter more howling wolves anyway, so there will be plenty of opportunities to slay them." As I offered her that warning, I bludgeoned a wolf to death with the butt of my spear.

Metea readied her kodachi for battle. It was an ideal weapon for her—she was a very nimble fighter—but in this instance, I felt a bit uneasy about the fact that she had to get within close range of her opponent in order to attack.

"Yeah, I know! Hyaah!" Metea stepped forward and swung her kodachi right before the remaining howling wolf was about to make contact with her. Blood gushed from its neck.

Metea's timing had been perfect, but the wound looked a bit shallow. The howling wolf staggered as it climbed down from the wall, but I swept its legs with my spear before it could recover, then pinned it to the floor with the butt of my spear.

"Your contribution to the battle was acceptable, but there's room for improvement," I said. "Do you want to deal the finishing blow?"

"Ugh. I'll do better next time."

Metea pouted a bit as she walked over and finished off the wolf. She had fulfilled her role in the party just fine, but it seemed like she felt a bit unhappy about the fact that she hadn't been able to slay the wolf in a single strike.

"That was the last one," said Natsuki. "I don't imagine howling wolves will pose much threat to us once we've become accustomed to fighting them."

I turned around when I heard Natsuki's words. It looked like everyone else had already slain the howling wolves they'd been facing off against, including Touya, who had gone one-on-one against the leader of the pack. The battle was over, but...

Yuki looked around. "You don't get a passing grade, Touya!" she said, thrusting a finger at him. "Yours is the messiest!"

And indeed, the howling wolf that Touya had slain looked like it had been cut open all the way from its neck to its belly. Yuki was right that Touya's work was unacceptable; there was basically no usable fur.

But Touya didn’t seem too pleased with Yuki’s complaints. “Seriously? I cut it before you even mentioned their fur. That shouldn’t count, right?”

“No, it still counts! Before slaying monsters, adventurers should always think about the value of the materials they can get!” said Yuki. “You need to set a good example for the new members of our party!”

“Oh yeah, I guess you’re right about that. The fur does seem pretty valuable.” A dry laugh escaped Touya’s lips, so he had probably only now used his Appraisal skill on the wolves.

“It’s a different story if a monster is dangerous enough that we can’t afford to be picky about how we slay it, but that doesn’t really apply here, does it, Touya?” Yuki asked.

“Yeah, sorry. I’ll keep that in mind for next time,” Touya replied. “However, what’s the point of turning their fur into a coat? It’s pitch black, so I’m kind of confused.”

“I feel like black fur coats would be nice,” said Haruka. “By the way, what’s the value of this magicite, Touya?”

Haruka handed Touya a magicite that she had extracted from the leader of the pack, and he nodded to himself after using the Appraisal skill on it. “This one’s worth twenty-two hundred Rea. The other magicites should be worth a bit less... Yeah, the other ones are worth about the same as magicites from zombies.”

“The amount of time it takes us to slay monsters and the discomfort we feel while fighting them are both important factors that we need to take into account,” I said. “We can use the Purification skill to wipe out zombies instantly, so if we can put up with the smell, we can earn money more efficiently that way.”

“Howling wolves don’t stink at all, but they do take more time to fight,” said Yuki. “Their fur is another potential source of money, though.”

“Those wolves are certainly more than the average adventurer could handle,” said Haruka.

Mary nodded. “Mm, I feel the same way. The howling wolves were very hard

to detect, so we could easily get ambushed, and their howls were dangerous too."

The howling wolves could sneak up on their prey and use the Howl skill to stop it in its tracks. Then they would go for the jugular. At least, that was my educated guess about their hunting behavior, and I felt fairly confident in it. The Howl skill hadn't been very effective against my party, but any skill that could cause us to freeze in place for even a fraction of a second in the middle of a battle was extremely dangerous. Given the danger it posed to adventurers at our level, the skill would probably have been very effective against the average adventurer from Laffan.

"So far, you haven't really used your Roar skill very often, but if it's similar to the Howl skill, then is it actually pretty useful?" I asked, glancing at Touya.

I felt like you could resist the effects of the Howl skill if you were ready for it, but if a stronger foe used it unexpectedly at a critical moment in a battle, that could make the difference between life and death. It would probably be the same if Touya used his Roar skill in that kind of situation.

Touya's only response was a shrug. "It's not that easy to use the Roar skill during melee combat, Nao. You have to focus in order to use it, and it gets harder to breathe when you raise your voice. Imagine if mages like yourself had to use magic while engaging in melee combat."

"Oh yeah, that definitely sounds like it would be hard to pull it off," I said.

It wasn't just a matter of raising your voice either; it sounded like you had to build up something like mana in order to use the Roar skill effectively. I knew from experience how difficult it was to cast spells while moving; if it were easy to pull off, I would definitely have been wielding my spear while casting Fire Arrows with my free hand.

"Well, being able to make our foes flinch for a bit at the beginning of a battle is useful, so should I practice my Roar skill for that purpose?" Touya asked.

"Hmm, I'm not really sure," I replied.

"It doesn't change the fact that the Roar skill is only useful under certain conditions," said Haruka.

She was completely right, and even if we learned to put up with the sound, it could still attract other monsters. Attracting other monsters hadn't been an issue back when we mainly fought tusk boars—there had never been many monsters in the vicinity—and some of our most powerful foes, like the wipe bear, were technically animals rather than monsters. Animals wouldn't travel long distances just to attack people, after all. In contrast, attacking people seemed to be all that monsters lived for; they would home in on anyone they detected.

"Another issue is finding an area where you can actually practice the Roar skill," said Yuki. "We have a very large yard, but from our neighbors' perspectives, practicing there would be noise pollution."

"Yeah, barking dogs are an easy way to get on the bad side of your neighbors," I said.

"I'm not a dog!"

Yuki nodded to herself and brushed off Touya's objection. "Mm, yeah, your Roar skill is definitely louder than a dog's bark."

It was true that the Roar skill would be louder than a barking dog, but even more significantly, it could inflict psychic pain, so it would definitely drive our neighbors to file some complaints.

"Let's leave it up to Touya to decide whether or not to work on leveling up the Roar skill," said Haruka. "However, Touya, if you do decide to practice it, you can't do so in our yard. I'd like to get along with our neighbors."

"Mm. We've paid for the house we're currently living in," said Natsuki.

"Yeah, we can't exactly move out easily," said Yuki.

"Ugh, that's definitely true," said Touya. "Fine, fine. I'll think about it."

It wasn't like the girls were deliberately making fun of Touya for no good reason, and he seemed to be aware of that; he grudgingly nodded.

★★★★★★★★★

Ten days had passed since we first reached the seventh floor of the dungeon, but we still hadn't found the stairs that led to the eighth. The mapping had gone

smoothly thanks to Yuki, but there was no end in sight; the seventh floor was bigger and wider than any of the previous floors. In addition, we had yet to find any sign of a return device.

By this point, the members of an average adventurer party would probably have started getting irritated with each other due to stress, but we were actually enjoying a barbecue.

“Hell yeah, this is delicious!” said Touya.

“The meat is melting in my mouth!” said Metea.

“I-I can’t believe that meat like this actually exists,” said Mary.

“Nao-kun, that slice of meat looks like it’s ready,” said Natsuki.

“Don’t just eat meat, Nao,” said Haruka. “You need to eat your vegetables as well.”

“Man, I wish vegetables didn’t taste so bitter in this world,” I said.

“Yeah, I feel the same way,” said Yuki. “The bitterness definitely stands out a bit if you only use light seasoning.”

We were taking our time enjoying tonight’s dinner. We’d decided to have a barbecue because of a monster we had encountered for the first time earlier that afternoon. It was called a picow, and it looked very similar to an overweight cow with stumpy legs. It was only about fifty centimeters long, but it had a single sharp horn on its head, and it was actually somewhat dangerous: despite its appearance, it could charge at you pretty fast. However, it wasn’t anywhere near as fast as a stab rabbit, and even the sisters could easily dodge it if they were ready for it. At first, the sisters had used words like “cute” to describe its amusing appearance, but when it attacked us, they had mercilessly decapitated it. *Hmm, yeah, I have a feeling this is another thing that I shouldn’t comment about.*

According to the information in the books we owned, the only useful materials you could get from a picow were its horn and meat. The horn looked similar to a blackish ore, and it was worth a decent amount of money, but apparently the meat wasn’t that popular; it was extremely fatty, and you couldn’t obtain very much from a single picow, so they weren’t a great source

of money either. I had assumed that we would toss it into our magic bags in order to gut it later, once we returned home, but Haruka had suddenly brought up the idea of eating picow beef for a change of pace.

So far, we'd been eating dishes that the girls had stored in our magic bags. None of us had any reason to object to Haruka's idea, so we had dressed the picow right away. As it turned out, the meat tasted absolutely fantastic. It was definitely fatty, but it was also soft and tender. People back in Japan who enjoyed marbled meat would definitely have enjoyed picow. According to Natsuki, picow beef tasted very similar to expensive Wagyu; she said cooking it on a teppan would be even better than barbecuing it. It wasn't something that you could really eat in large amounts, but if you grilled it on a net over charcoal, the fat was reduced to the perfect level.

There was one downside to picow meat, however.

"Man, I wish we could get more meat from one picow," I said.

"Mm, they are rather small," said Natsuki.

After you removed a picow's internal organs, hide, subcutaneous fat, and bones, there was practically nothing left. The marbled meat was even scarcer; a big eater like Touya could probably have devoured all of it himself, given that the entire cow was only about fifty centimeters long. Grilling out some of the fat reduced the volume of the meat even further. All of those facts together probably helped to explain why picow beef wasn't very popular. But the taste, at least, definitely wasn't an issue, and Mary and Metea in particular seemed to love the marbled cuts.

"Did you like this meat, Metea-chan?" Natsuki asked.

Metea nodded, beaming. "Yeah! I actually like this dungeon now! I wouldn't mind naming it 'the Meat Dungeon' or something like that!"

Just a little while ago, Metea had been frustrated with this dungeon due to all of the goblins and undead monsters—and the small number of treasure chests. The rest of us had been equally unimpressed, so we all understood why Metea was pleased now.

"I don't know if a name like that is a good idea," I said. "For one thing, it might

attract other adventurers to this dungeon.”

Metea swiftly changed her mind. “Huh?! That’s no good! Let’s stick with ‘Summer Resort Dungeon’!”

Mary laughed awkwardly and patted Metea on the head. “Met, please don’t just throw out weird ideas.”

The rest of us laughed as well.

“Tee hee. I feel like it’s perfectly fine to keep the meat for ourselves if it isn’t worth much money,” said Natsuki. “Red meat has its uses, after all.”

“I’m down for that!” said Touya. “I wouldn’t want to eat marbled meat every day, but it’s nice from time to time!”

“Mm, I don’t see any reason to object to that idea,” said Haruka.

“I’ll hunt more and more!” Metea cried. “Let’s stock up on meat so we can eat it whenever we want to!”

My party had arrived at the conclusion that orc meat and picow meat were both delicious in different ways, so our plan was to keep the picow meat we obtained for ourselves. At this point, we were all at peace with being trapped in a dungeon.

“By the way, how’s the teleportation magic coming along, Nao?” Touya asked.

Oh, come on, let me savor this barbecue a bit longer, Touya.

“Ugh. Well, I’ve gotten to the point where I can teleport a short distance, but I still don’t think I’m good enough to get us all out of here.”

Normally, once you learned the Teleportation spell, the Area Teleportation spell would have been the next step. The issue for me was that I couldn’t test whether it was actually possible to teleport outside of the dungeon. If I could teleport back and forth between the inside and outside of the dungeon, there was no problem, but if that wasn’t possible, I would be abandoning the rest of my party. With that in mind, I could only test teleportation magic after I had learned how to use the Area Teleportation spell.

“Mm, I guess that’s true,” said Haruka. “What about you, Yuki?”

“Me? Well, I’m not as good as Nao is,” said Yuki. “We’ve practiced teleportation magic together, but...”

“Yeah, the most that Yuki can manage right now is to teleport to a nearby passageway,” I said.

I could teleport a few hundred meters away from our campsite, but I couldn’t really test farther than that; it would have been dangerous to wander around alone in a dungeon. As a result, I had started practicing the Area Teleportation spell, but I was only able to teleport myself and Yuki to a spot within my line of sight.

“Well, that sounds like decent progress for a month’s worth of practice,” said Haruka.

“Mm, I believe it is,” said Natsuki. “Time Magic seems to be an exceptionally difficult form to learn, much less master.”

Yeah, Time Magic really isn’t easy, so please don’t put too much pressure on Yuki and me.

“How are things going on your end, Haruka, Natsuki?” I asked. “You’ve been practicing magic too, haven’t you?”

“Mm. There isn’t much we can do without making any noise, after all,” said Haruka.

Our party had long since developed a shift system for lookout duty. Now that Mary and Metea had joined us, the responsibility cycled between three groups. The shifts were structured so that each group could secure at least six hours of sleep, meaning each shift lasted about three hours. The only problem was that there wasn’t much to do during those shifts. If the people on lookout duty made a lot of noise, no one else would be able to sleep in peace. Realistically, the only thing you could do on watch was train in silence or read a book. As a result, most of us chose to kill time by practicing magic.

Haruka and Natsuki glanced at each other and laughed awkwardly.

“We’ve primarily been practicing Light Magic,” said Haruka. “However...”

“We don’t know whether or not our efforts have been successful,” said

Natsuki. “All I can say is that it feels as though we’ve made some progress.”

“Oh yeah, that makes sense to me,” I said. “With Light Magic, it’s definitely hard to tell if you’ve made progress without seeing actual results. Man, the Light Orb was really useful for that purpose.”

Purification was a spell with fairly obvious effects, but there were a lot of spells that had no effect if you used them on healthy people, such as Level 7 Remove Curse, Level 8 Cure Addiction, and Level 9 Cure Insanity.

“By the way, Nao-kun, we’ve used a bunch of spells on the rest of you while you were asleep, including Mind Heal, Resist Disease, Bless, and Rest,” said Natsuki. “Did you happen to notice?”

“Wait, really? No, I didn’t notice at all.”

Bless improved your resistance to negative status effects such as poison. Rest enhanced the physical and mental benefits of sleep, which in turn made you quicker to recover from injury and disease.

“Oh, is that why none of us have been feeling irritated even though we’re stuck in this dungeon?” Touya asked.

“Mm, I bet it is,” I replied. “Our lives here have been pretty comfortable, but we’re still stuck for now.”

None of us had exceptional mental fortitude, so it would make perfect sense if magic had helped us maintain a degree of serenity. Being trapped underground for a month with no idea of whether it was even possible to escape would cause a severe emotional crisis for the average person.

“Wait, some of those spells are Level 6 and 7, aren’t they?” Yuki asked. “Have the two of you learned to use them?”

“No, we’re still just practicing,” said Haruka. “We don’t know if our spells are working properly or not.”

“Mm. Healing spells aren’t so simple that they function without any issues as long as you can cast them,” said Natsuki.

There was a big difference between being able to cast a spell and being able to use it proficiently. That was true of all types of spells, but the disparity was

especially wide in the cases of Light and Time Magic. For example, depending on the proficiency of the mage, the effects of the Regenerate spell could vary from healing a broken or slightly malformed finger to regenerating an entire missing arm. At first, I had only been able to teleport to a place within my line of sight, but I could teleport much farther now due to the fact that I had become much more proficient at using the spell. With all of that in mind, you couldn't really call yourself a master Light mage the moment you got your Light Magic to Level 10. It would be way more accurate to call yourself someone who had mastered the basics of Light Magic.

"Mary, Metea, the two of you have been studying too, right?" I asked.

"Yes," said Mary. "We've been learning a lot from everyone, and we've also been reading the books that you bought for us."

"Yeah, we're studying very hard so we can learn to read!" Metea put in.

Haruka smiled as she patted Metea's head. "I'm amazed by how ambitious and eager you are to improve yourself, Metea." Then she cast a dubious glance in Touya's direction. "You, on the other hand..."

"Well, it's not like I've been sitting on my ass and spacing out the entire time," said Touya. "It's true that I can't use magic, but I've been reading books and exercising. In fact, I've gotten my Enhanced Muscles skill all the way to Level 4."

Actually, I had no idea what Touya had been doing—we had been assigned different groups for lookout duty—but it sounded like he had been working hard too. However, based on the looks that Haruka and Natsuki were giving Touya, they seemed to have a different opinion.

"I've been feeling a bit annoyed whenever I see you exercising nearby, Touya," said Haruka.

"Oh, come on, I've tried really hard not to make any noise while working out!"

"That's not the issue," said Haruka. "You were *grinning* while doing handstand push-ups..."

"Oh yeah, I wouldn't really want to see that myself," I said. It would definitely have been kind of annoying to watch.

“Mm, I feel the same way,” said Natsuki. “You looked like you were working hard, Touya-kun, so I didn’t say anything at the time, but even so...”

“Ugh...”

Natsuki and Haruka alternated pairing up with Touya for lookout duty. That was probably why he looked a bit disheartened after Natsuki joined Haruka in voicing those words of disapproval. *Oh, man, don’t look at Mary and Metea right now, Touya. You definitely don’t want to see the reactions of the other people who periodically get grouped with you for lookout duty.* On a side note, Yuki and I were always together during lookout duty, since we had to practice Time Magic together, so she had yet to witness Touya’s embarrassing behavior.

“Well, I mean, wouldn’t that make you happy too—getting to the point of doing something you could never have dreamed of doing before?!” Touya exclaimed. “There’s no way I could ever have done that kind of thing back on Earth.”

“Oh, hmm.” *Yeah, as a guy, I guess I can somewhat relate to your feelings, Touya.*

But apparently none of the girls shared my sympathy.

“I used the Purification spell on you from time to time so that you wouldn’t get too sweaty, Touya,” said Haruka.

“Oh, yes, I did the same,” said Natsuki.

“Wait, what?! Seriously?!” Touya looked like he was feeling even more disheartened at the girls’ casual honesty. “I really appreciated it, but I had no idea that was the reason!”

Haruka cut short his reaction by holding up one hand. “*Cure Insanity.*”

Touya’s head glowed dimly for a while after Haruka cast the spell. He looked somewhat surprised. “Oh, whoa, I actually do feel kind of relieved now. I had no idea you could use the Cure Insanity spell that way.”

“I used the Cure Insanity spell as an experiment, but it seems to have worked,” said Haruka. “It’s good to know that the spell can be used to calm someone’s mental state.”

It seemed that the Cure Insanity spell was effective against all kinds of emotional ups and downs. I felt like the chances of any of us suffering from mental illness were quite low, but the Cure Insanity spell would still be really useful if it could cure negative emotions such as uneasiness or fear.

“Oh, did you say all that stuff to provoke me so you could carry out this experiment?” Touya asked.

Touya was clearly hoping that Haruka had been joking earlier, but she dashed his hopes without any mercy. “No, I merely voiced my honest opinion.”

“Ack!”

“Well, Touya-kun, we were half joking,” said Natsuki. “The experiment was more important.”

Natsuki, you know that also means you were half serious, right? If you were trying to cheer him up, then I feel like that was a poor choice of words.

“Cure Insanity isn’t useful in most situations, but we’re currently stuck inside an enclosed space,” said Natsuki. “That’s why we’ve been working hard to practice this spell—in case someone starts to lose their mind.”

“I’d like to believe that we’ll be fine, but I’ve seen plenty of disaster movies where everything starts to crumble after one person loses their mind due to stress,” said Haruka.

“Oh yeah, that’s pretty common in horror and thriller movies too,” I said.

In a movie, a character who yelled something like “I’m out of here!” before heading off on their own would either be the first to die, return acting weird, or put the other characters in a dangerous situation. My party had been fine so far, but a dungeon was similar to the settings of some disaster movies, so there was a chance that one of us would eventually lose their mind and surrender to despair. It made sense that Haruka and Natsuki had teased Touya in order to confirm that the Cure Insanity spell could be used to calm someone down.

“Mm, it would be bad for us if Touya suddenly unleashed his primal self.” Yuki made a fist with her thumb inserted between the first two fingers suggestively. “He is a beastman, after all!”

Touya slapped Yuki's hands out of the air. "There's no way I would do something like that!"

However, for some reason, Yuki glanced at me too and grinned.

"Nah, you never know what might happen under extreme conditions," said Yuki. "If you do unleash your primal self, Nao, then make sure you take the proper steps one at a time."

"Huh?! What do you mean by proper steps?!"

"Well, you know, the first thing you should do is confess your love," said Yuki. "Tee hee, did you happen to think of something else?"

"No, I didn't think of anything at all!"

Yuki had a playful smile on her face as she inched closer to me, but I pushed her away, then sighed to myself. *I mean, yeah, it's true that there is someone that I feel romantically attracted to, but what if I get rejected after confessing my love? I'm pretty sure that would create an awkward atmosphere for everyone, so it's not an easy decision to make, especially since everyone's in the same boat, fighting for survival in this different world.*

Luckily for us, everyone in our party was still very young. Most adventurers got married fairly late compared to the average for civilians in this world, so it was a possibility I could keep in mind for the future. Things might change after all of us became independent enough to make it in this world as individuals.



“...Limp dick.”

Oh, hmm, did I just hear something? Nah, I’m fairly sure it’s my imagination again, ha ha! I’ll forget about this in no time!

★★★★★★★★★

Three days after our barbecue party, we finally discovered something new.

“This *is* a door, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Yeah, and a pretty unnatural-looking door at that,” Haruka replied.

The door was made entirely of metal and stood right in the center of the wall we were facing. It appeared to be about four meters tall and three meters wide. We had seen a door back in the first room of the second floor, which had led to the floor proper, but that had been the size of a door inside an ordinary house. In contrast, the door in front of us appeared very majestic and well-made.

“Well, actually, I feel like this is a very typical dungeon door,” said Yuki. “You know, it’s like an obvious sign that we’ve made it all the way here and a powerful boss is awaiting us.”

“Mm, it definitely looks fancier than any of the doors on the other floors,” said Mary.

“Yep. I bet the boss will be fancy too,” said Touya.

I gave Touya an exasperated look. “What do you mean by a fancy boss, Touya? That makes no sense at all.”

Touya paused in thought for a bit, then grinned at me. “Uh, well, a fancy boss is a rich boss, so he might be called something like Rich the Lich, you know?”

“Oh, so you think it might be an undead boss that’s worth a lot of mon—or rather, what kind of cringey pun is that?!” I asked. “Also, I really don’t want to fight a lich!”

“I wouldn’t mind battling a lich if the Purification spell works on it, but I also don’t really want to go out of my way to find out,” said Haruka.

“I feel like we should consider retreating if the boss is a lich, but based on what I can tell with my Scout skill, I don’t think the boss is that strong,” said

Yuki. “Anyhow, there’s only one way to find out. You’re up, Touya.”

I completely agreed with Yuki’s assessment, so when Touya looked to me for confirmation, I nodded.

“Roger,” said Touya. “I’m going to open the door.”

He slowly opened the door. Immediately, everyone yelled in surprise. One of those yells sounded a bit happy for some reason.

Inside the room was an enormous picow. It looked even bigger and heavier than a normal cow. From my Third Eye skill, I learned that it was, in fact, a *tyrant* picow. It definitely looked every bit as intimidating as its name as it glared at us from the back of the room, but it was otherwise mostly the same as a normal picow, so in a way, it also looked sort of charming.

However, the tyrant picow had three horns instead of one, and all of them looked very dangerous; each horn was as long as a normal one-handed sword. If it rammed Touya, I had no idea whether his breastplate would survive.

But Touya actually seemed happy to see the tyrant picow. “Hell yeah, more marbled meat!”

“Lots of delicious meat!” Metea chimed in.

“...Yeah, depending on how you look at it, I guess ‘fancy’ kind of works as a way to describe what’s going on here,” I said.

The tyrant picow wasn’t the only monster inside of the room. There were also ten normal picows; they looked like they were here to protect the tyrant. None of them were that strong individually, but even in this spacious room, they would be annoying if they all charged at us at the same time, and it would be especially dangerous if they coordinated with the tyrant.

“Based on the information available through the Third Eye skill, the tyrant picow doesn’t seem very strong, but it’s still a new foe that we’ve never fought before,” I said. “With that in mind, everyone, make sure to stay alert and be caref—”

“A hide that size is probably worth a decent amount of money,” said Haruka.

“We might be able to cook and eat its tongue too,” said Yuki. “The tongues of

normal picows are too small to cut into rounds.”

It seemed that Touya and Metea weren’t the only ones taking a carefree attitude toward the tyrant picow.

Natsuki sighed in exasperation. “It’s too early to think about things like that. Save it for later, after we slay the tyrant cow.” She held her naginata at the ready.

Mary said, “Mm, I’ll do my best!”

Almost immediately, the tyrant picow charged right at us.

“Graaaahhh!”

The tyrant actually knocked aside the normal picows in its vicinity as it charged, so it was as cruel as its name implied. It was decently fast too, but it wasn’t fast enough to be a threat. There was nothing it could really do to compensate for its short legs, and the inertia of its giant body would prevent it from suddenly stopping in its tracks or pivoting rapidly.

“Is this monster supposed to be a pig or a cow?!” Touya was once again yelling nonsense as he dodged the tyrant picow’s charge. He swung his sword at it, but the blow landed on its neck, where the dense subcutaneous fat absorbed the impact.

“Damn it, I ended up attacking some fatty pork neck!”

“That’s something completely different, Touya!” I yelled.

It was true that the tyrant picow’s neck was thick and fatty, just like pork neck, but a term like fatty picow neck would probably have been more accurate. Picows had a lot of fat distributed throughout their bodies, so they definitely weren’t very healthy to eat.

“Graaaaaah!”

Touya’s blow hadn’t been very effective, but it seemed that the tyrant couldn’t shrug off an attack to its neck. It stamped its feet to forcefully bring itself to a stop, then wheeled around toward Touya and made some angry noises.

“Oh, it sounds like it’s mooing angrily,” I said. “I guess it is a type of cow,

Touya.”

“I don’t know about that one, Nao-kun,” said Natsuki. “Hyaah!”

The tyrant picow had focused all of its attention on Touya, but that decision proved foolish; Natsuki was way more dangerous. Her naginata was much sharper than Touya’s sword, and she swung it down on the tyrant’s neck while it was distracted by Touya. She swiftly stepped back as a torrent of blood gushed from its neck.

Natsuki’s attack was enough: it slowly collapsed to the ground and stopped moving. I’d had my spear at the ready just in case, but it had turned out to be unnecessary.

As for the normal picows that the tyrant picow had knocked down, they were only dangerous if they charged at you. Due to their body shape, picows had trouble getting to their feed, so the ones in the room had already been rendered harmless. In fact, the other four members of my party had finished off all of the normal picows while Touya, Natsuki and I had faced off against the tyrant.

“Oh, did the three of you have an easy time too?” asked Yuki. “I guess that means this boss fight was a freebie with a lot of meat as the reward.”

“There’s so much! I can eat until I’m completely full!” said Metea.

“Please, Met, you already do that whenever we eat,” said Mary. “I’m surprised at how fast it was over, though—that picow was so big. Well, actually, I guess it was only easy to slay for someone like Natsuki-san, so...”

“Touya-kun’s sword couldn’t slice through the tyrant picow, so I think it would have been a formidable foe for ordinary adventurers,” said Natsuki.

It was difficult to quantify a monster’s strength; some monsters might be easier to slay than others depending on your individual abilities. However, the tyrant picow had natural armor that had prevented Touya from inflicting a mortal wound with his sword, plus sharp horns and a very powerful charge due to its sheer mass. With all of that in mind, tyrant picows could probably be very dangerous in certain situations. Apparently magicites from tyrant picows were worth around six thousand Rea apiece, which meant they were more or less as

valuable as orc leaders. They could probably crush an average adventurer with ease, but thanks to Natsuki, this one had turned into an easy source of meat.

“More importantly, let’s look for the next door,” I said.

This boss room was much bigger than any of the previous ones—as big as a school gym. Just as I was starting to look around, a door oozed out of the wall in front of me.

“Oh, this door is normal size, but it also looks kind of fancy,” said Yuki.

“Mm. This boss room seems to be quite different from the previous ones,” said Natsuki. “I’m fairly sure the stairs that lead to the next floor are behind this door.”

Yuki and Natsuki both seemed a bit puzzled, but Touya just laughed and held up two fingers. “Well, there are some games where you have to fight two bosses back-to-back, you know? The final boss of this dungeon could be waiting for us—maybe we just beat the mid-boss.”

“Oh, come on, don’t say things like that, Touya,” I said. “There are no signals from my Scout skill, so the room ahead should be safe, but still.”

I inspected the door for traps before carefully opening it. Ahead, per usual, was a small room. There were some stairs at the back, presumably leading to the next floor, and there was also a chest on the right side of the room, but something else quickly captured my attention.

“A treasure chest!” Metea dashed toward it right away. She stared at the treasure chest as she stood before it, so I was glad that she had learned some restraint and was holding back from carelessly touching it.

“Met, wait up!” cried Mary. “Nao-san, I’m really sorry about this...”

“Ha ha, don’t worry about it,” I said. “We can just inspect the treasure chest first.”

I inspected it for traps, but there weren’t any. After I gave her the all clear, Metea happily opened the treasure chest and stuck her head inside.

“Hmm, there’s a small ball inside,” said Metea.

“All the treasure chests we’ve found so far have been unnecessarily large,”

said Yuki. “Hmm, this kind of looks like a murky crystal ball.”

Yuki took the loot out of the chest. It was an opalescent sphere the size of a table tennis ball.

“I think it might be a piece of jewelry or an item that has some kind of status effect,” said Haruka. “Can you tell what it is, Touya?”

Touya stared at the ball, but after a bit, he shook his head. “Uh, it’s an orb. That’s all I’ve got. Sorry.”

Touya’s words put me in mind of the Light Orb that Ishuca-san had lent us, but this orb didn’t seem likely to be that amazing. At the same time, I felt fairly sure that it was more than normal jewelry.

“I guess we’ll have to bring this back with us to the guild and pay for the appraisal service,” I said. “I really wish the Appraisal skill were a bit more useful. It’s definitely more useful to us than the Help Guide, but still.”

“The main purpose of the Help Guide was to assist us with avoiding land mine skills in the beginning,” said Haruka. “It served that purpose well, and it’s still somewhat useful to us.”

“Yeah, true, although we haven’t had to rely on it as much nowadays,” I said. “By now, I’ve absorbed a lot of the common sense and general knowledge that we need in this world.”

The Help Guide could teach you the name of unfamiliar vegetables, so it still proved its worth from time to time, but to me, its limited utility made it feel like an inferior version of the Appraisal skill. My Appraisal skill had gotten good enough to identify monsters, although I wasn’t positive that I’d improved solely due to my own practice; it might just have been a reward for visiting Advastlis-sama’s temple in Laffan all the time. Regardless, my skill didn’t see any use as long as Touya or Yuki was around.

“There’s one other thing in this room that stands out, and it’s making me really curious,” I said.

Everyone turned around and followed my gaze. In the middle of the floor on the left side of the room was a magic circle that appeared to be about two meters in diameter. When I inspected it more closely, I noticed that it was

glowing faintly.

“I wonder if this magic circle is the return device we’ve been looking for,” said Haruka.

“Uh, I can kind of feel some Time Magic coming off of this magic circle,” said Yuki. “What do you think, Nao?”

“So can I, Yuki,” I said. “It could be a teleport trap, however.”

“A trap like that would be hidden or disguised, wouldn’t it?” asked Touya. “I’m pretty sure anybody would immediately notice a glowing ring like that.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right about that,” I said.

Three members of my party could use the Light spell, so we had been able to maintain a bright source of light at all times as we explored the dungeon, but most adventurers used tools like lanterns. However, this circle was glowing brightly enough to stand out even to adventurers exploring by lantern.

“I’m pretty sure this magic circle isn’t a trap,” said Haruka. “However, based on what I’ve read, there can be shortcuts in dungeons that will teleport you to an even deeper level.”

“Hmm, yeah, I guess there’s also no need to hide a shortcut like that,” I said. “If that’s what it is, though, that would be really bad for us.”

We wanted to escape, so it would have been nice if it were easy to distinguish between magic circles that teleported you deeper into the dungeon and magic circles that teleported you out.

“Let’s investigate and see if there are any clues,” said Yuki. “Hmm, yeah, I don’t know. I can feel the presence of Time Magic, but it also feels kind of weird for some reason.”

“I think it’s hard to tell for sure partly because we lack the necessary knowledge,” I said. “But anyway, we need to decide whether or not to use this magic circle.”

Hmm. Now that I think about it, our goal was to discover a return device, but there’s no way the dungeon would be so charitable as to provide us with detailed information. The only reason we have information about the return

devices in other dungeons is that people have used them in the past to find out what they do.

"Well, if we decide not to use this magic circle, then we'll have to walk all the way back to the second floor," said Natsuki. "We can hope that the passageway to the surface has returned to normal, but if not, we'll have to dig our way out. There's also the option of relying on your teleportation magic, Nao-kun, but that'll take quite some time."

"Ugh. I really don't want to walk all the way back," said Metea.

"I guess it all comes down to whether or not we can accept the risk of using this magic circle," said Haruka. "Let's decide by majority vote. Raise your hands if you're against the idea of using the magic circle."

Metea was the only one who had openly voiced her desire not to walk back, but nobody raised their hands, so apparently we were all on the same page.

"All right, then. Let's all hold hands and enter the circle at the same time," said Haruka.

"Mm. It would be a disaster if some of us were teleported to different places," said Natsuki.

"I really hope that this circle isn't that dangerous," I said.

In a video game, this circle probably wouldn't have been a dangerous trap given that the monsters on this floor weren't very strong. However, the world we were in wasn't a game, and there were still many aspects of dungeons that we had yet to discover. All of us were a bit nervous as we gathered around the magic circle and held hands to prepare ourselves.

"Okay, it's time," said Yuki. "Here we go!"

All of us stepped into the magic circle at the same time, but nothing happened.

"...Is this magic circle not functional?"

But right after Haruka said that, the magic circle started to glow brighter. The light engulfed me; it was so bright that I had to squeeze my eyes shut. When I opened them a few seconds later, the first things I saw were trees and sunlight.

“Oh, is this the area right outside of the abandoned mines?!” I exclaimed.

I looked around and saw the uprooted trees and disturbed earth from our fight with the lava boar. I turned and saw the entrance of the abandoned mine—or rather, it would probably have been more accurate to describe it as the entrance of the dungeon.

Yuki laughed for joy when she realized we had escaped. “Yay, we won the gamble!”

Haruka breathed a sigh of relief. “Whew.”

“The fresh air of the forest feels really good!” Metea stretched and jumped in the air, then spread her arms and legs as she savored a deep breath.

Like Haruka, Mary breathed a sigh of relief. “It’s nice to see the sun again.”

“Yeah, it’s been a long time since we were last exposed to sunlight!” said Touya, looking up at the blue sky. “The sunlight is very strong, but I don’t mind it right now!”

Nobody had vented their frustrations inside of the dungeon, but now everybody looked like they were smiling from the bottom of their hearts for the first time in a long while, so some amount of stress had definitely built up during our time inside the dungeon.

“I do feel really relieved now,” said Haruka, “but the magic circle seems to have been a one-way return device.”

“Yeah, I can’t detect any Time Magic here, unlike in the magic circle back in the dungeon,” I said.

After basking in our freedom, we investigated the area where the magic circle had teleported us, but no trace of teleportation magic remained, and nothing happened even after all of us stood still for a few moments.

“That means it’ll take a few days for us to hunt picows if we ever want to do that again, huh? Ugh, that sounds like a pain in the neck,” said Touya. “Nao, I’m counting on you to practice and learn to teleport all of us in one go as soon as you can!”

“I want to go back into the dungeon as well!” said Metea.

The hungriest members of my party seemed very eager to return to the dungeon even though we had just escaped.

“I’ll do my best, but we’ll have to wait until we make some teleportation markers before coming back,” I said.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” said Yuki. “But I’ve finished mapping the first seven floors, so as long as we stick to the shortest routes, we’ll be able to go through the dungeon much faster than we did the first time.”

“Um, will we be able to get past the slope to the second floor again?” Mary asked, sounding a bit uneasy. “It’s blocked off, isn’t it?”

Haruka and Yuki casually shook their heads.

“I’m pretty sure we’ll be able to return,” said Haruka. “It would be a different story if that place were a normal cave, but it’s a dungeon, so I don’t think we’ll have to worry about it.”

“Yeah, apparently traps in dungeons eventually reset,” said Yuki. “Besides, a dungeon wouldn’t be a dungeon if you couldn’t get in.”

This world’s dungeons were very strange and mysterious. In some respects, they were similar to dungeons in games, but they were also different in anomalous and unexpected ways.

“Well, we can just confirm that next time,” I said. “For now, let’s head back to Laffan. We’ve been away for a long time.”

“Mm. Diola-san might be very concerned about us,” said Natsuki.

“We did tell her that we were going into a dungeon, but she might be worried for precisely that reason,” said Haruka. “Oh, I think we should probably gather some dindels before we head back. The season might end soon.”

As she muttered those words to herself, Haruka glanced in the direction of the dindel trees; Diola-san’s name must have reminded her.

“U-Um, Haruka-san, what exactly are dindels?” Mary asked hesitantly. “I remember hearing that name before, but I don’t think I’ve heard what exactly they are.”

“Oh, have you never eaten one before? They’re fruits you can harvest in the

forest at this time of the year," Haruka replied. "You might say it's all thanks to dindels that we've risen so far in this world."

"You left out some important details, Haruka," I said. "Dindels are red fruits that grow on very tall trees, and they're sweet and delicious."

I used my hands to illustrate the size of a dindel, and Metea leaned forward in excitement. "Sweet fruits! I want to eat some dindels!"

"Sure, you can eat as many as you want," I said. "We can go gather some dindels before we head back, right, Haruka?"

The area around the dindel trees was fairly safe for us nowadays. Last year, we had worked hard gathering dindels with normal backpacks, but we had magic bags now, so I felt like it would be much easier.

I glanced at Haruka, since she and I would have to work the hardest, and she immediately nodded in response.

"Yeah, sure. It's true that we can come back later, but we might as well gather the best ones—the ones that are ripe enough to eat—while we still can."

"If Nao-kun and Haruka are ready, I don't have any reason to object. I would like to help, but..." Natsuki seemed to feel a bit bad about the fact that she wouldn't be of much use.

I shook my head to reassure her. "It'll probably be a lot safer if you just leave it to me and Haruka."

Aera-san's nimble movements through the treetops had been proof that this world's various races all had unique abilities, although it wasn't something I thought about often. That being the case, elves like Haruka and me were definitely the best suited for activities on top of trees—especially since it was scary to contemplate a bunch of people simultaneously clambering around trees as tall as dindels.

"The rest of us have to wait under the dindel trees to protect everyone's luggage," said Touya. "I'm pretty sure it's going to be really easy this time, though. Last year, I had to do that duty alone. I got a bit scared, so I actually hopped up onto one of the low branches to take cover."

“Oh, was there actually a time when you were scared of monsters, big bro Touya?” Metea asked.

“Yeah, there was, so both you and Mary need to be careful too,” Touya replied. “Right now, you can already slay goblins no problem, but you would be in trouble if you ever ran into a wipe bear.”

I’m pretty sure “scared” isn’t the right way to describe your attitude when we gathered dindels last year, Touya. You made a makeshift hammock out of some rope—although, if I recall correctly, you did seem pretty relaxed. Well, Mary and Metea seem to have taken your words to heart, which is good, so I’ll let you off the hook this time.

“Yeah, I understand!” Mary had a knowing look on her face and sounded very proud. “Adventurers who get too arrogant are the first to die. The most dangerous time in an adventurer’s life is early on, when you think you’ve gotten pretty strong!”

She wasn’t wrong at all, but...

“Who did you learn that from?” I asked.

“Oh, um, it seems that the other day, during the welcome party, she asked Diola-san about important things to keep in mind as adventurers,” Natsuki replied.

“It’s perfectly fine if she learned that from Diola-san,” said Haruka. “It would be dangerous if she were picking up weird things from strangers, however.”

“Yeah, information literacy is very important in this world too,” said Yuki.

Haruka and Yuki both nodded, looking relieved; they must have been worried that Metea had overheard some strange talk from random adventurers.

Touya started walking, leading the way to the dindels. “All right, let’s get going! We need to gather a lot of dindels to bring back with us!”

“Let’s go!” said Metea. “Lots of delicious fruits are waiting for us!”

Afterward, we spent some time gathering a bunch of dindels from a number of different trees. We were all in high spirits as we headed back to Laffan with nature’s bounty inside of our magic bags.

Chapter 4—Homecoming, and the Path Forward

We had no idea exactly how long we had been stuck inside the dungeon, but when we escaped, it seemed to be afternoon. We ate lunch while bathing in the sunlight for the first time in at least a month. It felt like having a picnic. After that, we headed over to the dindel grove in order to harvest a lot of fruit. Haruka and I still weren't as nimble as Aera-san, but we had gotten more proficient at moving through the treetops than we had been last year. On top of that, we had magic bags now, so there was no limit to the number of dindels we could bring back with us. As a result, we took the time to pluck every single dindel that was available and then returned to Laffan in the evening. It wouldn't be great dropping by the guild during one of the busiest times of the day, but we decided that it would be best to inform Diola-san that we were back. However, when we arrived at the guild...

"Oh, I'm so glad to see that you're all safe!" The moment she saw us, Diola-san stood up so fast she knocked her chair over, which was quite a rare sight.

"Oh, um, yeah, we're perfectly fine," I said, a little confused. "As you can see, none of us have suffered any serious injuries."

Diola breathed a sigh of relief. "Whew, that's good to hear. After you told me you were planning to explore a dungeon, you went missing for a long time, so..."

After that, she seemed a bit embarrassed and paused to stand her chair upright again, then looked at all of us.

"Um, have you been exploring a dungeon this entire time? Did you take Mary-san and Metea-san with you?"

"Yeah, we took them with us, and something happened that caused us to get stuck for a while. Can we talk about this at a later time?" I felt like it would be better to discuss things when the guild was less busy.

Diola-san rejected my idea right away. "Of course not." She gave my party a

suspicious look. “I would be willing to consider it if you were actually tired, but that doesn’t seem to be the case...”

I mean, yeah, all of us are definitely pumped up right now. We got to enjoy the sky, the sun, and dindels for the first time in a long while, so all of us feel really refreshed.

“The guild is going to get really busy soon, isn’t it? Do you really have time to sit down and talk?” I asked.

“Time isn’t something that you have; it’s something that you make,” said Diola. “Follow me a moment.”

When the other receptionists heard Diola-san say that, they reacted with total shock, but she ignored all the looks she got as she pulled me by the hand toward a private meeting room. She forced everyone in my party to sit down on a sofa, then stood in front of us with her arms crossed as if urging us to start talking.

“Now, tell me what happened.”

“Well, it’s just that we couldn’t exit the dungeon after we entered it. You see...” I gave Diola-san a rough summary of our experiences.

She looked a bit worried throughout my narrative, but after I concluded, she breathed a sigh of relief. “Whew. I’m really glad that you were able to survive and escape.”

“Heh, I bet you’re glad you didn’t lose your dindel delivery service,” said Touya.

Touya sounded like he was trying to lighten the atmosphere, but Diola-san smiled at him in a very scary way that I’ve never seen from her. “It’s true that I really like them, Touya-san, but I would never be more concerned about dindels than your party’s well-being.”

“Mm, I’m perfectly aware of that, Diola-san,” I said. “Touya, you know there are some things that you shouldn’t joke about, right?”

“O-Oh, yeah.” Touya immediately bowed his head. “I’m sorry, Diola-san.”

Diola-san nodded as a calm expression reappeared on her face. “I’m glad you

understand. I've been feeling very anxious lately..."

"Thank you very much for worrying about us, Diola-san," said Haruka. "With that in mind, these dindels..."

Haruka tried to place a magic bag full of dindels on the floor, explaining that we wanted to turn them in to the guild, but Diola-san firmly grasped Haruka's hands.

"That's a completely different matter. I'm more than willing to accept any dindels that you have. You can sell them to the guild, but you can also offer some to me as gifts, you know?"

"Oh. I didn't expect you to ask for them so blatantly, Diola-san."

Haruka had an exasperated look on her face, but Diola-san just laughed. "I wouldn't say something like this to rookie adventurers, of course. I think your party can be considered a veteran one by now, however."

"Well, you've helped us out a lot, so I don't mind sharing some dindels with you, Diola-san." Haruka took out five dindels and placed them on the table in front of us.

Diola-san's face shone. "Thank you very much! You'll sell some dindels to the guild as well, won't you?"

"Of course," said Haruka. "However, we have more people who will be consuming dindels this year, so we won't be turning in as many."

Initially, while Haruka and Diola-san were talking, Metea had looked a bit uneasy, but her face lit up after she heard that last point. Haruka had probably added that caveat precisely because she had seen the look on Metea's face, and Diola-san had probably noticed too, although she just laughed and refrained from pointing it out. Dindels weren't exactly very profitable for my party nowadays; they were mainly a way for us to contribute to the guild in Laffan. Diola-san was the vice-branch master, so if turning in some dindels would be enough to keep her happy, that was all that mattered.

"We'd also like to turn in the magicites and materials that we obtained inside the dungeon," I said. "By the way, can we request the guild's appraisal services too?"

“Of course. You’re Rank 5 adventurers, so the appraisal fee per item will be one gold coin.”

“Does the fee vary depending on your adventurer rank?” I asked.

“Yes. The appraisal service is more or less a budget deficit for the guild, so it’s not something that the guild is willing to offer to just anyone,” said Diola.

According to Diola-san, the appraisal service was basically a perk for adventurers; it wasn’t something the guild tried to turn a profit on. However, it would have been financially damaging if the guild had accepted every single appraisal request for cheap, so the fee was ten gold coins per item for adventurers Rank 3 and below, three gold coins per item for Rank 4 adventurers, one gold coin per item for Rank 5 and 6 adventurers, and five large silver coins per appraisal session for adventurers Rank 7 and above.

In essence, it sounded like the guild was assuming that low-rank adventurers would only bring in useless items. The reason that adventurers Rank 7 and above were charged per session instead of per item was that five large silver coins were chump change for people at that level, but there was no reason to make the fees too cheap. Those high-rank adventurers usually brought a lot of items back with them, so apparently the guild could still make a decent profit, even charging per session.

“Please wait here for a moment. I’ll go get the necessary tools.”

Diola-san headed out of the room and returned a few minutes later with two tools. One was a magical device used to measure the amount of mana within a magicite; it was something that I was already very familiar with. The other tool was a board, about the size of an ordinary book, that appeared to be completely black. Diola-san placed those tools on the table in front of us and then started to pick up the magicites, which we had already taken out of our magic bags.

“I’ll start by measuring the magicites,” she said. “Hmm. I had a feeling this would be the case based on what your party told me, but most of these magicites aren’t very valuable. I suppose that means the dungeon that your party explored isn’t a very profitable one.”

“Yeah, you can definitely earn more money from the area outside of the

dungeon," I said. "By the way, since you asked about a name for the dungeon, we've decided to go with 'Summer Resort Dungeon' as our final choice."

"Oh, really? Was it very cool and comfortable inside of the dungeon?" Diola asked with a laugh.

All of us nodded.

"Mm. It's a great place to spend time during the summer," said Haruka. "It's definitely much more comfortable than the forests."

"I see. In that case, I'll officially register that name," said Diola. "I don't think many adventurers will want to explore a dungeon with that name, however."

"Really? We actually had a decent time inside of the dungeon. I don't think it's a bad place for adventurers," said Touya.

"That only applies to your party, Touya-san. The average adventurer in Laffan can't handle anything more dangerous than goblins. They would probably die before even arriving at the dungeon itself, and none of the monsters there are an efficient source of money," said Diola. "On top of that, you can't really obtain any valuable materials from the dungeon, so veteran adventurers from other towns probably won't go out of their way to come here."

Everything that Diola-san had said made perfect sense. Apart from the fact that it was pleasantly cool inside, the only other positive aspect of the dungeon was the delicious meat you could get from picows. We felt like the dungeon had been the perfect place to train Metea and Mary, but it probably wouldn't be a popular option for most adventurers, especially given its floors upon floors of undead monsters.

"It sounds as though the dungeon is designed to trap adventurers the moment they enter the second floor. That would be the end of the average adventurer," said Diola. "Another issue is whether or not that trap can be activated multiple times. I'm fairly confident it's the type of trap that will return to its default state over time, but..."

"Really, Diola-san? You don't think the entrance will remain blocked off until someone tries to dig their way through?" I asked.

"Nobody would be able to enter the dungeon easily if that were the case.

That’s just how dungeons work, Nao-san.” Diola-san had a knowing look on her face.

After Metea had absorbed that explanation, she grinned broadly. “That’s good! It means we can go back and hunt for more meat!”

“Tee hee, that’s true,” said Diola. “You can ask everyone to take you back to the dungeon, Metea-san.”

Metea nodded firmly. “Yeah, I’m looking forward to it!”

Diola-san smiled back at Metea, then gathered all of the magicites that she had finished measuring in one pile. She held up the other tool she had brought with her and started to wipe its surface with a cloth.

“Next up are the items that your party found in treasure chests. This tool doesn’t see much use, so it’s a bit dusty.”

“Um, what is that board supposed to be, Diola-san?” I asked.

It was probably metal, and there was a double circle drawn on the surface, but I had no idea what its purpose was.

“This is a simple tool for appraising magical devices,” Diola replied. “Haruka-san, please put an item in the middle of this circle.”

“Uh, okay. I guess we can start with the pendant. Will this do?”

Haruka placed a pendant on top of the board, and after a moment, the circles started to glow dimly.

“That’ll do. It’s a waste of time and money to appraise normal accessories, but if the board glows like this, then the item is definitely some kind of magical device,” said Diola. “The gem that’s attached to the pendant is probably worth a decent amount of money even as jewelry, however.”

Next, we placed the lamp and the orb on the board, and it glowed for both items. According to Diola-san, the reason the board was so dusty was that no adventurers had discovered any dungeons near Laffan recently.

“This board seems like a very useful tool,” said Haruka. “The guild will accept our appraisal request, right?”

“Mm, you can leave these items with the guild. However...”

According to Diola-san, it could take up anywhere from a few days to a few months for the appraisal results to become available to us, and the lower limit of a few days was only possible if there were an alchemist in town who could appraise the items. However, Riva was the only alchemist in Laffan, so the likelihood of that was very low.

“If these items are very valuable, then adventurers might pour into Laffan from everywhere around, but...” Diola-san paused and shook her head as if she considered that likelihood very remote. “If I had to point out one good thing about the dungeon, it would be the fact that there’s a magic circle that you can use to teleport outside.”

“Yes, it certainly was convenient,” said Natsuki. “It would have been awful if we’d had to walk all the way back to the first floor in order to exit the dungeon.”

The rest of us nodded. As we explored the dungeon, we had mapped the entirety of each floor, but it had taken us over twenty days to reach that magic circle. It would definitely have been annoying and exhausting to walk all the way back, even if we’d chosen the shortest route possible.

“The guild does set up teleportation devices in dungeons that are profitable, however,” said Diola.

“Really? Is that actually possible?” I asked.

“Yes, but it’s not an easy decision for the guild. Teleportation devices are very expensive to set up.”

Diola-san explained that you could create a device that would teleport you to a specific floor of a dungeon, but that required assembling a team of numerous alchemists and mages, all capable of using Time Magic. However, it was prohibitively expensive to set up the device *and* to maintain it, so apparently the guild would only cover the costs if a dungeon was very profitable.

“In any case, it’s not relevant to the guild branch here in Laffan. The dungeon that your party discovered isn’t in a very good location, and the monsters and loot aren’t very good either,” said Diola. “There’s nothing to attract

adventurers, and that means no one will invest the money to develop the area nearby. Depending on the circumstances, dungeons can benefit the economies of nearby towns and help them grow, but that's not the case here..."

"Does that mean the dungeon will be left alone?" Haruka asked.

Diola-san chuckled and nodded. "Yes, I believe so. I don't believe the guild will go out of its way to announce the dungeon's existence or notify adventurers either."

Despite the risks, adventurers dreamed of making a fortune in newly discovered dungeons. Regardless of rank, adventurers could freely enter any dungeon that wasn't under the direct management of the guild, so all kinds of adventurers would take a crack at new dungeons, even if they'd been stuck at a low rank for a long time. For a low-rank adventurer to challenge a dungeon was normally tantamount to suicide, but all too often, adventurers with big dreams would disregard the risks, thinking only of the slim possibility of success.

"The low-rank adventurers who die challenging dungeons have no one but themselves to blame, but it's not as though the guild wants to make decisions that will increase the number of casualties," said Diola. "In any case, even if the guild issued the information, the majority of people probably wouldn't notice."

"I see. Well, I guess that means we don't have to stay alert to risks, like rookie adventurers getting in our way, so that's convenient," I said.

"Does your party plan to resume exploring the dungeon that you discovered?" Diola asked.

"Uh, well, we might head out to harvest precious wood or hunt orcs depending on the time of the year, but actually, we have yet to discuss it among ourselves." I glanced at the others to see how they felt, and all of them nodded in response, so it seemed we were all willing to resume exploring at some point in the future. I felt curious about the floors past the seventh, so... "Yeah, we'll probably give it another shot. We'll do our best to prioritize safety and to avoid taking risks, of course."

"I see. However, Nao-san, please be as careful as possible. Keep in mind that your party is now responsible for Mary-san and Metea-san's well-being in addition to your own lives." Diola-san looked and sounded like she was warning

us as a mature adult some years our senior, so all of us nodded seriously.

★★★★★★★★★

We had been away from our house for a very long time, but when we returned home, it looked a lot cleaner than we had expected. I had felt confident that the kids from the orphanage wouldn't slack off, and indeed, it looked like I could put my mind at ease and assume that Edith's mansion was in good shape as well.

"Whew, I'm really glad that we had asked the orphanage for help!" said Yuki.

"Mm. We should visit at some point to thank Ishuca-san," said Haruka.

"We should also say thanks to the gods!" Metea put in.

"Tee hee, indeed," said Natsuki. "For right now, however, let's take a bath and relax. It's been some time since we last had the chance."

"A bath! I'm looking forward to it!" said Metea.

"Hmm. I'm surprised that you and Mary don't hate taking baths." It sounded like Haruka was thinking of the sisters as cats, but both of them tilted their heads in confusion.

"I don't see any reason to hate taking baths," said Mary. "I still feel like it's kind of a luxurious use of hot water because of what our lives were like in the past, though."

"Baths feel very nice and refreshing," said Metea.

"Well, it's fairly common for kids to hate baths," said Haruka. "I wonder if it's because baths are hot?"

"I think baths are warm and comfortable," said Mary, "and even during the summer, I think it's better to take a bath instead of just washing your body."

"Yeah. The Purification spell is enough to keep ourselves clean, but it's no replacement for the feeling of a bath!" said Touya. "Let's go, Metea!"

"Okay! It's time to enjoy a bath that I haven't had in a long time!"

"Both of you, wait up!" Haruka exclaimed. "You can't do anything even if you charge ahead of us!"

Haruka, Yuki, and I were the only ones who could draw a bath with our magic. Haruka chased after Touya and Metea, and the rest of us followed behind at a walk.

★★★★★★★★★

We ended up deciding to take a break from our morning training session on the next day. When I went to bed, I actually didn't feel exhausted in the slightest, but it was almost noon when I finally woke, so my fatigue must have accumulated throughout our time underground; I hadn't been able to fully relax when sleeping inside the dungeon.

When I entered the living room, I found it empty; so was the dining room. Apparently everyone else was just as tired as I'd been, so I put on a tea kettle and watched as the flames flickered underneath it. I heard footsteps on the stairs just as the water came to a boil, and Haruka appeared in the kitchen momentarily.

"Good morning, Nao. You sure are up early—or not. It's already pretty late in the day."

"Mm, yeah. Everyone slept in today."

Haruka was wearing casual indoor clothes, probably because our morning training session as a party had been canceled. She had her hair down too. I definitely would never have seen Haruka this relaxed back when we were sharing a room at an inn.

"I heard some sounds from one of the rooms next to mine while I was changing clothes, so I'm pretty sure the others will wake up soon," said Haruka. "I actually woke because I heard some sounds from your room, Nao."

"Oh, sorry! Did I wake you up while you were still enjoying your sleep?"

I hadn't deliberately made any loud noises, but neither had I tried especially hard to be quiet. Haruka's room was next to mine, so I asked her if it was necessary for me to be more careful, but she shook her head and used the water I had boiled to start brewing some tea for herself.

"No, you weren't noisy or anything like that," said Haruka. "It's just that I was already close to waking up anyway. Do you want me to bring out some snacks

to go with the tea?”

“Nah, it’s almost lunchtime, right? I’m fine with just some tea.”

“Okay. I’ll make lunch. It’s been a while!” Haruka handed me a cup of tea, then took a sip from her own cup. Next, she began preparing lunch.

I leaned against the kitchen wall and quenched my thirst with tea. For whatever reason, I found myself watching Haruka’s back as she worked.

“Is there anything that you especially want to eat today, Nao?”

“Hmm. Well, I think everything you make is delicious, but I’m kind of in the mood for some soup with a miso flavor.” I pointed toward some sauce that Natsuki had made, which wasn’t technically miso but tasted a lot like it. “We weren’t really able to eat a lot of soup dishes inside of the dungeon.”

Haruka laughed and nodded. “You can just say miso soup if that’s what you want. All right, then. I’ll make some miso soup as well, and I’ll test whether we can modify our magic bags so that we can carry soup dishes.”

Magic bags could fit all sorts of things, but they did have some downsides. One was the fact that they were the same as normal bags when it came to liquids. If you threw something like a cup full of water inside and swung the bag around, the water would spill. The only way to avoid such an outcome would be to pour liquids into sealed containers like flasks, but it wasn’t realistically possible for a DIY blacksmith like Touya to mass-produce closed containers, which were harder to make than simple products like pots. As a result, the number of containers that we had on hand was very limited, and most of the dishes that we stored in our magic bags weren’t very wet or juicy.

“It’d be convenient if we could make freeze-dried soups,” said Haruka. “We can easily conjure hot water with magic.”

“I mean, yeah, freeze-dried soups would be nice, but making something like that would require a lot of work, wouldn’t it?” I asked. “Wouldn’t you need to learn and master some new spells?”

“Well, not really. There’s the Dry spell, which I bet will work for that purpose,” Haruka replied. “I’ll probably have to improve it in order to make delicious-tasting soups, however. What do you think, Natsuki?”

The door of the kitchen opened and Natsuki laughed as she entered the kitchen.

“Oh, I guess you noticed my presence, Haruka. I avoided showing myself because the two of you seemed to be enjoying your time alone with each other...”

“Really, now? I find that hard to believe considering you were using the Sneak skill,” said Haruka. “I feel like the only reason you’d use that skill inside our home is to spy on us.”

Natsuki’s presence was, in fact, currently very faint and hard to detect. I had the Scout skill, but I hadn’t noticed that she was outside the kitchen until she had walked right up to the door. As for Haruka, she had only noticed after Natsuki had cracked the kitchen door.

“Well, I don’t really mind,” said Haruka. “Besides, it’s not like this is anything unusual. It’s a normal part of our everyday lives.”

“Yeah. There haven’t been many opportunities since we were transported to this different world, but back on Earth, Haruka used to come over to my house from time to time and make food,” I said.

“Is that so?” Natsuki briefly stared at us for some reason, but her usual gentle smile soon reappeared on her face. “Well, I suppose I won’t pry further for now. If you’re asking about freeze-drying, it’s the process of drying food without using heat in order to preserve the flavor and nutritional value. Your Dry spell generates some heat, doesn’t it, Haruka? If you can somehow remove the moisture from food without heat, you might be able to get results that are even better than those of conventional freeze-drying.”

“...Oh, right. I forgot that water can sublimate very quickly in a vacuum or when you freeze it,” said Haruka.

“Mm. It has to be done without boiling the water,” said Natsuki. “Nao-kun can use both Time Magic and Water Magic, so he might be able to combine those two types of magic to create a new spell that can teleport the moisture out of food.”

“That sounds really difficult, but I guess it’s worth practicing,” I said.

We didn't actually need a spell like that, but trying to create one would be a good way of practicing magic. I was starting to get bored of practicing the Area Teleportation spell, so something else to practice would be a nice change of pace.

"It would certainly be convenient to have some freeze-dried food around," said Natsuki. "It's true that we can stock a lot of things in our magic bags, but it's best to carry as little as possible. If we plan to continue exploring dungeons in the future, then we should also consider trying to develop magic bags that we can keep equipped during combat."

"Oh, hmm. I guess it's true that we won't always be able to retrieve our magic bags," I said.

We would generally leave our magic bags at a set location before a battle and pick them up once the fighting was over. That would probably be fine as long as we only fought battles we could easily win, but if we ever had to retreat or ended up being separated from each other, we might lose our luggage.

"I think something like a waist bag could work," said Haruka. "If we want to keep them on our bodies during combat, they definitely need to be as light as possible."

"Yeah, that's true," I said. "Food isn't the only thing that we need to carry with us either, so developing freeze-dried food might actually be really important."

"There's also the option of rations, but those don't taste very good at all." Natsuki had a distant look in her eyes as she brought up that idea.

I probably had a similar look on my face as I thought about Natsuki's words. "Oh yeah, we actually used to eat that stuff. What happened to them?"

"We still have some left over," said Haruka. "You're the one who described them as tasting like paper clay, remember, Nao? Nobody wanted to eat the rations."

Mm, yeah, that makes perfect sense. There's no reason to go out of your way to eat rations when there's other food available that's fresh and tasty.

"It would be really nice if we learned to prepare freeze-dried food for our

party,” said Natsuki. “By the way, how did this topic come up in the first place?”

“Oh, well, Nao mentioned that we weren’t able to eat much soup during our time inside the dungeon.”

After Haruka summarized our discussion, Natsuki nodded. “I see. That’s a good point, but it would be something of a luxury to have soup inside of dungeons.”

“Mm, that’s true,” said Haruka. “Regardless, Nao asked me to make miso soup, so we’ll be having some with lunch for today.”

Yuki suddenly popped into the kitchen out of nowhere. “Whoa, did Nao tell you that he wants you to make miso soup for him every day for the rest of your lives? That’s basically a marriage proposal! Congrats, Haruka!”

It was as if she had been waiting for the perfect opportunity to join us. She slid over next to me and poked me in the ribs, grinning.

“I didn’t say anything like that at all! Also, why did you suddenly barge in out of nowhere and jump into this conversation, Yuki?!”

“I had a feeling that something interesting was going on, so I dashed over here!” said Yuki. “I knew I could trust my ability to sense fun from afar!”

“I feel like there’s something wrong with both your eyes and nose,” I said. “Ask Haruka to heal you.”

“I don’t know if my Cure Insanity spell is capable of healing the problems Yuki has,” said Haruka. “It might be too late for her...”

“Huh?! There’s nothing wrong with my head or any of my five senses!” Yuki’s eyes were wide open with shock.

Haruka just sighed and pointed upstairs. “In that case, go wake everyone else instead of standing around saying weird stuff. Lunch is almost ready.”

“Sure. Touya, Mary, Metea, it’s time for lunch!”

I watched as Yuki headed off to wake up everyone else, and soon, I heard some light footsteps.

“Food!” Metea appeared in the kitchen. I had expected her to be the first one

here out of the remaining three members of my party. However, she was still wearing her pajamas, and she had a serious case of bed head, so she must have just woken up.

Natsuki laughed, turned Metea around, and gave her a gentle push on the back. “You should change out of your pajamas before eating, Metea-chan.”

“Okay! I’ll go do that right away! Hmm, what should I wear today?”

Natsuki had told her off, but Metea still seemed to be in a good mood as she headed back to her room. The girls had made a lot of clothes for the sisters, and Metea seemed to enjoy having a lot more options than she had in the past.

The next person who appeared was Touya, also still in pajamas. “Morning. I smell something good in here,” he said with a loud yawn.

Touya was an adult, however, so Natsuki ignored him. She instructed me to help out with carrying the dishes, and I accompanied her to the dining room.

As we finished setting the table, Mary appeared. “I-I’m sorry for sleeping in!” She had brought Metea with her and was holding her hand. Both of them had changed out of their pajamas, and it looked like Metea’s bed head had been set in order as well.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not like we set a specific time for everyone to wake up,” I said. “Okay, let’s start eating.”

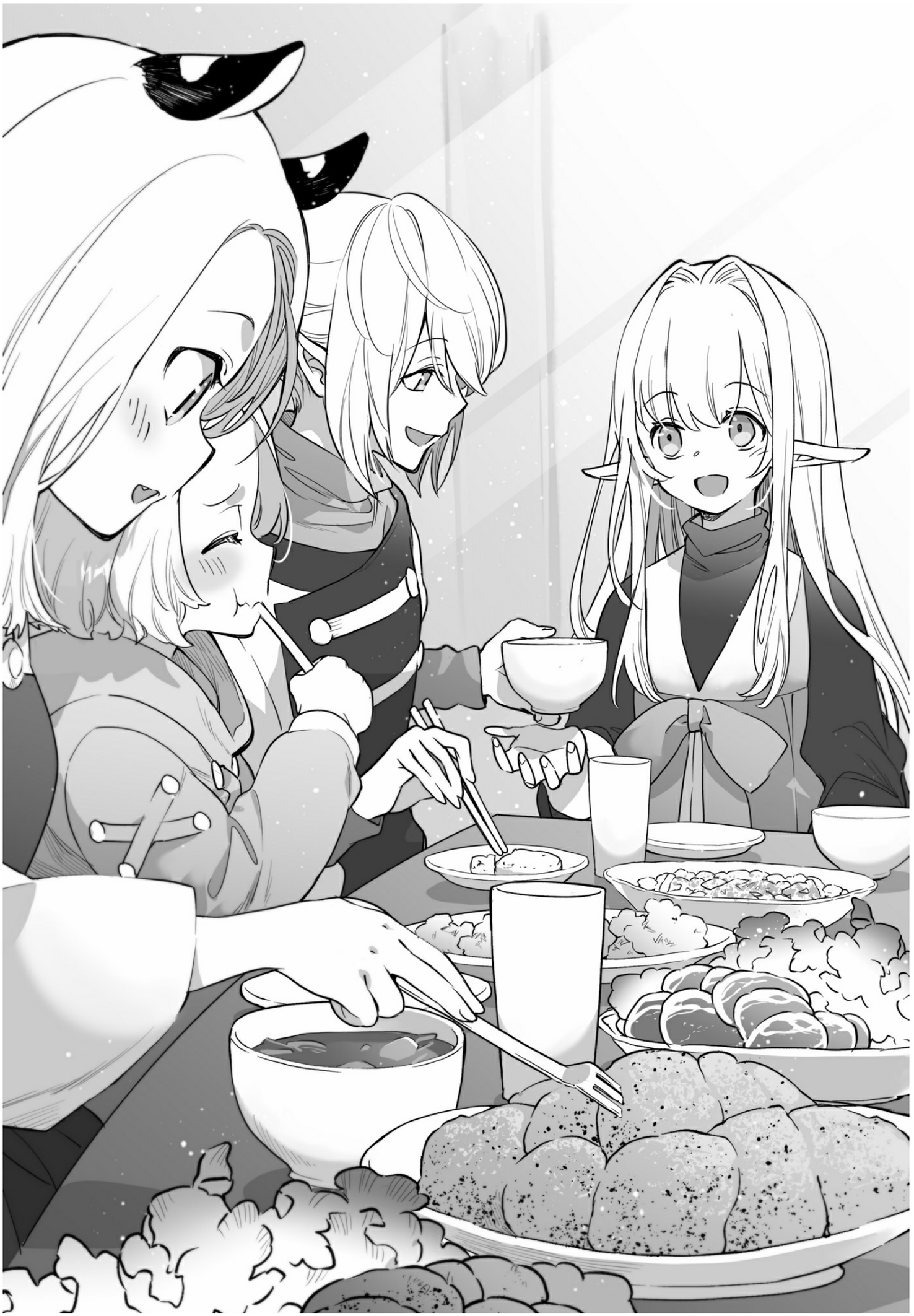
Everyone sat down in their chairs, and then the five of us who had grown up in Japan clasped our hands together to express our gratitude for the food. Mary and Metea copied our actions. We began to eat using chopsticks, except for the sisters, who were using forks and spoons.

“I gotta try out the miso soup first for sure,” I said.

Steam was wafting off of the warm soup. I took a sip. *Mm, yeah, delicious. It’s been a while since I last had miso, but it tastes just as refreshing as I remember. It’s true comfort food.* I suddenly felt like someone was looking at me, and when I glanced up, I discovered that Haruka was staring at the bowl of miso soup in my hands. I smiled and nodded at her, and she smiled back at me before sipping from her own bowl.

“Oh, Haruka made today’s lunch, huh?” said Touya. “Hmm...”

I tilted my head. “Wait, you can actually tell the difference, Touya? All of the food that the girls make tastes good, so it’s hard for me to tell.”



I sensed some hidden implication behind Touya's words. Of all the girls, Haruka had the highest-level Cooking skill, but in practice, Yuki and Natsuki were just as good; all three girls could cook on par with professional chefs.

"Yeah, I figured it out from your reaction." Touya grinned and put his hands on his cheeks. "There was a very obvious—"

It seemed he had something to say, but...

"By the way, we need to get rid of our old rations somehow," Haruka interrupted him. "If you have any issues with my cooking, Touya, then..."

Touya stood upright. "I don't have any issues at all, Haruka! I really appreciate your cooking!"

"Really, now? That's good to know," Haruka said with a laugh. "Eat quietly, then, okay?"

Touya responded with a dry laugh. *You know the saying "Speech is silver, silence is golden," right, Touya? I hope you truly understand it now.* For the time being, I continued eating quietly, but when I was halfway done with my lunch, I raised another topic.

"There's something I want to talk about, but feel free to continue eating while you listen," I said. "Everyone's down with prioritizing dungeon exploration for the near future, right?"

I felt fairly sure that we had all effectively agreed to this idea yesterday at the guild, but I wanted to make sure. Everyone nodded.

"I mean, it's not like we have anything else to do," said Touya. "We could head to a different town, but that doesn't seem like a great option to me."

"Hmm. I'm not against the idea of visiting a different town, but right now, we happen to have the dungeon near Laffan all to ourselves," said Yuki. "With that in mind, we might as well try to explore as deeply as we can, right?"

"Mm, I agree," said Haruka. "Also, the dungeon would be a pleasant environment to work in during the hottest parts of summer and the coldest parts of winter."

"And it's the perfect place to train Mary-chan and Metea-chan," said Natsuki.

“Um, well, I’m down for whatever everyone else wants to do.” Mary didn’t exactly sound gung ho about it, but apparently she was willing to tag along.

Metea hadn’t voiced an opinion—she was focused on eating food—but her ears were twitching, so she was probably still listening.

“In that case, I guess we should spend some time preparing before we challenge the dungeon again,” I said.

“Mm. We should definitely prepare the things that we were lacking during our first attempt,” said Haruka. “And by that, I mean things like watches and teleportation markers.”

“I think we should also discuss how to split our earnings with Mary and Metea,” said Touya.

Mary’s head popped up in surprise. “Oh, um, you don’t need to split anything with us! You’ve already provided us with all sorts of things, so...”

Haruka shook her head. “No, Touya’s right. You’ve formally joined our party, so we can’t just let you earn nothing from adventurer work.”

“But you paid for this house and our equipment with the money that all of you earned before, right? You’ve trained us too, and I feel like we’re still rookies,” said Mary. “I don’t think we deserve a split of this party’s earnings...”

The sisters were playing an active role in our adventuring, so it wouldn’t have been fair to pay them nothing, but Mary was right that we weren’t exactly peers within the party—not yet, anyway. We tried to factor in all of those considerations, and after some discussion, we arrived at the conclusion that for the time being, we would treat the sisters as rookie members of our party; until they reached adulthood, they would receive half shares. However, we wouldn’t charge them for the money we’d sunk into their equipment or the house. It seemed like Mary still felt that she and her sister were too much in our debt, but they both had the potential to become strong and contribute a lot to our party, so the rest of us all agreed that it would be a worthwhile investment.

“We need to go harvest some more dindels as well,” said Natsuki. “They can only be harvested during this time of the year.”

“We brought a lot back with us, but there were still a lot that weren’t ripe

yet," said Yuki. "Let's do our best to get them all!"

"I think we should ask Aera-san if she wants to join us gathering dindels," I said. "What do you all think?"

Aera-san was also aware that this was the season for dindels, and she had tagged along with us last year. That being the case, I felt like it would be unfair for us to harvest all of the dindels for ourselves without at least inviting her.

"Sure, I don't mind," said Haruka. "It's not like she'll hold us back."

"Yeah. In fact, she's way more nimble than we are in the treetops," I said. "A natural elf is definitely different from us."

Aera-san looked very young despite the fact that she was much older than us, so she was the perfect example of a normal elf.

"There are a few other minor tasks that we need to deal with, but I think that's it for the major ones," said Haruka. "Is there anything else we might have forgotten?"

Metea raised her hand. "We also need to go say thanks to Advashtrish—I mean, Advastlis-sama!" She'd stumbled over her words, but she corrected herself right away.

I felt fairly sure that Haruka thought of that as a minor task, but she gently smiled and nodded. "Mm, yeah, the god's name is a bit hard to pronounce. All right, then. Let's head to the temple after everyone's done with lunch."

"Okay! I'll pray and ask for a lot of favors!" Metea exclaimed.

The temple was tranquil as usual when we arrived. It wasn't a desolate place by any means, but the lack of activity was to be expected for a place of prayer. Since Mary and Metea were with us today, I decided to donate a bit extra and tossed in a whole gold coin before offering my prayers.

"Your current level is Level 20. You need to gain 9,080 EXP in order to level up."

Before I entered the dungeon, I'd been at Level 19, so I had actually leveled up. *Hmm. But I didn't slay that many monsters in the dungeon. Did I gain a lot of*

experience because I was exploring a completely different environment, or was it because practicing Time Magic is a very efficient way of gaining experience? If so, then—

“Eeeeeep!”

Mary and Metea suddenly both shrieked, interrupting my thoughts.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” Haruka asked, looking a bit worried.

“Err, um, I heard a weird voice in my head!” Metea exclaimed.

“Huh? Oh, did the voice talk about things like levels or experience points?” Yuki asked.

“Yes, it did,” Mary replied. “What exactly was that voice?”

We glanced at each other. We had discussed this possibility among ourselves, but we had dismissed it as unlikely, so...

“Uh, well, I think a simple way to describe it is that you’ve been blessed by the gods,” said Yuki. “In other words, you’re the same as us now, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Yeah, that’s a good way of explaining it,” said Haruka. “However, Mary, Metea, it’s best not to talk about this in public or around other people. Keep it a secret, okay?”

“Okay,” they replied in unison. They nodded with serious looks on their faces, but there were a lot of other things that we had to confirm and explain to them, so we only spoke to Ishuca-san briefly before hurrying back home. Once we were in the door, we started the process of gathering important information.

“First of all, what did the voice in your head tell you about your level and experience points?” I asked.

“I think it said I was Level 8,” Mary replied. “I don’t remember what it said about my experience points, though. I’m sorry.”

“It said my level was Level 6,” said Metea.

“Oh, don’t worry—your experience points aren’t too important, so it’s fine if you don’t remember,” I said. “I’m kind of surprised by how high your levels are,

however.”

When I’d visited the temple for the first time, I was Level 13, and that had been right after we had exterminated an orc nest. The sisters were much younger than we were, so I felt like they were exceptionally strong for their age.

“Well, they’ve worked very hard to catch up to us, so I’m not too surprised,” said Yuki. “Okay, let’s move on. Try thinking that you want to see your own abilities.”

“Okay!” said Mary. “Oh, something appeared in front of me!”

“Me too!” said Metea. “Uh, this looks kind of hard to read...”

It seemed that the sisters were now capable of opening their own status display screens as well. Neither one of them was fully literate yet, so it took some trial and error to get an accurate account of what information they were looking at. In the end, I was a bit surprised by the results.

```
  Name: Mary
Race: Beastwoman (Subspecies: Tiger. Age: 9)
Condition: Healthy
Skills: Level 1 Dagger Wielding, Level 1 Evasion, Level 2
Robust
Level 1 Sneak, Level 1 Disassemble
```

```
  Name: Metea
Race: Beastwoman (Subspecies: Tiger. Age: 7)
Condition: Healthy
Skills: Level 1 Dagger Wielding, Level 1 Evasion, Level 2
Robust
Level 1 Sneak, Level 1 Disassemble
```

The sisters had exactly the same skill builds, probably because we had trained them in the same way. Their Robust skills were higher in level than their other skills, but it was possible that their previous living conditions had played a role in that.

Something else stood out too.

“I guess both of you really are tiger girls,” said Touya. “I’m glad to know that my Appraisal skill wasn’t wrong.”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, that seems to be the case,” said Mary.

“Huh? Do you not really care about what your subspecies is?” Yuki asked.

Yuki seemed a bit confused by Mary’s casual reaction, but Mary just blinked back at her. “Um, nah. Bloodline is probably important for people like nobles, but it’s not something that matters to us. It’s not like anything will change about our ears or tails even if we know who our ancestors were.”

As she answered Yuki’s question, Mary was rubbing Metea’s ears, which were twitching, as if it was a bit ticklish. She looked up at Mary. “There’s something that does matter, big sis. Our bloodline might affect us when it comes to marrying and having children.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s true,” said Mary. “I guess it’s a good thing that we know about our subspecies now.”

Hmm. Is this kind of nonchalant attitude about one’s bloodline normal for beastfolk? It seems noteworthy that the sisters were raised in a neighborhood where there weren’t any other people of the same race apart from their dad. For now, I guess I’ll just keep this information in mind.

“In any case, it’s a good thing for our party that the two of you are able to check your own status display screens now,” I said.

“I’m sure it’s because I prayed really hard!” said Metea.

Metea seemed very proud of herself, but I felt like Advastlis-sama wasn’t the type of god who would be that kind to mortals. In fact, it was possible that he had only blessed the sisters as a reward for the amount of money we had donated. All the same, there was no reason for me to ruin Metea’s good mood, so I decided to keep quiet about it.

“Mm, yeah, I’m sure it was because you were a good girl.” I patted Metea on the head, and she laughed and wagged her tail.

“It’s definitely nice that the two of you have a way to gauge your strength

now," said Natsuki, "given that we're not very experienced at teaching and training other people."

"Mm, yeah," said Yuki. "Now we can see if we're actually training you properly or not."

"I had no idea that I had these skills," said Mary. "I feel even more motivated to train harder now!"

"Yeah, I'll work very hard to level up fast!" said Metea.

The sisters both clenched their fists, as if to indicate that they were determined to become very strong.

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The next day, we started carrying out the plans we'd laid earlier. Specifically, we spent a few days gathering dindels with Aera-san, crafting magical devices like watches and teleportation markers, and practicing the Area Teleportation spell. We continued our usual combat training as well, and the sisters kept up with our harsh training regimen without muttering any complaints, so it seemed like they hadn't been lying about their resolve to become stronger. I felt like our training sessions were a bit too harsh for little kids, but the sisters seemed very determined to become stronger and survive. However, it wouldn't have been right for us to make the sisters spend their youth doing nothing but train. Periodically, we made time to visit Remi and let the sisters play with her, or to eat snacks at Aera-san's café. About a month had passed after we returned from the dungeon when something out of the ordinary finally happened.

"Um, shouldn't we head back to the dungeon soon?"

Mary was the one who had suddenly brought up the topic of the dungeon, and I felt a bit surprised to hear that from her.

"Well, the plan is to head back in the near future," I said. "Why did you decide to ask?"

"Um, well, our party didn't earn a lot of money last time, right?" Mary asked. "I feel a bit concerned about the fact that we've only been spending money recently..."

I had felt fairly sure that Metea would be the one who would bring up the dungeon first, but when Mary explained her reasoning, I nodded. Her words made perfect sense. It was true that the incident back in Kelg was the last time we had earned a lot of money at one time. We had also received a monetary reward from Viscount Nernas, but that was related to the same incident. Our income over the last month or two had been the money that we earned from selling magicites, meat, and dindels. All of that had added up to no more than a few hundred gold coins, which was a lot less than our usual income.

As for our expenses, we had purchased new equipment for everyone in our party before entering the dungeon the last time, and we had also spent a little bit of money on ingredients for cooking. On top of that, we had also invested a lot of money into crafting magical devices, and the girls had purchased materials like cloth, thread, and cotton in large amounts, which they had used to make winter clothes for everyone in our party. We had also been donating money at the temple every day. Mary had witnessed all of that spending, so it made sense that she was a bit worried.

“We still have plenty of savings, but regardless, I guess you’ll probably get tired of training eventually if it’s all that we do,” I said. “What’s left to do, Haruka?”

“If your teleportation magic is ready for use in the field, all that’s left is to wait for the results of the guild’s appraisal,” said Haruka. “It’s not like we absolutely have to wait for the results, however.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s true that we can just head over and ask about it the next time we return to town,” I said.

Some of the items we had left with the guild had seemed like actual treasure. It was possible that they were just junk, but we wouldn’t have been adventurers if we weren’t curious about the value of our loot. The girls seemed like they, too, felt disappointed that we had to keep waiting, but...

“Oh, about that—Diola-san told me that the appraisal results came back two days ago,” said Touya.

The words that suddenly slipped out of Touya’s mouth changed everything, and everyone threw cold looks his way.

“Huh? You should have mentioned this earlier, Touya,” said Haruka.

“It’s bad to do something like that, big bro Touya,” said Metea.

“Yeah, you knew we were all excited about the appraisal results, right, Touya?” said Yuki. “I can’t believe you did this to us.”

After that severe scolding, Touya flinched and bowed his head. “S-Sorry, I completely forgot.”

It was only at that point that Natsuki chimed it. “Well, it’s not an urgent matter by any means, so let’s put this behind us. More importantly, why don’t we just head over to the guild now in order to ask about the appraisal?”

Oh yeah, I guess this isn’t really worth getting angry over. Touya was saved by Natsuki’s intervention. After that, all of us headed over to the guild. Diola-san guided us to the same room where she’d seen us the other day and then brought over the three items that we had left with the guild.

“You’re here to inquire about our appraisal of these items, right?” Diola asked. “I assumed that you would come here right away...”

“Oh, well, Touya completely forgot about it, so that’s why we’re late,” I said.

Diola-san glanced at Touya and laughed. “I see. I was just wondering if your party wanted to know right away or not, so it’s not a problem. Let’s start with the lamp. It’s a very well-known type of magical device called an insect repellent lamp.”

“That’s a very simple and straightforward name,” said Haruka.

“Mm, and the name accurately describes how the device works. When you pour mana into it, it lights up, and the light repels insects,” said Diola. “It’s very popular among adventurers. Adventurers like your party probably won’t get bitten by insects, but insects nearby can be very irritating.”

We generally used Sanctuary to keep insects away, but there were very few people out there who could use that spell, so it made sense to me that insect repellent lamps were popular among adventurers. When Diola-san said that insects probably couldn’t bite us, she was alluding to the fact that normal insects wouldn’t be able to pierce the skin of high-level adventurers. After all, it

was possible to become strong enough that even knives couldn't cut you. However, even if the insects couldn't physically damage adventurers, they would still cause you some amount of mental suffering just by buzzing around, so a magical device that could repel insects would be very useful.

"Not many adventurers own insect repellent lamps, however," said Diola. "It's mostly rich people who tend to buy them."

According to Diola-san, rich people and children were vulnerable to bites from insects due to the fact that they weren't strong like adventurers. As a result, devices like this were greatly valued among the wealthy; sometimes the lamps would be given as gifts to celebrate the birth of a child. It seemed that it was possible to make an insect repellent lamp with alchemy, but the ones from dungeons were much more effective and therefore much more valuable.

"The guild pays a considerable sum for insect repellent lamps," said Diola. "Would you like to sell this one?"

"We're not struggling for money, so we'd like to keep it if it's something that we can't easily buy," said Haruka.

Yuki and Natsuki nodded right away.

"Yeah, I'm down with the idea of keeping the insect repellent lamp," said Yuki. "It would be great for us to have around if one of us ever gives birth to a child. Do you have any plans in that regard, Haruka?" she asked with a playful grin.

Haruka responded calmly to Yuki's teasing. "No, I don't. We can lend this to Yasue, however."

"Oh, yes, an insect repellent lamp might be useful for Yasue-san," said Natsuki. "I think that's a nice idea."

"I'm also down with the idea of keeping the lamp," I said. "I'm confident that it'll be useful for us in all sorts of ways."

We were aware that insects like mosquitoes carried and spread scary diseases like malaria. On top of that, we had been transported to a different world, so there were a lot of additional factors we had to worry about, like whether a mother would pass her immunities on to her child.

“All right, I guess that means we’re keeping the lamp,” said Touya. “Mary, Metea, you’re okay with that too, right?”

“Of course,” they replied together.

Diola-san sighed after she heard our party’s conclusion. “You can get over one hundred gold coins for an insect repellent lamp, but I suppose that’s not attractive enough for your party. All right, please take this back before we move on to the pendant. This pendant is actually a very powerful magic resist pendant.”

“Magic resist? I assume that means it can protect you from magic?” Haruka asked.

“Well, it’s more like it can weaken the potency of magic,” Diola replied. “This is a valuable magical device, just like the lamp...”

Diola-san asked us what we wanted to do with the magic resist pendant, but all of us shook our heads.

“We’ll keep the pendant too,” I said. “Safety is more important to us than money.”

Safety was the biggest priority for our party, so a small amount of money in exchange for something that could protect us wouldn’t have been worth it at all. In fact, we probably wouldn’t have sold the pendant even if we had been struggling for money.

“I figured as much. By the way, just so you’re aware, this magic resist pendant affects all kinds of magic,” said Diola. “It will weaken buffs and healing as well, so keep that in mind.”

Haruka paused in thought, but she quickly reached a conclusion and nodded to herself. “...Oh, I guess that means it doesn’t only affect offensive magic.”

“Mm. No one has yet invented a magic resist pendant that has only positive effects,” said Diola.

Friendly fire was an inherent risk associated with offensive magic, and magical devices wouldn’t distinguish between the magic used by your allies and the magic used by your enemies. It would have been a different story if you could

have developed some kind of IFF system for magic itself, but that was probably near impossible. You would have to be capable of making your own magic resist pendants on top of being very talented at magic, so it would be much easier to use a magic resist pendant with an awareness of its limitations. As for the Magic Barrier skill, which we already had, it couldn't distinguish between allies and enemies either, so we couldn't block our foes' offensive magic while also allowing healing magic from our allies to pass through the barrier.

"There are magic resist pendants that are specialized for certain types of magic like Fire Magic. Those will probably have almost no effect on healing magic from your allies," said Diola. "However..."

"Those pendants are useless against other types of magic, I assume?" I asked.

"Yes," Diola replied. "Fire Magic is generally used for offensive magic, however, so magic resist pendants that are specialized against Fire Magic are much more valuable than most other kinds."

And indeed, Fire Magic was the main type of magic that our party used to deal damage to our foes. We could use other types of magic to deal damage, but Fire Magic was the simplest and easiest. However, in the future, we might encounter monsters that were resistant to Fire Magic, so we probably had to account for that possibility if we wanted our future dungeon exploration to be successful.

"Another thing to keep in mind is that the magic resist pendant won't work if you directly touch someone and use magic on them," said Diola.

"Hmm. So if you hold the hand of the person wearing a magic resist pendant and use healing magic on them, then the healing magic won't be weakened?" Haruka asked.

"Yes, that's right. The same applies to offensive magic, however," Diola replied. "Magic resist pendants are useless against foes who make physical contact with you before using magic, although it would be quite dangerous to let a foe get that close to you in the first place."

Touya chuckled and shrugged. "Yeah, if you can get close enough to touch someone's hand, then it would be faster to just stab them with a knife or something instead of using magic."

Magic was actually very difficult to use in close combat. The mages in our party, including myself, could handle such situations to a certain extent, but it wasn't easy to make physical contact with a foe before using magic. If used within melee range, Fire Magic could easily backfire against its user, after all. Based on our experience healing Mary's injuries when we first met her, we had learned by chance that it was possible to regrow fingers with the Regenerate spell, but if the price of survival was casting a spell that damaged your own hand, that would already be a strategic defeat for us as a party that prioritized safety above all.

"A magic resist pendant can be very helpful if used properly," said Diola. "It might be difficult to decide which member of your party should wear it, however."

Diola-san smiled as she handed the pendant over to me. I felt like everyone was staring at my hands. I glanced at Haruka, Natsuki, and Yuki, but all of them were casually looking away from me.

"Hmm. Mary or Metea would be the logical choices if we go by physical strength," I said.

"Th-There's no way I could accept something like this!" said Mary.

"We're not the ones that have to fight strong foes!" said Metea.

Oh, yeah, I guess that makes sense. Mary and Metea stay on the back line for boss battles while the rest of us take the fore, and the plan is to maintain the same formation in the future, so...

"In that case, I think one of our frontline fighters could put this pendant to the best use," I said. "Do you want to wear this, Touya?"

"Me? Nah, Natsuki's weaker than me in terms of physical strength, so I think it should be her," said Touya. "Besides, think about it. Who do you think the pendant would look better on, me or Natsuki?"

"The answer to that is obvious," I said.

"Right?" said Touya. "On top of that, as long as Natsuki's safe, she can heal our injuries, so that's another reason."

Oh, right. The magic resist pendant won't affect healing magic that's used on other people, so it's still beneficial for Touya as one of our frontliners that Natsuki not get downed in combat.

"All right, then," I said. "Here you go, Natsuki."

Natsuki seemed a bit hesitant to accept it. "Um, is it really all right for me to wear this?" She glanced at Haruka and Yuki to see what they thought, but both of them nodded.

"Mm. You're the one that fights on the front line more often than I do, Natsuki," said Yuki.

"This is the best choice for our party if we factor in potential scenarios in which magic that inflicts negative status effects or ailments gets used against us," said Haruka.

"Very well. In that case, I'll accept this," said Natsuki. "Would you be willing to put this pendant on me, Nao-kun?"

"Huh? Me?" I asked. "I mean, sure, I guess, but—"

"Hold on."

Haruka suddenly grabbed my hands and stopped me before I could even attempt to put the pendant on Natsuki's neck.



“Oh, what’s wrong, Haruka?” asked Natsuki.

“I agreed to let you wear the pendant, but I didn’t agree to something like that, Natsuki.” Haruka had a smile on her face, but it looked slightly forced.

Natsuki put on her own much more playful smile. “Tee hee. In that case, would you like to put the pendant on me, Haruka?”

“Ugh. Fine, I’ll do it.” Haruka snatched the pendant out of my hands, walked over behind Natsuki, and looped the chain around her neck. *Uh, I mean, I don’t mind, but my hands hurt a bit from how hard you grabbed them, Haruka.*

“Tee hee, it looks like everything worked out in the end,” said Diola. “Conflicts between adventurers over valuable items are rare, but they can still happen, and I would hate to see something like that happen among the members of your party.”

“Really?” Haruka gave her a suspicious look. “Tell me the truth, Diola-san—did you give that pendant to Nao in an attempt to start something?”

Diola-san brushed aside Haruka’s doubts with a fake-looking smile. “Of course not. Trust me. Let’s move on to the final item. This is called a blessing orb.”

“...Well, I guess I’ll take your word for it,” said Haruka. “More importantly, I’m curious about the last item. Tell us more about it.”

“Okay,” said Diola. “You might have been able to guess from the name alone, but you can obtain a blessing from this orb if you pour mana into it.”

According to Diola-san, there were a lot of different types of blessing orbs out there, and you could receive blessings like the ability to wield weapons masterfully, knowledge of how to cook or smith, and changes in your physical traits, including your height. On top of that, some of the most powerful blessing orbs could even change your gender.

It sounded like blessing orbs were extremely different from any of the magical devices that we had obtained so far. It wouldn’t have been unusual to find items like blessing orbs in games, but this world was a realistic one with only a few game elements, so I felt like blessing orbs were very strange and mystical items.

“Whoa, blessing orbs sound really amazing,” I said. “So, what kind of blessing can we obtain from this orb here?”

“I’m very sorry, but the guild wasn’t able to obtain that information,” said Diola.

“...Huh? What do you mean?”

I pressed Diola-san for further details, but it seemed that the guild could ascertain only basic information through the appraisal process; you would be lucky if you happened to obtain detailed information. Apparently the trade-off for the comparatively cheap appraisal fee of one gold coin was that the guild wouldn’t invest that much time or effort in the process.

Diola-san noted that you could request a more thorough appraisal in exchange for an additional fee, but it was a lot of extra money—and took a lot of extra time. In fact, the extra cost was so great that it might completely offset the profit you made selling the item. That sounded exactly like Boltac’s Trading Post in the *Wizardry* games, but considering that the guild had to pay outside experts a lot of money to carry out the appraisal, it didn’t seem to be a complete rip-off for adventurers.

“The only people who can appraise and obtain detailed information about the exact blessing conveyed by these orbs are pious, high-ranking priests,” said Diola. “You can request their services, but...”

“It takes donations, right?” I asked.

“Yes,” Diola replied. “You’ll have to donate a *lot* of money. Would you like me to introduce you to someone who can do this?”

“Nah, we know someone we can ask, so for now, we’d like to bring this blessing orb back with us,” I said.

“Very well. However, just so you know, I would suggest that you not use the blessing orb without first having it appraised by a priest,” said Diola. “There are some blessings that may have negative effects, after all.”

“Mm,” said Haruka. “Thank you for the warning, Diola-san.”

Land mine skills were a frightening prospect that we were well aware of. True,

part of the reason that there were so many land mine skills was that the students in my class had asked for all sorts of favors, but even so, it was a fact that Advastlis-sama had strewn those land mines in our path.

Still, it should have been obvious that nothing good would come of asking for power from someone who introduced himself as an evil god. Doom was the ending you would have expected in a story about people who instantly caved and blindly trusted a suspicious figure offering them great power.

We couldn't use the Help Guide to dodge a land mine from a blessing orb, and there was no way we would take a gamble and use the orb without knowing exactly what kind of blessing it would convey. I wanted to hope that the Plunder skill wasn't one of the potential "blessings" we could obtain from the orb, but even something like the Extremely Attractive Appearance skill would cause a lot of trouble for Haruka and me as elves. In the end, we thanked Diola-san for her help, then left the guild for our next destination.

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"Oh, I see that you have a blessing orb," said Ishuca.

"You recognize what this is, Ishuca-san?" I asked.

"Of course," Ishuca replied. "I am the head priest of this temple, after all."

Of course, the person my party could ask for help was none other than Ishuca-san, so after leaving the guild, we had immediately dropped by the temple. Given that Ishuca-san had successfully identified the blessing orb the moment I showed it to her, I felt very impressed by her insight as a head priest.

"Is it that easy to tell what this is at a glance?" I asked.

"Well, it might be hard for normal priests like Ange to identify something like this right away, but it's fairly easy for head priests."

Hmm. In the future, I guess we should probably just bring similarly shaped orbs to the temple first, before bringing them to the guild. One gold coin isn't that expensive, but coming to Ishuca-san will save us a month of waiting for the guild's appraisal results.

"Does that mean you can also determine what blessing this orb conveys,

Ishuca-san?” I asked.

Diola-san had told us that only high-ranked pious priests could appraise blessing orbs, but Ishuca-san nodded nonchalantly, so it must not have been a big deal for her. “Mm. Not every head priest is capable of that, but I am. Would you like me to appraise your blessing orb?”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” I said. “But how much would it cost?”

“Well, it would normally cost at least ten gold coins,” said Ishuca. “Do you also want a certificate of appraisal?”

“A certificate of appraisal?” I asked. “What’s that?”

“It’s a certified document that states the kind of blessing orb that was identified. You need to have one in order to sell a blessing orb. However, I’ll have to report to my superiors in order for them to issue the certificate...”

Ishuca-san’s voice trailed off at the end. She was probably implying that the money we donated in exchange for her service as an appraiser would ultimately flow to her superiors. *Hmm. Does that mean that as long as we don’t ask for the certificate, all of the money will go to this temple and the orphanage?* I turned around and glanced at the others.

Haruka nodded back at me before taking ten gold coins out of her wallet and handing them over to Ishuca-san. “We don’t need a certificate of appraisal.”

Ishuca smiled as she accepted the donation from Haruka. “Thank you very much.”

If we had to pay for the service either way, then it was a better use of our money to support the orphanage here instead of some other place that we knew nothing about. Anyway, we planned to use the blessing orb for ourselves, so a certificate of appraisal held no value for us. We would need one to sell the blessing orb if the blessing turned out to be useless, but we could cross that bridge when we got to it. Anyway, I felt like an orb with a useless blessing wouldn’t be very valuable anyway, so we probably wouldn’t regret this decision.

“Please allow me to take the orb for a moment,” said Ishuca.

Ishuca-san took the blessing orb from me and placed it on the altar of the temple in a reverential way, then knelt before it. She began to pray. After spending a few minutes in prayer, she stood again, but nothing seemed to have happened. I hadn't exactly expected a special effects extravaganza, but the appraisal process as carried out by a priest seemed pretty boring to me.

"It seems this blessing orb can increase the wielder's strength," said Ishuca.

Ishuca-san had gotten concrete results despite the unimpressive process, but the information she provided sounded a lot more ambiguous than what I had expected to hear.

"Strength?" I asked.

"Mm. It's something along the lines of an increase in your physical strength," said Ishuca.

Man, I thought that the results would be more specific—like maybe we could obtain a skill related to swordsmanship or something like that. Actually, wait, hmm. I guess people in this world normally don't have access to their own status display screens, and they don't know about the existence of skills.

Natsuki had a slightly troubled look on her face after we heard Ishuca-san's words, so it seemed like I wasn't the only one feeling a bit disappointed. "Um, is it not possible to get more detailed information about the blessing?" she asked. "You were praying for quite a while..."

"Well, it's hard to put it in words, but when I pray to appraise a blessing orb, an image appears in my mind," said Ishuca. "There are some straightforward images, like a sword, which indicates that the orb will enable the user to wield a sword skillfully, but there are more ambiguous images as well. This orb actually falls into the category of straightforward and simple to understand."

"I see," said Natsuki.

Hmm. Actually, now that I think about it, it makes sense that she would only get an ambiguous image of the effects of a blessing orb. It's not like you can describe an increase in strength in terms of concrete stats, like an increase of 10 points. Even if Ishuca-san gave us some numbers, we don't know our exact stats, so we would have no idea about the exact value of those numbers. For example,

if my strength stat is currently 10, then an increase of 10 would make me twice as strong, but if my strength is over 10,000, it would be a totally inconsequential increase.

"In any case, that means that there are no downsides to using this blessing orb, right?" I asked.

"No, you don't have to worry about any negative effects," Ishuca replied.

All right, that's all I need to know. It wouldn't be funny if we fell for a land mine skill at this point, long after we successfully dodged them during character creation.

"Thank you very much for your help, Ishuca-san," I said.

"Don't worry about it," said Ishuca. "Feel free to bring anything here that you want appraised." She smiled playfully. "I especially welcome items for which you don't want or need a certificate of appraisal."

★★★★★★★★★

"What do you guys think?" I asked. "Do you think we'll get a skill from using this blessing orb? Or rather, can blessing orbs even grant you skills in the first place?"

"If this orb grants a skill that increases physical strength, then it might be something like the Enhanced Muscles skill," said Natsuki.

"It's possible that this blessing orb will provide us with something that isn't a skill, like Nao suggested," said Haruka. "We can't see our own stats in our status display screens, but in effect, we might receive an increase to a strength stat, just like in a game."

We had returned home from the temple and were standing around the blessing orb as we discussed what to do with it. An increase in strength would be good for any one of us, but it wouldn't be easy to decide what would be the most efficient use of that blessing.

"We need to decide who should use this orb." I glanced around at everyone, but all of them were looking at me for some reason.

"Well, if this blessing orb can increase the strength of anybody who uses it,

then I think you're the one who should use it, Nao," said Yuki. "Recently, you've even started losing matches to me. At this rate, even Mary and Metea might become physically stronger than you before too much longer."

"Ugh!"

I was at a loss for words after Yuki hit me with the harsh truth. I had participated in the same training sessions as everyone else, and our levels were about the same too, but I was the second weakest in terms of physical strength—not counting Mary and Metea. In fact, at this point, I felt like I was no match for anyone except Haruka, and it was true that even Yuki could now overpower me sometimes during our sparring sessions. I had been more or less even with Natsuki and Yuki in the beginning, but that clearly wasn't the case anymore. *Is this because of racial traits? I mean, I'm stronger than them in terms of mana and magic, so it would make sense, but as a guy, I feel a bit conflicted about being physically weaker. Ugh...*

"Yeah, it's true that you've become physically weak, Nao," said Touya. "You used to be about as strong as me, but..."

That was back during our time on Earth, Touya. I'm way too physically weak compared to you now. Touya didn't look very muscular, but he was the strongest of any of us. I was still much physically stronger than I had been back on Earth despite the fact that I was one of the weakest members of our party, however.

"There's also the option of making Touya even stronger, right? I don't think that would be such a bad choice," I said.

"Nah, there's no need for that," said Touya. "I'll become stronger naturally over time."

"What about Haruka instea—?"

But when I glanced at her, she shook her head and said with a laugh, "The idea of being physically stronger than you doesn't really sit well with me, Nao."

Hmm. I mean, yeah, it would feel a bit soul crushing if I were the weakest member of my party. Mary and Metea are little girls and aren't even ten years old, so it would definitely feel painful being weaker than them, even if I factored

in the differences in our racial traits. I should probably start working on leveling up my Enhanced Muscles skill, but having more base strength can't hurt.

"All right, then," I said. "Just to make sure, is it okay with everyone if I use this blessing orb?"

"Mm. If we find more blessing orbs in the future, the rest of us will probably end up using them for ourselves, so feel free to go ahead and use it," said Haruka.

Everyone nodded when I asked for confirmation, so I grabbed the blessing orb and poured mana into it. I heard a voice in my head that said, "Your strength has increased," and the orb in my hands gave off a faint light—and disappeared.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed. "Looks like I used it successfully...?"

"Yeah, it seems like you did," said Haruka. "Blessing orbs disappear after use, huh? I guess it's good that you can easily tell if you've used one successfully, and it also prevents people from getting scammed."

"Mm, yes, it's good that there's no such thing as an empty blessing orb," said Natsuki.

I later learned that the certificates of appraisal issued by temples would disappear along with the orb after it was used, so you couldn't use those to scam people either. On the other hand, most blessing orbs that lacked certificates of appraisal were fake, so only stupid people would purchase stuff like that.

"Does anything feel different to you, Nao?" Haruka asked.

"Uh, I can't really tell," I replied. "I heard a voice in my head, though."

"A voice? Who was it?" Touya asked.

Anyone who claimed to hear voices in their head would normally be considered crazy, but that was a perfectly normal phenomenon in this world, which was why Touya had asked me about it so casually.

"I don't know. However, one thing I can say for sure is that it definitely wasn't Advastlis-sama." I heard Advastlis-sama's voice every time I dropped by the temple and prayed to check my experience points, so there was no way I

wouldn't recognize his voice. Advastlis-sama sounded like a young boy, but the voice that I'd heard in my head this time had sounded a bit feminine instead.

"A voice, huh? I wonder if that means that the gods are the ones who create blessing orbs," said Haruka.

"Yeah, I bet that's the case," I said. "Unlike the other items we found in treasure chests, you can't make blessing orbs with alchemy, right?"

"Mm. It wouldn't be fair at all if alchemists could craft things like that," said Haruka.

"Yeah, alchemists would be way too overpowered in that case," said Yuki, shaking her head. But despite her words, she looked like she felt a bit disappointed.

It would definitely have been very convenient if you could craft blessing orbs with alchemy, but life wasn't that easy in this world.

"It's possible that there are other beings who can make blessing orbs, but I hope it's only the gods," said Natsuki.

"Oh, are you thinking of demons or something like that, Natsuki?" asked Touya. "I don't know if they actually exist in this world, but if you used a blessing orb made by demons, I bet you'd be doomed."

"Uh, you know, I just used one, so please don't make me feel uneasy like that." Still, a priest had appraised the blessing orb that I had used, and as far as I could tell, there were no issues, so I felt fairly sure that nothing bad would happen to me.

"Demons shouldn't be an issue if they're like the demons in Christianity," said Natsuki. "Most of the beings that Christianity treats as demons used to be the gods of other religions."

Oh, yeah, I didn't really think of that, since Japan has incorporated all sorts of gods into its culture. The Seven Lucky Gods are a colorful mix of people who actually existed and wrathful deities from as far away as India. Japanese religion integrates a lot of different influences, like a melting pot, but I think it's a good thing if it leads to a lack of conflicts over religion, considering all of the religious wars throughout humanity's history on Earth.

“I wonder if the Imperial ancestor goddess Amaterasu-sama would have been turned into a demon if Christianity had managed to conquer Japan,” I said.

“I have no idea what would have happened in that kind of alternate history,” said Natsuki. “I can’t deny the possibility, but there’s a special relationship between the Japanese people and His Majesty the Emperor, so that’s a factor to keep in mind.”

“It’s a good thing for us that faith is fairly flexible in this world,” said Haruka. “It’s flexible enough that Advastlis-sama introduced himself as an ‘evil’ god despite the fact that he’s worshiped by a lot of people.”

“Mary, Metea, neither of you worship any specific god, right?” Yuki asked.

“Mm. We used to visit a nearby temple to pray, but that was about it,” said Mary.

“We worship Advashtrish-sama now!” said Metea.

Uh, Metea, you pronounced his name wrong again.

“Ha ha. Well, faith might be flexible, but divine punishments also affect people very directly,” I said. “That’s not relevant to us, however.”

“Mm. Let’s continue to maintain upright conduct and good manners, at least to a reasonable extent, for our entire lives,” said Haruka.

“Okay!” we all said in unison.

Once Haruka had gotten that expression of consensus from us, she nodded, then continued, “We should now be ready to head back to the dungeon, right? Nao, Yuki, are you two able to teleport everyone in our party?”

Yuki nodded firmly. “Yeah, we’re good to go! In terms of distance, Nao can teleport us out of the dungeon from where we left off last time!”

“What about yourself, Yuki?” Haruka asked, sounding a little exasperated.

Yuki just laughed, then turned to me for backup. “Well, I think I can pull off teleportation magic as long as I set up the markers properly ahead of time. I can’t teleport as far as Nao can, but I worked hard and tried my best to improve. Right, Nao?”

“Mm, yeah, you definitely worked really hard and put in a lot of effort,” I said. “In fact, our training sessions were so intense that we couldn’t let other people watch.”

When you tried to push yourself beyond the limits of your mana, you would feel sick, and Yuki had definitely pushed herself, so...

“Yeah, we flirted so much that it would have been embarrassing in front of an audience!” said Yuki.

“It felt more like caring for an invalid,” I said. “I actually leveled up my Light Magic thanks to you, Yuki.”

I had used the Light Cure and the Purification spells on a fairly regular basis during our teleportation training. However, the Light Cure spell consumed a lot less mana than the Purification spell, so it hadn’t been very effective on Yuki when she was merely feeling uncomfortable due to using a lot of mana. In fact, I felt like the Light Cure spell had probably been useful only as a placebo.

“I see. Well, if you worked really hard, then I have no complaints,” said Haruka. “So, what are the concrete results of your training?”

“I’ve gotten to the point that I can teleport everyone in our party to a location one kilometer away regardless of whether I make use of a teleportation marker,” I said.

I had offered that explanation after seeing the slightly cold look in Haruka’s eyes.

Natsuki blinked a bit as if surprised. “Um, isn’t that actually rather amazing, Nao-kun?”

“Well, I’d have to use almost all of my mana to pull that off,” I replied. “I wouldn’t be able to move around after that without getting some rest first.”

“I can teleport about half of the distance that Nao can,” said Yuki. “I can teleport farther than one kilometer if I only have to teleport myself, though.”

The distance you could teleport wouldn’t change even if you used teleportation magic without a marker, but teleportation markers would affect the precision of the teleportation, which was actually very important. Markers

would help make it a little bit easier to use teleportation magic, and your magic would fail to activate if you tried to use a marker to teleport somewhere that you couldn't, although it was still possible to end up stuck inside of stone if you were very unlucky. Apparently it was virtually impossible unless you were a complete novice at teleportation magic *and* very unlucky, but the idea still spooked me.

"Anyway, it sounds like we don't have to worry about that trap at the beginning of the dungeon sealing us inside again," said Touya. "Should we head back to the dungeon tomorrow?"

"Yeah, let's go!" said Metea. "Let's hunt a lot of meat again!"

"We still have plenty of tyrant picow meat left, but it's definitely true that we've depleted a lot of the meat that we stocked in our magic bags," said Haruka.

We ate a lot of meat for our own meals, but the main reason we had depleted our meat reserves was because we had sold some to Aera-san. We hadn't been hunting orcs very frequently before heading over to Kelg, so our reserves had already been running low, and we had also supplied her with a wide variety of meats recently. However, according to Aera-san, the more varied selection of meats was actually quite popular among her customers; they never got tired of eating meat due to all the options that were available to them. I felt like part of it was just Aera-san's ability to cook any kind of meat, however.

"Oh, it's very bad to have very little meat stored up!" Metea hastily stood up. "Let's go to the dungeon right now!"

"Huh? Right now?" Yuki laughed awkwardly. "We didn't plan on doing that today, Metea."

Mary tried to calm her sister down. "Met, being selfish is a bad thin—"

I interrupted Mary to say, "Actually, I think now would be a perfect time. I want to test the actual effects of the blessing orb as well."

"Really? Hmm." Haruka paused in thought but soon nodded. "Well, I guess it doesn't matter if we head back right now instead of tomorrow. It's not like it's going to be a day trip."

It seemed like Yuki wasn't exactly against Metea's idea either, so we set out for the dungeon right away.

"Do things feel any different for you, Nao? Can you feel the effects of the blessing orb?"

We had just arrived at the dungeon when Haruka asked me that question. I frowned and paused in thought.

"Hmm. Kind of, I guess? Yuki, I need your help for a sec." I unsheathed my kodachi.

"Oh, are you challenging me to a contest of strength?" When Yuki saw what I was doing, she drew her own kodachi. "I'll teach you a lesson!" she said in a macho voice.

We locked blades. In the past, it had been difficult for me to hold my ground against her, but now I felt like I could push back against her a bit.

"Hmm, yeah, it seems like you've definitely gotten a bit stronger, but it doesn't feel like a significant increase," said Yuki. "Oh no, I'm gonna lose, ha ha!"

Yuki was laughing even as I was slowly overpowering her, so I sighed and sheathed my kodachi. "If you have time to joke around, then I definitely haven't become significantly stronger. I bet you'll lap me again in no time."

I had barely managed to save face this time, and I felt uneasy about the future given my physical limitations as an elf.

"What if the effect of the blessing was an increase like the base growth rate of your strength or something like that instead of your current muscular strength?" Haruka asked.

"It would be amazing if that were the case, but I don't know," Natsuki replied. "If the gods are the ones who make blessing orbs, then I think it could be either one."

Nothing was impossible for gods, a fact of which we were well aware, having experienced a god's power for ourselves. *Man, I hope the blessing actually is an*

increase in the base growth rate of my strength like Haruka suggested. My big weakness is a lack of physical strength.

While I was musing to myself, Touya suddenly clapped me on the shoulder. “I feel like there’s no point overthinking this, Nao. The results of training are different for each person, so just accept whatever happens as your fate. Simple and easy, right?”

“...Yeah, I guess you’re right about that,” I said. “It’s not like we’ll do anything different.”

Even if we learned the exact effects of the blessing, there would be no reason for us to change our regimen, so—

“Yeah, there are other areas where you can shine even if you end up becoming physically weaker than Metea!” Yuki put in. “Right, Metea?”

Metea smiled and nodded. “Yeah! Nothing will change even if I become stronger than you, big bro Nao!”

Ugh. On second thought, I should probably devote more time to working out.

“W-Well, um, one advantage that you have over us is your ability to use magic, Nao-san,” said Mary. “And besides, we would feel a bit bad if there wasn’t at least one thing that we could be better at...”

Mary’s words warmed my heart, so I patted her on the head, and she looked down, embarrassed. “Thanks, Mary. You’re a really good girl.” Metea started pouting when she saw that, so I patted her too and added, “Oh, you’re a good girl as well, Metea.”

Metea smiled right away. She looked really cute when smiling, but as one of her guardians, I wanted to remain physically stronger than her at least until she became an adult.

“In any case, for the time being, I think we should focus on what each of us excel at individually,” I said. “Where do you think we should set up a teleportation marker, Yuki?”

“Hmm. Well, I think a flat area would be good.”

“Yeah, I like that idea,” I said. “It would be awful if we teleported to our

destination and immediately twisted our ankles due to a hole in the ground or something like that. However...”

We were standing where we had once won a difficult battle against a lava boar, but I couldn’t see any area that met the conditions we were looking for.

“I guess I’ll have to flatten the ground with my Earth Magic.” Yuki walked over to an area a bit to the left of the dungeon’s entrance. “This should do just fine, right?” She placed her hands on the ground and started to pour mana into it. The ground around her rapidly flattened out.

Natsuki covered her mouth in surprise. “Wow, I’m genuinely impressed, Yuki! When we first arrived in this world, the most you were capable of was digging your own grave, but you’ve improved a great deal!”

“Hm? Oh, come on, I made that joke over a year ago!” said Yuki. “Why bring it up now?!”

“Well, it seemed as though you wanted me to laugh at your joke back then, so I figured that now would be a good time,” said Natsuki.

“I didn’t ask for mocking laughter! Come on, I’ve practiced my Earth Magic a lot since then!”

I had no clue what Yuki and Natsuki were bantering about. *Are they talking about something that happened between them before they met up with the rest of us? Hmm...*

“Uh, I don’t know what you two are talking about, but it’s true that Yuki has worked hard at practicing her Earth Magic,” I said.

“Mm, I used my Earth Magic to do things like make a bathtub and maintain our flower beds,” said Yuki. “Oh, hmm. Now that I think about it, I haven’t really used Earth Magic for combat very often.”

“Your Earth Magic was very useful during our battle against a lava boar,” I said. “We should definitely practice other types of magic a bit more, however.”

Yuki tilted her head, so I explained what I had been thinking about the other day. Yuki nodded in comprehension, as did Haruka.

“Mm, it’s true that we’re quite reliant on Fire Magic to deal damage to our

foes," said Haruka.

"Yeah. We use other types of magic in our daily lives, but not for combat," said Yuki. "All right, then. Should we restrain ourselves from using Fire Magic as much as possible until we manage to get back to the point where we left off last time?"

"That doesn't sound like a very strict self-imposed rule, but I guess safety matters more than practice if it comes down to it," I said. "So, how are we supposed to set up a teleportation marker?"

Teleportation markers looked like square boards, fifty centimeters on a side and about three centimeters thick. When I placed one in the center of the area that Yuki had flattened, it stood out a lot.

"We can't just leave a teleportation marker here like this!" Yuki exclaimed. "Monsters wander around here! One of them will definitely find this thing and destroy it sooner or later!"

"Yeah, you're definitely right about that," I said. "It won't break if something just steps on it, but it'll break for sure if something smashes it with a weapon or a rock."

Haruka tapped the marker with her fingernail. "What if something tosses it into a river?"

I nodded. "Don't worry, Haruka. You can still teleport into a river. You just have to use the Breathe Water spell beforehand."

"Yeah, you wouldn't drown that way, so— I mean, no, that's the wrong way to solve the problem at hand!" said Yuki, but then she jabbed back at me with a more realistic solution. "Hmm. Should we bury it instead? If I harden the earth around it with my magic, monsters probably won't notice it, and if they do, it won't be easy to move."

I actually felt pretty impressed at Yuki's competence in all sorts of areas, so I went along with the idea in part just as a gesture of respect. "Sure, let's go with that. Create a hole around here, and then..."

I dug a hole in the ground and placed the teleportation marker inside of it.

“All that’s left to do is to cover this up and harden the earth,” I said.

“Hold on, Nao,” said Haruka. “Are we only burying one teleportation marker? What about Yuki’s marker?”

“Hm? Oh, we only need to set up one here. We’ve adjusted them so that Yuki and I can use the same teleportation marker,” I said. “However, teleportation markers are like beacons, so one downside is that they’ll become unusable if we don’t replace the magicites inside of them from time to time.”

We had poured enough mana into the teleportation marker to last for about a year, but it would still be bad if we forgot and neglected to replace the magicite. However, even if the magicite was depleted, the marker itself would still help by making it a bit easier to perform teleportation magic, so everything else being equal, it would be better to have a teleportation marker set up than nothing at all.

“I see. The fact that you two can both use the same marker seems very convenient,” said Haruka.

“Mm, yeah. It would take up a lot of space if we had to make and use a bunch of different teleportation markers for the same area,” said Yuki. “All right, then. I’ll go test this out and make sure it works properly.”

Yuki dashed off into the dungeon. About two minutes had passed when she suddenly reappeared in front of us with a smile on her face.

She raised her right arm and gave us a thumbs-up. “Ah’ll be bach. It worked perfectly! I can teleport back here from inside the dungeon just fine!”

“That’s good to know,” said Touya. Then he glared at Yuki. “So, wait, why did you say, ‘I’ll be back’ along with that thumbs-up? Are you trying to make fun of me, Yuki?”

Yuki stuck out her tongue and laughed, then pointed a thumb over her shoulder at the dungeon. “Of course not! I’m just expressing how excited and enthusiastic I am, that’s all. Now, as we explore the dungeon, we can feel secure in our ability to escape at any time.”

“Really, now? Well, I guess I’ll take your word for it,” said Touya. “So are we ready to head into the dungeon now?”

“Mm, yeah—oh, wait, there’s something that I forgot to retrieve!” Yuki dashed off toward the dungeon again, and the rest of us followed her this time.

We soon caught up with her; she was standing outside of the entrance and holding up the main unit of the special compass. She must have placed it here earlier.

“Oh, are you not going to leave that here, Yuki?” Natsuki asked. “It’s useful for your mapping work, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but the compass doesn’t function very well if it’s too far away from the main unit,” said Yuki. “I think it would be better to place this at the entrance of the floor right after the one where we left off the last time.”

Yuki had already mapped out the dungeon all the way to the seventh floor, so I felt like she was right that it would make sense to move the main unit of the compass to the entrance of the eighth floor, but Haruka had a slightly worried look on her face. “Have you considered the possibility of this being destroyed, Yuki? It cost a lot of money to make, remember?”

“...Oh.”

In most cases, monsters inside of dungeons didn’t venture outside, and monsters from outside of dungeons didn’t venture inside. That was the reason that the main unit of the compass hadn’t been destroyed even though we had left it at the entrance of the dungeon, but there was no guarantee that it would remain safe if we placed it somewhere inside.

“I think the small rooms that come after boss rooms or the stairs that lead between floors should be safe spots to place the main unit,” said Natsuki. “We don’t know for certain that they’re absolutely safe, but it seemed as though monsters don’t spawn in those places...”

“Oh yeah, let’s try out those places!” Yuki clasped her hands together and begged Haruka for permission. “If the main unit happens to get destroyed, then I’m sorry, but it’s worth a try, right?”

Haruka released a short sigh, then chuckled. “Sure, I guess. You’re the one who maps out the dungeon floors for our party. If the main unit gets destroyed, then I’ll just consider that part of the cost of mapping work. I’m counting on you

again from the eighth floor onward, Yuki.”

“Yeah, leave it to me! Let’s hurry back to where we left off!”

Everyone agreed with Yuki’s idea, so we dashed into the dungeon, and in no time, we arrived at the slope that led to the second floor of the dungeon. However...

“It looks like the slope is back to normal,” said Haruka. “Diola-san was right about this.”

The slope had collapsed after we made our way down it the last time, but it now appeared to have returned to its previous state.

Mary peeked down the slope, looking a bit scared. “Will it collapse and get blocked off again?”

Touya was standing next to her. He paused in thought, then looked at Yuki and me. “Well, we should be fine this time now that Nao and Yuki can teleport us outside. But should we set up a teleportation marker here too?”

“We could if we want to, but this is a bit too close to the entrance of the dungeon, so it wouldn’t be very efficient,” said Yuki. “I think a better place to set up a second teleportation marker would be the small room at the end of the fourth floor. We should be able to teleport that far in one go, right, Nao?”

“Uh, I’m not really sure, but if that’s what you think as our party’s mapper, then you’re probably right about that,” I said.

As she mapped out the dungeon, Yuki had measured and remeasured the distance between the main unit of the special compass and the unit she kept on her at all times, so she was probably aware of our position relative to different landmarks in the dungeon. I, on the other hand, only ever consulted the map she had made, so I had no idea of the exact distances involved.

“I-I feel kind of uneasy after hearing that from you, but I’m sure we’ll be fine!” Yuki sounded like she was trying her best to convince herself that everything would be okay, but she nudged Touya in the back, and the two of them started down the slope.

The rest of us followed behind them, and soon, we arrived at the second

floor, but this time, nothing happened behind us.

Metea turned around to check. “Hm? The path back didn’t get blocked off this time.”

I felt like she sounded a bit disappointed for some reason. Haruka chuckled a bit as she gently pushed against Metea’s back; her words must have given Haruka the same impression I had.

“We don’t know exactly how dungeons work, but I assume it would be very costly to destroy the path back every time,” said Haruka. “If dungeons are sentient, then it’s possible that they won’t activate this trap on people who won’t be impeded by it.”

Touya contemplated Haruka’s hypothesis, then nodded and chimed in, “In tower defense games, you need to use resources to fix traps and respawn monsters. It’s possible that dungeons prioritize respawning monsters in boss rooms before fixing traps. There’s no way that dungeons have unlimited points to spend, right?”

“A point system for resources, huh? If I were the dungeon, I would spend my points on powering up stronger monsters instead of spamming weak ones,” I said.

“Strong units usually cost more to respawn, and there are even some games where you can’t respawn them,” said Touya. “I would personally use traps to weaken enemies, then have a lot of weak units gang up on them, and I’d only spend points on boss monsters if I had points left over.”

As we made our way through the dungeon, we continued chatting about defense games. Suddenly, Metea turned toward the rest of us with a serious look on her face.

“I need the dungeon to work hard and give us tyrant picows!”

“Um, Met, do you actually understand what everyone’s talking about?” Mary asked, her head cocked.

We had been talking about things that only people from Earth would know. It seemed like Mary had been ignoring our conversation due to the fact that she couldn’t understand any of it, but Metea folded her arms and nodded.

“Well, I don’t really understand, but I have a rough idea of what they’re talking about! It means that our source of meat is in danger!”

Hmm. Yeah, I guess that kind of understanding is good enough, Metea.

“We don’t know if dungeons actually operate on a point system, but I think we can tell to a certain extent based on how many of the monsters have respawned along the way back to where we left off,” said Yuki. “If there aren’t that many, then it’s possible that the boss monsters haven’t respawned either.”

“A month has passed since we last explored this dungeon, so it would be a bit worrisome for us if that were the case,” said Haruka. “We can’t exactly continue to explore this dungeon if we can’t profit from it, after all.”

“It might be different in deeper floors of the dungeon, but I think we can worry about it after we confirm things for ourselves,” said Natsuki.

Everyone nodded in response to Natsuki’s words, and we proceeded to make our way through the floors full of goblins again. However, there were way fewer goblins than last time even accounting for the fact that we dodged some of them by using the Scout skill, and on top of that, the boss rooms were empty. As a result, we arrived at the small room at the end of the fourth floor without any trouble, but...

“This is a grave situation!” Metea’s tail was slapping the floor; she was genuinely upset. “Even the treasure chests didn’t respawn!”

“Well, Met, it also means that there should be fewer zombies on the fifth and sixth floors, so that’s a good thing for us,” said Mary.

Metea was rendered speechless for a second, but then she launched right back into wishful thinking. “Ugh. I don’t want any zombies. I just want a lot of picows to respawn on the seventh floor!”

I would also have appreciated it if the dungeon furnished us with a lot of picows, but if I’d had control over the dungeon, I would have prioritized zombies due to the fact that they were harder to slay. *Hmm. On second thought, if the dungeon wants to do its best to defeat us, then decreasing the number of zombies would be the better option. They’re no threat to us—we can easily slay them with the Purification spell.*

“More importantly, let’s set up a teleportation marker right now. We can speculate about the dungeon at a later time,” I said. “I’m not sure where we should set it up in this room, though.”

Monsters probably couldn’t enter this small room, but even so, I felt a bit uneasy about the idea of leaving a teleportation marker out in the open without anything to protect it. The safest way to set up a teleportation marker would have been to bury it in the ground like we had done at the entrance of the dungeon, but...

“Mm. I’m not sure either,” said Haruka. “This entire room is covered in blocks of stone, after all.”

“I can try using a pickaxe to dig up some of the blocks,” said Touya. “Oh, actually, would magic be a better option?”

“Nah, magic isn’t very effective against objects that are part of a dungeon,” I said. “If you’re willing to try using a pickaxe, that would be great, but I don’t know if we’ll be able to use a teleportation marker if it’s buried under blocks of stone.”

You could damage the surfaces within a dungeon to a certain extent, but if you tried using magic to destroy or change its structure, your spells would suddenly become very weak. I felt like that might be because it would be bad for dungeons if people could just create physical shortcuts by digging through the walls, but regardless, the limitations of magic were an issue for us at the moment. On top of that, dungeon walls automatically repaired themselves over time even if you somehow managed to destroy them, so it was possible that the repair process itself would destroy any buried teleportation markers.

“Let’s just test things out first, Nao,” said Haruka. “Touya, can you get to work?”

“Sure, leave it to me! Hm, seems like digging up the first block of stone will be the hardest part. Nao, can you bring out a chisel and a hammer?”

“Sure. I just need to stick them in hereabouts, right?”

Touya handled the tasks that required a lot of physical strength, while I took care of the tasks that required more care and precision. Once we had

successfully removed the first block of stone, the rest was easy. We removed the smallest number of blocks necessary, then dug a hole in the ground underneath and placed a teleportation marker inside. After we covered the hole, moving the blocks of stone back into their original positions, all we had left to do was check whether or not the teleportation marker was intact.

“Hmm. It looks like things are fine for now,” said Yuki.

“Mm. We don’t know what will happen after some time has passed, but I can still detect the teleportation marker that’s outside the dungeon, so I guess this will do,” I said.

Yuki had mentioned previously that this room was actually fairly close to the entrance of the dungeon in a straight line, and sure enough, I could detect both of the buried markers. With that in mind, it probably wouldn’t be difficult to teleport between each location.

“Teleportation magic is more or less a lifeline for us,” said Natsuki. “It would be nice if we could use it as a shortcut through the dungeon, however.”

“Yeah, I would really like it if we could skip the floors full of undead monsters,” said Touya. “I don’t want to go through those floors every time we come back.”

“That’s part of what we have to test out with our teleportation markers this time,” I said. “We’ll find out for sure once we leave the dungeon.”

There were still some things on my mind that bothered me, but we ventured deeper in the dungeon. We arrived at the end of the seventh floor without any problems, but when we did, we discovered two pieces of good news and one piece of bad news. The good news was that, one, we hadn’t encountered many undead monsters on the fifth and sixth floors, and two, the teleportation marker at the fourth floor still seemed to be functional even after a few days had passed. Fewer undead monsters also meant fewer earnings, but our goal this time was to explore the eighth floor and onward, so it wasn’t really an issue for us. The bad news was that there hadn’t been many picows either. We had only encountered a few on the entire seventh floor, and the tyrant picow in the boss room hadn’t respawned yet, so Metea had angrily voiced her disappointment in the dungeon and stamped the ground.

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“I was wrong,” said Metea. “This dungeon is actually a good one!”

Metea’s mood had quickly improved due to the monsters that we had begun encountering from the eighth floor onward. On the eighth floor itself, the monsters that we had encountered were flame boars and flame peacocks, which quickly became sources of pork and poultry for our party.

Flame boars reminded me of lava boars due to their name, but they were much weaker. However, they were a bit annoying to deal with: they could spit fire from their nostrils, which caught us by surprise the first time we saw it happen. Even Touya had lost focus due to how surprising and funny it was to see something like that, so the attack had been somewhat effective, but in a flash, the flame boar’s severed head had fallen to the ground, so it was only a onetime thing that didn’t surprise us again. Also, the range of the fire was less than two meters, so it wasn’t dangerous at all now that we were aware of it.

As for flame peacocks, they would fan their feathers like normal peacocks—and then shoot them at us. Flame peacocks and flame boars appeared alongside each other, so their attacks from long range were slightly annoying, but they had to completely spread out their feathers before they could shoot them, so their movements were very easy to read.

You could easily cut the flying feathers out of the air with a sword, and their only other methods of attack were to poke us with their beaks or scratch us with their talons, so they were very weak if you could get close to them, and Metea had happily yelled, “Grilled bird meat!” as she slew some of them. Natsuki and I had long weapons, so the peacocks were more like sitting ducks as far as we were concerned.

Flame peacock meat was extremely red even after being drained of blood. Natsuki had commented that she thought it looked similar to duck meat, but that was the only notable thing about it. According to the girls, flame peacock meat tasted similar to broiler chicken, and they liked how easy it was to cook.

The monsters that we encountered on the ninth floor were frozen springhares and armored glyptodons. Frozen springhares looked somewhat like rabbits and were about thirty centimeters long. They could use the ground,

walls, and the ceiling to jump around, but they would die instantly if you could land a single good hit on them, so they were pretty weak. However, the most unique thing about frozen springhares was what happened after they died. They would turn into hard, frozen meat immediately upon death. You couldn't drain the blood from them, and they weren't easy to gut either, so at first, we were confused about what to do. However, when we checked our books for information, we learned that this was actually perfectly fine.

According to our books, there was no need to drain the blood from the frozen meat, and it tasted fine if you cooked it as is. We were skeptical when we first tested it out, but it was actually quite good. The meat had a somewhat peculiar flavor, but it was actually more enjoyable as a result, so it made sense that there was no need to drain the blood. In addition, I wasn't sure if it was due to the effects of mana, but it seemed like the frozen meat didn't go bad even after a few days at room temperature, so it was very good for adventurers who couldn't freeze meat using Water Magic or who lacked magic bags.

As for the armored glyptodons, I was pretty sure they were a type of mammal. They had armored tails that they would bend like a shrimp before facing us and using their tails to launch themselves like missiles. They would also spit water out of their mouths to propel themselves or to attack us directly, so they were formidable foes. It wasn't easy to cut through their tails, but Touya could smash them to death with a single blow of his sword, so the only thing we had to keep in mind was the fact that they could fly far away if you dodged them when they launched themselves at you. Our books told us that armored glyptodons were edible, but the taste of the meat wasn't as unique as that of frozen springhare meat, so they were currently sitting inside of our magic bags unused.

The monsters that we encountered on the tenth floor were ripper hares and giant ostriches. Ripper hares were rabbits, slightly larger than jumbo rabbits, and would blast you with sharp blades of wind. They weren't very nimble, but the blades of wind were dangerous because they were hard to see. It would have been very difficult to dodge them if you couldn't detect the presence of mana. Luckily for us, the blades weren't very powerful, and they couldn't injure us as long as they failed to land on unprotected areas of our bodies, like our

faces, but we did have Mary and Metea with us now, so the rest of us would prioritize slaying ripper hares whenever we encountered any.

As for giant ostriches, they really were very big even compared to normal ostriches. Their heads towered above us; it looked like they were very close to scratching the ceiling of the dungeon. They would bring their beaks down with so much force that they broke the stone floor upon impact, and the kicks that they launched as they sped around were powerful enough that even Touya could be sent flying if he wasn't careful.

However, giant ostriches would attack us alone instead of in groups with other monsters, so they were actually fairly easy to slay as long as we dodged their attacks and aimed for their legs. We could also slay them easily by launching a barrage of Air Cutter spells at their necks, so defeating them was just a matter of getting used to the strategies. In fact, we were now able to cut their necks with magic before they got close to us. It was an easy way to get a lot of meat.

To sum things up, all of the monsters that we had encountered from the eighth floor onward had edible meat, so it was obvious why Metea was in a good mood. Mary and Touya seemed happy as well. You could never go wrong with meat.

Currently, we were barbecuing some meat on the grill outside the tenth-floor boss room—trying to get a meal in before the battle that awaited us. Suddenly, Metea started dancing around and raised her arms in the air.

"Tee hee, I'm so glad that I decided to become an adventurer!" she said, obviously pretty proud of herself. "I'll never be short of meat for the rest of my life!"

"Well, yeah, we've gotten all kinds of meat, from pork, beef, and poultry to some types that are even more unusual, but is that really the only thing that matters to you, Metea?" I asked.

"Hmm." Metea thought about that, but she came up with an answer right away. "Oh, yeah, I also want treasure chests!"

Uh, I was actually trying to ask you about your other goals as an adventurer, Metea. Well, in a way, I guess only wanting food and treasure is perfectly

normal for an adventurer. I wouldn't have known how to respond if you'd said you wanted to become the best adventurer in the world or something like that.

"Now that I think about it, we haven't found any treasure chests on this dungeon dive," said Haruka. "Here you go, Metea—this piece is ready." She offered Metea a plate, and Metea accepted it gratefully, plopped down next to me, and got to work on the meat.

"Thanks! Time to dig in!" It seemed like the words "treasure chest" had vanished from her mind.

"Tee hee. Well, we have a lot of meat stocked up now, but this dungeon isn't really a very good place for earning money," said Natsuki.

"Yeah. We can get a lot of delicious meat, but the magicites from the monsters aren't worth much," I said. "The situation sounds even worse when you take into account the fact that they're a mere fraction of the value of magicites from monsters right outside of the dungeon."

"We should be able to get a decent amount of money if we sell some of the meat that we've gotten, right?" Mary asked, sounding a bit worried.

Yuki laughed awkwardly as she nodded. "Well, yeah, that's true. But the materials we can get from monsters outside of dungeons are worth money too. Each monster outside might be worth as much as ten times more than the average monster inside. The sheer number of monsters inside of the dungeon kind of makes up for it, though."

"It's not that hot at this time of the year, so it would definitely be better to fight the monsters outside if we wanted to earn as much money as possible," said Touya. "But we can still dream about finding riches in here!"

He sounded very excited and optimistic, and the rest of us laughed. One of the reasons that we had decided to explore the dungeon was because it was a good place to train Mary and Metea, but I wasn't sure if Touya had avoided mentioning that in order to make sure the sisters didn't feel bad—or like they were indebted to us. *You haven't just forgotten our actual reason for coming here, have you, Touya? I sure hope you haven't...*

"Well, the only riches we've found so far are different kinds of meat," I said.

“In a way, I guess the seventh floor all the way to the tenth floor can be classified as the meat area of this dungeon, huh?”

“If we classify these four floors as one area, then it would be the third area of this dungeon after the goblin area and the undead area,” said Haruka. “I wonder if that means this entire dungeon is divided into zones with distinct features.”

“It’s convenient for the sake of gathering specific materials, but there’s nothing surprising or unusual about that,” said Natsuki.

“There’s no need for a dungeon to be surprising or unusual, Natsuki,” I said. “I feel like Touya has been a bad influence on you. Are you okay?”

“Oh, come on, don’t be so rude,” said Touya. “I mean, sure, I think it would be interesting if dungeons had some surprising gimmicks, but—”

This time, it was Haruka who jabbed back at him. “You just proved that you are a bad influence!”

We continued discussing our thoughts about the dungeon while we enjoyed our casual barbecue. After we had finished eating, we stood up and walked back to the door of the boss room.

“Okay, is everyone ready?” Touya asked. “Nobody’s too full to move, right?”

“I think that would only apply to you or Metea,” I replied. “Both of you ate a ton of meat.”

“Don’t worry, I still have room in my stomach for dessert!” said Metea.

Hmm. I bet my stomach would explode if I ate that much, but I probably shouldn’t think about it too much.

“I wonder what we’ll have to fight this time,” said Yuki. “If it’s the same pattern as when we fought picows, then it might be something like a tyrant giant ostrich.”

“That sounds like it would be a very dangerous foe,” said Natsuki. “Giant ostriches are already huge, so I really hope we don’t have to fight something even bigger.”

Mm, yeah, I don’t want to fight one either. A tyrant giant ostrich could

probably smash us with its beak no matter where we were standing in the boss room...

"A tyrant ripper hare might be more manageable, but their wind blades are quite scary," said Haruka.

"Yes, they're too fast for me to dodge," said Natsuki.

"Don't worry—if we have to fight one, I can deal with it," said Touya. "All right, let's see who guessed correctly!"

But when Touya opened the door, it looked like there was a pack of sixteen wolves at the back of the large boss room. Fourteen of them were normal howling wolves, but two were much larger than the others. A normal howling wolf was already about one and a half meters from head to tail, but the two big ones looked like they were easily three times that size. On top of that, it looked like they were over two meters tall at the shoulder, so they were pretty intimidating.

"Oh, hey, it looks like you've got a *lot* of relatives here, Touya," I said.

"I told you I'm not related to these wolves!" But Touya sounded a bit nervous as he responded to my banter. "More importantly, now's not the time to joke around!"

I was confused that he didn't seem to be in a joking mood, but then I used my Third Eye skill on the two larger wolves and realized why he was acting like that.

```
  Race: King Howling Wolf
Condition: Healthy
Skills: Bite, Claw Strike, Resonator Howl
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  Race: Queen Howling Wolf
Condition: Healthy
Skills: Bite, Claw Strike, Booster Howl
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I had a bad feeling about some of the skills that I had discovered, but our foes acted before I could warn everyone else in my party.

“Awoooooo!”

All of the wolves in the boss room howled in chorus, and an invisible attack crashed against us. It was much more powerful than the howls we had experienced in the past, and even I froze up despite the fact that I had been mentally prepared. The king and queen howling wolves took advantage of the opening and ran along the walls toward us. For a moment, I was stunned by the fact that they could run along the walls despite their enormous size, but then I realized with a start that they were aiming for Metea and Mary. In the formation we used for boss battles, the sisters were behind us, but the king and queen howling wolves had deliberately targeted them.

It was typical for predators to take down their weakest prey first, but there was no way we could allow them to accomplish their objective. Touya was the first to recover from the combined howl attack, and he slid in front of Mary and raised his right arm to smash his shield into the underside of the king’s jaw. I was the next to recover, but I only had a few seconds to react. *Come on, I’ve gotta make it in time!*

“Ugh!”

The queen howling wolf was aiming for Metea, so I ran over and picked her up with my left arm, but the wolf swung her forelegs down on me. I somehow managed to deflect her attack with the spear in my right arm, but I lost my balance as a result.

“Metea, hold on tight!”

“O-Okay!”

I used the Accelerate Time spell to make the wolf slower than me, then took advantage of that reprieve to regain my balance before moving around the wolf’s flank and lunging at her hind legs in order to damage her Achilles tendon. The moment the Accelerate Time spell ended, the wolf squealed in pain. With all the practice I’d put into teleportation magic, I had gotten to the point that I could use spells like Accelerate Time during combat, but it was still exhausting, so until I got a lot better, I could only cast the spells on myself.

“*Fire Arrow!*”

Haruka and Yuki, who had finally recovered from the combined howl attack, aimed Fire Arrows at two of the howling wolves that were positioned toward the back of the boss room. Haruka had the Third Eye skill too, so she had probably used it and arrived at the conclusion that it would be better to whittle down the number of normal wolves instead of trying to take out the king and queen first. However, twelve normal wolves were still standing. Fully eight of them dashed toward Touya while the remaining four went for the rest of us.

“Metea, are you able to move again?” I asked.

“Y-Yeah, I can!”

But despite her words, Metea’s body was still tense and stiff, and her tail was curled between her legs. It seemed like she was mentally unable to adjust to a dangerous battle, perhaps because she had only experienced easy ones so far. Her arms, which she had wrapped around my body, were shaking, and it was obvious that she wasn’t capable of participating in combat right now. The wounded queen fell back as a normal howling wolf jumped toward me instead. I stabbed my spear into its open maw and killed it, but I wasn’t able to pull my spear out using just one hand.

“Damn it!”

I forcefully swung my spear to the right in order to toss away the dead wolf, but the blade remained stuck inside its carcass, so I couldn’t react to the next foe in time. However...

“I got you covered, Nao!”

Yuki ran over and snatched Metea from me, then immediately retreated. I pulled my spear free with both hands and swept away the two wolves that had jumped toward me.

“Um, I...”

“Don’t worry, Metea,” said Yuki. “We won’t die here—we’re not that weak! *Fire Arrow!*”

Yuki held Metea in her arms as she fell back and used magic; she must have decided to switch to just dealing damage from range.

“Yeah, we can survive this!” said Touya. “But it isn’t fair at all! Why is it suddenly so hard?!”

“I think it’s because this dungeon thinks the same way as Nao!” said Yuki. “It prefers to save resources on weak monsters so it can make boss monsters strong!”

“Hmm, I guess that means Nao was the one who jinxed us this time,” said Haruka.

Oh, come on, I know that I made fun of Touya over something like this before, but this isn’t my fault. Haruka and Natsuki moved to back up Touya, and the two girls whittled down the normal howling wolves while he held off the king. However, there were still a number of wolves standing, and I noticed that the queen had taken a deep breath. *Oh no, is she going to howl again?!*

“Nao, water!” Haruka exclaimed.

“*Water Jet!*”

At that simple instruction from Haruka, Yuki and I both cast the Water Jet spell. When the streams of water entered the queen’s mouth, she made some gurgling and choking sounds. I heard some similar sounds from Haruka’s location. The other howling wolves unleashed their Howls at us, but we were strong enough to resist the effects of the Howl skill during combat. I blasted off the head of a howling wolf that was standing in place to howl, then slew another with my spear. Yuki slew a third with a Fire Arrow.

The only remaining foe in my vicinity was the queen. After placing Metea in a safe spot behind us, Yuki lined up next to me. I glanced at Haruka, Touya, and Natsuki out of the corner of my eye, and it looked like they had also finished dealing with the normal howling wolves over there. Mary was with them, and together, they were surrounding the king, so it was probably just a matter of time before he met his end.

“If you and I can just buy the others some time to finish what they’re doing, we can probably all gang up on the queen and slay her no problem, but—”

“Nah, let’s take this opportunity to try slaying her by ourselves,” said Yuki. “Let’s do this! It’s time to get a bunch of wolf fur!”

“Huh?! Are you seriously asking me to be careful not to damage her fur, Yuki?!” *I mean, yeah, its fur looks like it could make a good rug for our living room, but still!*

Yuki dashed to the right, so I assumed she would act as a distraction as I moved to the left and aimed for the queen’s legs. Magic would probably have been the more effective way to slay the queen, but I obliged Yuki’s request and used my spear instead. The queen howling wolf shifted her attention to me and hastily tried to raise her legs out of the way of my attack—she must have been scared after I damaged her legs earlier—but that created an opening for Yuki, who circled behind the queen and attacked her other hind leg. The wolf lost her balance, exposing her throat to me.

“Victory is at hand!” I firmly grasped my spear in both hands and stabbed the queen through the throat. The point came out the back of her head.

“You sound quite relaxed, Nao,” said Yuki. “I’ll join in as well!” She ran her kodachi through both of the queen’s eyeballs.

Yuki really did seem intent on slaying the wolf without damaging her fur. I had no idea if the finishing blow was Yuki’s attack or mine, but instantly, the queen’s legs stopped flailing around in the air. The others finished their battle against the king around the same time.

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“Whew, I actually felt a bit nervous this time!” said Touya.

“Mm. The Resonator Howl and Booster Howl skills were unexpectedly very dangerous,” said Haruka. “Those skills definitely had a synergy effect with the base Howl skill. Apart from that, however, the king and queen howling wolves weren’t actually very strong.”

“Um, I felt like they were actually quite strong,” said Mary.

“They weren’t as strong as we expected based on their size,” said Natsuki. “We could probably have slain them faster if Yuki hadn’t insisted that we avoid damaging their fur.”

“I mean, they had enough fur to completely cover the floor of an entire room in our house,” said Yuki. She stroked the queen wolf’s fur and then said,

sounding disappointed, “It feels kind of coarse, though.”

Haruka frowned as she touched the fur too. “Hmm. I wonder if we can improve the texture using alchemy.”

She took out one of our magic bags and started to skin and store the wolves’ fur. Storing materials from the foes we slew was part of our everyday lives as adventurers, but this time, there was someone missing: Metea was staring at the ground a ways away from the dead wolves. I walked over and bent down next to her.

“Were you scared, Metea? Don’t worry, it’s over now.”

Metea’s tail was still hanging limp, so I patted her head gently, but she continued to stare at the ground. She shook her head. “I wasn’t able to do anything...”

“The pack of howling wolves were much stronger than we expected,” I said. “You just weren’t quite ready to fight them yet, but there’s no need to feel bad about it.”

“Big sis was able to fight...”

Apparently Mary was the reason that Metea was depressed, so it seemed best to leave things to her older sister. I made eye contact with Mary, and she nodded, then walked over and hugged Metea.

“I’m your big sis, so of course I’ll fight to protect you. Let’s work hard together again in the future, okay?”

“...Okay, I’ll do my best.” Metea’s tail looked like it had a little more life in it after her older sister cheered her up.

“A new door has appeared, Metea,” said Natsuki. “There’s probably a treasure chest ahead.”

Metea’s head popped up. “...A treasure chest?”

“We fought a lot of foes in this boss battle, so we might actually be rewarded with some good loot,” I said.

“Oh, we definitely need to check it out!” Metea’s ears perked up as she dashed toward the new door, and the rest of us followed behind.

As usual, we checked the door for traps before opening it. The small room ahead actually looked pretty similar to the one on the seventh floor of the dungeon.

“A treasure chest, stairs that lead to the next floor, and a magic circle? I wonder if this magic circle is also a return device,” I said.

“Aren’t return devices supposed to be somewhat rare?” Touya asked.

“Yes, that should be the case, so I’m a bit confused,” Natsuki replied. “Perhaps this dungeon is special in that regard.”

We had expected to find a treasure chest and stairs leading to the next floor, but we hadn’t expected to find a return device here. *Is this actually a good dungeon for adventurers? It would be really helpful if it’s that easy to escape this dungeon...*

As I was thinking to myself, Haruka poked me in the shoulder and smiled, pointing at the treasure. “Let’s check the contents of the treasure chest first. It seems like Metea can’t wait to find out.”

Metea was standing in front of the treasure chest. “I’m pretty sure the treasure chest isn’t booby trapped! I checked it really good!”

She sounded confident, but we had to double-and triple-check to be absolutely sure. Natsuki and I both took turns, and when we’d confirmed that it was safe, both of us nodded at Metea.

Metea opened the treasure chest and stuck her hands in. “Let’s see... Hmm. What’s this?”

The object Metea was holding in her hands appeared to be something like a Buddhist monk’s staff, but made entirely of metal. It was about thirty centimeters long and looked like it was probably used for ritual purposes. On top was a spherical stone with a diameter of about five centimeters.

“Seems to be a monk’s staff,” said Touya. “That’s all the information I can get.”

“You know, your Appraisal skill is pretty useless, Touya,” I said.

“Oh, come on. I kind of feel the same way, but please don’t remind me.”

“Would the Appraisal skill be more useful if Natsuki had it instead?” Haruka asked.

“Please keep that question to yourself, Haruka,” said Touya. “Just thinking about it makes me feel sad...”

Your own knowledge affected the results of the Appraisal skill, so it was true that Natsuki would probably have been able to put the skill to better use. Yuki had the Appraisal skill as well, but she never mentioned it even when we needed it. I was fairly sure that she must have used it at some point, and the information that she could learn through the skill was probably more or less the same as what Touya could learn.

“Personally speaking, I’m expecting great things from Yuki’s Appraisal skill,” I said.

“Huh? Where did that come from all of a sudden?!” Yuki blinked at me. “You know that there’s no way I can live up to your expectations, right? At least not right here and now.”

I pointed at Touya and then at her. “Touya’s skill build is more or less specialized for combat, so I think you, as someone who can also use alchemy and magic, would be able to make better use of the Appraisal skill, Yuki. I’m pretty sure that you’ll get better than Touya in the long term, especially since you’re smarter than him.”

“Whoa, I didn’t expect to catch a stray bullet like that,” said Touya. “You’re definitely right, though!”

“Are you really going to take that, Touya?!” asked Yuki. “Hmm. Well, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to try appraising things as a way to learn before asking the guild for help.”

“Mm. It could help you level up your Appraisal skill,” said Haruka. “We can ask Riva for help, and if we still can’t appraise an item, then we can turn to the guild as a last resort.”

Haruka and Yuki were technically alchemists as well, and people would normally ask alchemists for help appraising items; they were supposed to be specialists in magical devices. With that in mind, the two girls could probably

appraise items if they worked together, and it would be great for our party if they learned how to do it.

“The appraisal fees aren’t very expensive by our standards, but I don’t really want to wait a month every time we bring something to the guild,” I said.

“It would make my Appraisal skill completely useless, though. Hmm, but actually, I guess it doesn’t matter. I can make up for it by performing well in battles!” It sounded like tasks that required brain instead of brawn weren’t a priority for Touya. He casually pointed at the magic circle. “By the way, is this a return device?”

“Yeah, it probably is,” I said. “Hmm. Is it just me, or is this dungeon designed in a way that’s very convenient for rookie adventurers?”

“...Now that you mention it, that does seem to be the case,” said Haruka. “You can’t earn a lot of money from this dungeon, but you can earn enough to get by. In addition, you can obtain a lot of meat, so you can save on food expenses while still eating delicious meals if you know how to cook.”

“The enemies that spawn in this dungeon are also very manageable,” said Natsuki. “There are weak monsters, monsters that use weapons, monsters that you need to use magic to defeat, and monsters that use weak magic. I imagine that rookie adventurers could slowly become stronger here if they took their time challenging this dungeon and were careful about it.”

Also, all the return devices that we had found so far were located very conveniently for adventurers. If there had only been a one-way path into and out of the dungeon, then any adventurers who misjudged their strength would have gotten trapped and met their demise, but thanks to the return devices, this dungeon allowed you decent odds of survival even if you made some mistakes.

“What you’re saying is that this dungeon is perfect for leveling up, right? Hmm. Yeah, it definitely feels like there’s something unnatural about it,” said Touya. “Would a dungeon that’s perfect for leveling up just happen to appear right next to Laffan? I don’t think so.”

Touya had a sour look on his face. He must have suspected that Advastlis-sama had personally created this dungeon, but Haruka cocked her head and

voiced a different opinion.

“I think it’s actually the opposite, Touya. We were transported to Laffan in the beginning because there was already a dungeon nearby that was convenient for leveling. Advastlis-sama didn’t allow us any cheat skills or overpowered abilities, but he did provide us with some help so that we could survive in this world.”

“Hmm. Yeah, I guess you’re right about that,” said Touya.

Advastlis-sama had given us starting clothes and money, after all. In addition, there weren’t that many monsters near Laffan, and you could defeat them as long as you kept working hard to become stronger. He hadn’t offered us or our classmates any overpowered skills that would make life effortless, but you could probably live a relatively safe and prosperous life as long as you worked together with other people, and that was exactly what my party had done.

“Does that mean this dungeon is supposed to be a career path for us?” I asked. “Are we supposed to train here if we want to become stronger?”

Hmm, I kind of want to ask Advastlis-sama if he really laid out a straightforward path for us to follow.

Touya thought about my suggestion, but he didn’t seem convinced. “Well, the road to the entrance of this dungeon wasn’t that easy to traverse.”

Touya was right that it wouldn’t have been easy for a rookie adventurer to get anywhere close to this dungeon. If you could easily get here, then you could probably make it all the way to the tenth floor of the dungeon with relative ease, but there had also been some strong foes among the zombies and skeletons on the first floor of the dungeon; they wouldn’t have been suitable opponents for leveling up if you were a rookie adventurer.

“I don’t imagine there is any place in this world that would offer purely favorable conditions,” said Natsuki. “Any dungeon city would probably have been fine for the purpose of leveling up, but I suspect that Advastlis-sama wanted, above all, to send us to a place that’s relatively safe and peaceful.”

“Mm, yeah, it’s true that Laffan and the surrounding environs are nice,” said Haruka. “Even elves, beastmen, and beastwomen can live fairly decent lives here.”

Hmm. Now that I think about it, I've barely found myself in any dangerous situations in Laffan so far. Apparently the area where we'd bought a house wasn't considered a very safe part of Laffan, but it didn't feel like a slum, and I had yet to see any thieves or thugs around. I had met a lot of kind and friendly people so far, including Diola-san, Simon-san, and Gantz-san, and nobody had ever tried to pick a fight with my party—apart from our former classmates. *Ugh, those guys were absolute scum.* It was also worth considering that we had chosen to become adventurers, but not everyone would want that, so in that sense, Laffan was an exceptionally good place to end up; you could probably get by even if you chose a profession other than adventuring.

"In any case, I think we can just express our gratitude when we pray to Advastlis-sama—and keep making use of this dungeon," I said.

"Mm, there's no need to overthink it," said Yuki. "Here you go, Nao. Take this teleportation marker."

"Okay. Help me out, Touya." I took the teleportation marker that Yuki had casually passed over to me and started to dig up the floor of the dungeon for the second time today.

With Touya's help, I removed some blocks of stone and placed the teleportation marker underneath them before returning them to their original positions.

I checked for the signals from the other teleportation markers. "Oh, hmm, I can detect the teleportation marker on the seventh floor and the one at the entrance of the dungeon. Hmm. I think I can actually teleport all the way back to the entrance if I give it my best shot."

Yuki had measured the optimal position for the teleportation marker at the seventh floor, but it seemed like the small room on the tenth floor also happened to be directly underneath the entrance of a dungeon.

"Does that mean we can resume exploring the dungeon starting from the tenth floor if we want to?" Touya asked.

"I'll probably have to rest for a bit after using my teleportation magic, but I think we can, yeah," I replied.

There wasn't any real reason to skip the floors full of monsters with edible meat, but the ability to directly skip to the tenth floor of the dungeon could be useful for us in the future.

"Hmm. In that case, should we test out this return device?" asked Yuki. "We can come back here depending on when we're in the mood for more dungeon exploration."

"We've explored all the way from the eighth floor to the end of the tenth floor, so I guess we've already accomplished a lot this time," I said.

"Mm. It's not like we're in a hurry to explore the entirety of this dungeon," said Yuki.

I felt like we were all coming around to the conclusion that we should call it quits for now, given that there was a safe means of escape right at hand, but Metea suddenly voiced an objection.

"Are we going to head home already, big bro Nao?"

"Oh, do you want to go to the next floor, Metea?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to finding out what's there. Also, um, I don't really want to end on a sour note this time..."

It sounded like Metea still felt a bit bad that she hadn't been able to do anything during the boss battle earlier, but she looked like she also felt uneasy about the idea of asking for something selfish; her tail was wagging, but slowly.

However, Natsuki smiled and nodded after she saw Metea's reaction. "In that case, let's head to the next floor. None of the stairs have been booby trapped so far with the exception of the slope that led to the second floor of the dungeon."

"Um, are you sure about this?" Mary asked, sounding a bit hesitant. "If you're doing it for Met's sake, then—"

Natsuki interrupted, "Yes, it's fine. I'm curious about the eleventh floor as well, and we can rely on Nao-kun to teleport us back to the tenth floor if it becomes necessary."

"Me? Well, okay, I don't mind," I said. "It won't be very taxing on me as long

as I only have to teleport from the eleventh floor back to this place.”

Nobody objected to the idea of exploring the eleventh floor, so I felt fairly sure that everyone was curious about what awaited us, and we started to descend the stairs.

However, this staircase was a bit different from the others we’d seen in the dungeon. It was curved and much longer than I had expected it to be. I couldn’t see very far ahead of me, so I felt uneasy, but I persevered, and after about ten minutes of walking, we finally saw light ahead of us.

“Whew...”

Someone had breathed a sigh of relief, but I had no idea who it was. We started to walk a bit faster, following the light, and when we reached the bottom of the stairs, there was nothing but an expanse of grassy plains as far as we could see.

Side Story—Jade Wings: Episode 4

When Kaho suggested that we meet up with the Meikyo Shisui party, the rest of us had agreed, but we had to do some research beforehand. I was doing my best to gather information about Meikyo Shisui, but even the stories that were supposedly true sounded totally unbelievable.

Rumor 1: Meikyo Shisui had ventured deep into the forests in order to save the entire town of Laffan, and they had brought back something that nobody else had ever managed to.

Rumor 2: When a dangerous fungus spread all over Laffan, Meikyo Shisui had risen to the occasion and successfully quelled the disaster.

Rumor 3: Meikyo Shisui had liberated the city of Kelg from a mysterious and scary cult.

Rumor 4: There used to be a cruel and dangerous bandit gang that blocked off roads and terrified travelers, but Meikyo Shisui, with no help, had slain the bandits to the last man.

Rumor 5: Meikyo Shisui were philanthropists and routinely donated a lot of money to an orphanage.

Rumor 6: The lord of the viscounty had acknowledged Meikyo Shisui and held them in high regard, and he had granted them a mansion in Laffan.

“On top of all of that, they’ve supposedly discovered a new dungeon. To be honest, I have a hard time believing that the members of this party are our classmates.” I placed the paper with all of the information that we’d gathered on the table in front of me.

Sae nodded in agreement. “Mm. I feel like they’ve accomplished way too much considering that none of us have cheat skills or overpowered abilities.”

“B-But their party name! It must be!” Kaho seemed unwilling to drop her hypothesis, but...

“About that—what if other Japanese people got transported to this world in the past?” I said. “I think that’s another possibility.”

“Mm, it’s possible that Meikyo Shisui is a phrase that has been passed down among a select few people in this world,” said Sae.

“Ugh. We’re talking about that ‘evil’ god, so I suppose you’re right—anything could be true,” said Kaho.

We’d been transported to this world, so it wouldn’t be weird at all if other people had been transported here in the past. Kaho’s head drooped when she realized that, but she perked up again when she heard Sae’s next words.

“Oh, yeah, the name of the dungeon that they discovered is supposedly ‘the Summer Resort Dungeon.’ I do feel like that’s the kind of name that our classmates would come up with.”

“Mm, I completely agree!” said Kaho. “If it were adventurers native to this world, I’m sure that they would have thought of something more grandiose!”

Hmm. If I recall correctly, the people who discover a new dungeon get the right to name it. Yeah, assertive adventurers with a desire for fame and glory probably wouldn’t come up with a name like that.

“That’s the only thing that makes the Meikyo Shisui party sound like they might be our classmates, however,” I said.

I personally felt like the three of us had been decently successful so far. We hadn’t really messed up with our choice of skills in the beginning, and we had good synergy as a party. We had climbed up the ranks much faster than the average adventurer—we were already Rank 3. On the other hand, Meikyo Shisui had accomplished way more incredible feats—almost too many.

“Do you think some of the skills might have loopholes that we don’t know about?” Sae asked.

“Hmm. Nah, I don’t think that’s likely at all,” I replied.

“Mm. In light novels, it’s a fairly common device for the heroes to deceive a god or the gods, but I believe such a thing would be impossible in this world,” said Kaho. “Divine punishment is a readily apparent feature of life in this world,

so like as not, there is no mercy for the wicked."

Hmm. Unlike Kaho, I'm not the kind of person who compares everything to tabletop RPGs, but attempting to deceive a god feels like the equivalent of picking a fight with your game master: sure, you might think you can get away with it, but he can almost certainly crush your efforts the moment he feels like it.

"So, what should we do?" I asked. "Should we drop the idea of meeting up with the Meikyo Shisui party?"

If we wanted to travel and meet them, we would have to end our lease on the house we were renting. There was no guarantee that we would be able to rent this house again even if we returned to this town, and I wasn't confident in our chances of finding another place that was comfortably affordable. We wouldn't be able to tackle adventurer work while we traveled, so our income would drastically decrease too. Our savings were decent, but it was still an amount of money that could run out in no time.

Kaho asked, "Meikyo Shisui is stationed in Laffan, are they not?"

"Mm. It's a town that we've never been to before," said Sae.

"I asked at the guild about Laffan, and I was told adventurers can't really earn much money there," I said.

We'd journeyed eastward from the place where we'd found ourselves when we were transported to this world. Apparently Laffan was located westward from the same area. According to Sara, a receptionist at the guild, Laffan was a safe and peaceful town, but there weren't many quests available for adventurers, and most of the local adventurers were greenhorns.

"Hmm. It would be much easier to make a decision if we knew the names of anyone in the party," said Kaho. "Alas."

I laughed and shook my head. "Nah, Kaho, there's no way things would work out in our favor that easily, so—"

But Sae interrupted me. "On that note, I've actually overheard a name that might be useful."

"What?! That's a vital piece of information!" Kaho leaned forward. "Tell us at

once! What is it?!”

Sae slowly raised a finger to her lips as she thought. “Hmm. I think I overheard the name of the party’s leader. It was supposed to be Nāo.”

“Nāo?” Kaho and I looked at each other as we voiced our confusion.

“That doesn’t really sound like a Japanese name,” I said.

“Was there someone with that name in our class?” Kaho asked.

Hmm. Let me try to think of all the names I remember. Nope, I can’t match anyone’s face to the name Nāo.

“I think it quite likely that the pronunciation was distorted as the name spread from person to person,” said Kaho. “Word of mouth is hardly reliable in cases like these.”

“Hmm. Nāo, Nāo, Nao,” I said. “Hmm...”

“Does anyone spring to mind, Yoshino?” Kaho asked. “Who is it?”

The two of us had no idea who it could be. When Sae realized that, she laughed and shrugged.

“Yoshino, Kaho, do you really not remember?” Sae asked. “There’s only one person it could be. It’s Kamiya-kun.”

“...Oh yeah, there were some people in our class who called Kamiya-kun ‘Nao’!” I exclaimed. “Your question about our memory was pretty rude, though!”

“Indeed, you are in no position to criticize us, Sae!” said Kaho. “You yourself ought to have noticed right away!”

“As I said, I just overheard it, so I wasn’t completely sure.” Sae sounded upset and raised her chin imperiously. “Besides, Kaho, you didn’t manage to gather any useful information, so frankly, I don’t want to hear it from you.”

Kaho had no answer for her. “Ugh. I suppose you’ve got me there...”

Neither of us had been able to connect the dots even after we heard the name Nao, so we had no right to criticize Sae for not noticing right away.

“If I recall correctly, it was Azuma-san’s group that called him Nao, right?” I

asked.

There was a group of three girls in my class who had stood out a lot: Azuma-san, Furumiya-san, and Shidou-san. They were all very cute, so they were popular with the guys, and they were friendly enough that they were also popular with the girls. *Hmm. Actually, I think "respected" or "admired" would be more accurate words than "popular." They were friendly, yeah, but they didn't really hang out with other cliques.* Kamiya-kun and Nagai-kun had been the only two guys who were good friends with those three girls. Both of them had good looks and were popular with the girls in my class, but everyone had long since given up on trying to get close to them; they were too close to Azuma-san's group. It wouldn't have been easy to compete with those three in terms of feminine charm.

"Mm. I believe that Nagai-kun also referred to Kamiya-kun by the cognomen 'Nao,'" said Kaho. "In addition, it seems rather unlikely that Kamiya-kun and Nagai-kun have been working as a party of two, so I assume Azuma-san's group are with them as well."

"Yeah, that's probably the case if they all managed to group up before that 'evil' god transported us to this world," I said. "So they're such good friends that they've stuck close to each other even in this world, huh? I actually feel kind of jealous. None of us have had any luck with guys."

"Well, I think it might be possible to compete with Azuma-san's group now," said Sae. "I've become an elf, so..."

That was a pretty audacious dream Sae had expressed, so I gently tapped her on the shoulder. "Mm, it's true that you've become very beautiful, Sae. Your original looks weren't bad at all, but it's definitely true that you look *more* beautiful now."

"Yeah, I thought so."

"However, I'm not sure if that's enough to compete with Azuma-san's group," I said. "I don't know if they actually put any points in beauty, though."

Azuma-san, Furumiya-san, and Shidou-san were not the kind of girls who would need a slight "upgrade"; they had all started out very beautiful. If they had invested any points at all in skills that affected their looks, there would be

no way to beat them in that department, and as for personality, I already commented on that.

“Ugh. The truth always hurts,” said Sae.

“Mm, victory would not be easy to achieve,” said Kaho. “On the other hand, I happen to have a number of natural advantages—videlicet, my ears and tail. Fluffy as they are, I believe they’re quite charming.”

“I-I also have some cute pointy ears, so—”

The two of them were starting to argue about stupid stuff, so I cut them short. “Kaho, Sae, do you really think those are good angles to try?”

Both of them averted their eyes in embarrassment.

“There’s no point trying to compete on looks, right? Personality is way more important!”

“Yes, that is correct!” Kaho exclaimed. “As someone who can slice an orc in half with a single stroke of my sword, my personality is—wait a moment, there isn’t anything charming about that at all!”

“I can blow an orc away in one hit with my magic, but I guess that isn’t worth emphasizing either,” said Sae.

“Mm, yeah, you two are the Little Executioner and the Crimson Eliminator,” I said.

“Please, I don’t want to hear it from you, Angelic Sadist,” said Kaho. “I’m fairly confident it’s *you* that people are the most frightened of, Yoshino.”

Kaho and I were rubbing our foreheads together. Each of us forced a laugh.

“We’re more or less the same,” said Sae. “The only thing we’re good at is combat...”

“Ugh, yeah, you’re right...” I couldn’t be that far behind my classmates in terms of fighting ability, but when it came to literally every other skill...

Argh, we don’t have any skills that improve our feminine charms! I guess Kaho does have the Attractive Appearance skill, but that’s about it! Sure, it’s kind of old fashioned pursuing traditional feminine traits like domestic skills, and I’m

down for gender equality, but that doesn't change the reality that guys like girls who give them homemade sweets and stuff like that.

"We weren't well acquainted with any of the five of them back on Earth," said Kaho. "If and when we do meet, will we truly be able to get along with them?"

"Hmm, yeah, it looks like the road ahead won't be easy," said Sae. "If we can't seduce the guys with our looks, we're doomed..."

Kaho and Sae both let their heads hang and stared at the ground, but...

"Uh, I think we'll be able to get along with them just fine as long as we *don't* try to seduce Kamiya-kun or Nagai-kun," I said. *Azuma-san's group were nice and friendly people, after all.* "More importantly, I think we've gotten off topic. We were talking about whether or not to meet up with them, right?"

"Ah, yes. I apologize for the distraction," said Kaho. "The latent feminine urge to show off my attractive traits... It suddenly came to the fore."

Kaho wagged her tail in an exaggerated way, and I did my best to restrain myself from jabbing back at her. We continued to discuss different angles on the situation, but nothing changed our initial conclusion that we should meet up with the Meikyo Shisui party.

As a result, we started getting ready to leave town. We canceled our lease and visited our neighbors to tell them we were leaving, and lastly, we headed to the guild to inform Sara, since she was the receptionist who had helped us out the most. However...

"Is your party really planning to leave town, Yoshino-san?! Please stay here! Your party is the top moneymaker for the local guild!"

Sara was desperately trying to persuade us to change our minds.

I had expected this kind of reaction from her. "Well, we've spent some time thinking about it, but our conclusion was that it wouldn't hurt to head over to Laffan, since it isn't too far from here. Sorry."

Sara pursed her lips in a pout. "Ugh. My employee evaluation has improved a lot recently thanks to your party, but..." She was probably half joking, though, because the pout quickly turned into a smile. "I believe you girls already know

this, but just to make sure—you have to reach Rank 4 before you can enter dungeons."

"Yes, we're aware," I said. "But that's not the main goal of our journey, so it's not an issue."

Our main goal was to make some new acquaintances. If we really wanted to go dungeon-diving, there was the option of working in Laffan until we ranked up.

"Is that so? Well, just so you know, it seems the dungeon at Laffan isn't really a profitable one," said Sara.

"Huh? Is it that easy to get information about that new dungeon?" I asked.

"Mm. How did you come by this information?" Kaho asked. "I failed to turn up anything of note during my research..."

It had been fairly easy to get information about the Meikyo Shisui party, but there was almost no information about the dungeon they had discovered.

"I assumed that nobody had investigated the dungeon yet, since it was just discovered," I said. "Am I wrong?"

"Mm. If the guild has officially announced the discovery of a dungeon, it's been investigated at least briefly," said Sara. "The name 'Summer Resort Dungeon' is the only information available, however. If it were a profitable dungeon, I'm sure more information would be made public in order to attract adventurers from all around, but..."

"Oh, so if there isn't that much information available, that implies that it obviously isn't a profitable dungeon, right?" I asked.

"Mm, that's right. For now, the guild simply registered the name in its books."

"I see. That's kind of a shame," I said. "We're still going to Laffan, though."

Sara laughed and nodded. "Mm, I won't try to compel you not to go. Freedom of movement is one of the perquisites that adventurers enjoy, after all. However, please come to me right away if you return here. Please don't forget about Sara, a receptionist of the Adventurers' Guild!"

Sara sent us off, sounding a bit like a politician on the campaign trail, and we

headed out of Kiura shortly afterward. There were also some adventurers who tried to convince us to stay, but that was whatever. My personal goal was to do my best in order to clean my name and discard the aliases I'd picked up, like Orc Eater and Angelic Sadist. I reaffirmed my resolve as we began our journey toward Laffan.

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Sarstedt was the first town that we had visited in this world, and we arrived there again on our way westward, toward Laffan. To be more specific, when we had first visited Sarstedt, we had been on the west bank of the river. The east bank, where we were now, was somewhat different, but not that much. As we walked through the town gates, I glanced at the remains of the place that my party had once used as a temporary home. The atmosphere here felt a bit different than it had in those days.

"Hmm. It seems like it's bustling now," I said.

"Indeed. There are rather a lot of people outside," said Kaho. "And yet there doesn't seem to be a festival or anything of the kind taking place."

Kaho was completely right. In fact, the atmosphere was the opposite of festive: it felt like the people of Sarstedt were troubled and irritated.

"The atmosphere in town right now feels like it used to whenever it wouldn't stop raining," said Sae.

"Oh yeah, that makes sense to me," I said. "But the weather's been good recently, hasn't it?"

Hmm. Now that I think about it, the atmosphere actually feels a bit worse than it did when everyone was trapped because of the rain and couldn't take the ferry to the different sides of town.

"I have no idea what the problem may be, but regardless, let us make haste," said Kaho. "I do not want to remain in this town."

"I agree completely," said Sae. "The food here tastes bad, and lodging is expensive too. It's not a good place to stay for any length of time."

Yeah, the food here tastes really bad. And I mean, sure, that might just be a

matter of individual taste, but lodging was definitely expensive. The smartest choice would be to head out of Sarstedt right away, and we hurried to the port, but...

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“Huh? The ferry services are suspended?” I asked.

“Yep. No boats will leave shore for the time being.”

That was the disappointing response we got when we spoke to one of the workers at the port. Apparently Sae had guessed right, but I had some other questions.

“Why is that?” Kaho asked. “The river does not appear turbulent in the slightest...”

Normally, ferry services would only be suspended when the waters were too dangerous to cross. However, the river didn’t look like it was flooding, and the waves were calm too.

“Well, you see, a giant salmon has swum upriver. It’s a rare occurrence, but those salmon are pretty dangerous. That’s why nobody is out on the water.”

That seemed like a pretty weird reason to suspend the ferries. The three of us looked at each other.

“Do I understand correctly that it’s just a fish?” Sae asked. “Is there really no one who’s willing to go out on the water even in a town full of fishermen?”

“Yes, this sounds like the perfect opportunity to bring in a large haul!” said Kaho.

I thought our reasoning made perfect sense, but the port worker snapped back, “Don’t be ridiculous! If you try to hunt those salmon, you’ll end up as their prey!”

“If you’re talking about giant salmon, then we actually caught one ourselves the other day.” Sae spread her arms to indicate the size of the salmon that we had caught.

The port worker frowned before lifting a hand to his chin. “Hmm, yeah, it sounds like you caught a very big fish, but I think it was probably just a king

trout.”

“Mm. It tasted delicious,” said Kaho. “We’d love to catch some more if it’s possible to find them here.”

Fish was a rare delicacy for us; meat made up the majority of our meals. Sae and I nodded in agreement with Kaho as we recalled the taste of fish, but the port worker just chuckled and shook his head.

“Well, unfortunately, the fish here are emperor salmon. They’re similar to king trout, but emperor salmon are more than double the length—and they’re much more dangerous.”

According to the port worker, emperor salmon were capable of swallowing children whole, and they were powerful enough that they could even bite off the legs and arms of an adult. They could capsize small and large boats alike, and once you were in the water, the fish had a home-field advantage. It wouldn’t be easy to save someone who fell into the river, so that was why the ferries were suspended.

“...I see. In that case, I suppose that you would have no choice but to suspend ferry services,” said Kaho.

I leaned forward in excitement and asked, “By the way, do emperor salmon taste good?” *As someone who loves salmon sushi, I gotta find out!*

He had a slightly exasperated look on his face as he nodded. “Supposedly they’re delicious, but nobody in this town is suicidal enough to try catching them.”

Kaho laughed and grinned at the port worker. “Are you implying, then, that nobody would complain if we caught some for ourselves?”

The port worker grinned back at her. “You’re more than welcome to try. Even if you catch some, I doubt you’ll be able to wipe out all the emperor salmon in the river, but I’m sure that people who’ve suffered from salmon attacks will feel a bit better knowing that someone is doing something.”

“Do you really plan on catching some, Kaho?” I asked.

“I do. Don’t you think that emperor salmon would be a perfect gift with which

to introduce ourselves, Yoshino? The people we are journeying to meet might welcome us with open arms if we were friends, but at present, we are merely acquaintances, are we not?”

“I feel like bringing along gifts or souvenirs is sometimes necessary even among friends,” said Sae. “Anyway, I’d also be down to catch some emperor salmon.”

“Me too! If they really do taste good, we shouldn’t let this opportunity go to waste!” I exclaimed. “Um, we might end up catching fish other than king salmon, but is that okay?”

It wouldn’t have been worth antagonizing the people of Sarstedt over a fishing session. I asked the port worker if there were any rules that we had to follow—whether we had to release certain fish, for example—but he laughed and shook his head.

“Nah, nobody’s going to complain about you catching some fish at the shore. It would be a different story if you wanted to sell the fish that you caught. But are you sure you’ll be all right? You look like adventurers, but emperor salmon aren’t easy creatures to handle.”

“Thank you for worrying about us, but we’ll be fine,” said Sae. “We don’t plan on taking any unnecessary risks.”

“Mm. If we find ourselves in a dangerous predicament, Sae will deliver us with her magic,” said Kaho.

“Yeah, I think I can handle that as long as I don’t fall into the water,” said Sae. “Please help by looking out for me.”

“Of course!” said Kaho. “Let us ready ourselves!”

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Sarstedt was a port town, so we found a bunch of fishing implements pretty easily. Or rather, the port worker helped us out with all sorts of things, probably because he had nothing to do at the moment, with the ferry services being suspended. As a result, we obtained the sturdiest thread, the biggest fishing hooks, and the strongest fishing rods that were available in Sarstedt, and we brought all of them with us as we headed to the shore. We had no idea what

would be good bait, so we took some of the orc meat that we had on us and attached it to our fishing hooks before each of us set down in a line.

“Tee hee, I’m looking forward to cooking the fish that we catch,” said Kaho.

“Cook? Weren’t you talking about using them as gifts?” I asked.

“A single fish ought to suffice as a gift,” Kaho replied. “I’m simply proposing that we cook enough for ourselves to eat.”

“I’ve heard that fishing is actually much more difficult than it seems,” said Sae, “so I doubt we’ll be able to catch anything right away.”

“Dream big or go home! However, you are probably correct that it won’t be easy, Sae,” said Kaho. “Let’s consider this a way to kill time, then, while we wait for the ferry services to resume.”

I felt like we would be lucky if we caught even one fish to bring with us as a gift, but before too much longer, Sae’s rod actually started to bend.

“S-Something’s pulling on my rod!”

“Oh, the first catch is yours, hmm?” said Kaho.

“I didn’t think we would get one so soon,” I said. “Since nobody tries to catch emperor salmon, maybe they aren’t wary of people.”

I was just chatting with Kaho as we watched Sae’s rod bend, but Sae raised her voice to get our attention.

“N-Now’s not the time for chatting!” She sounded pretty nervous. “The fish is really strong!”

Sae was an elf, but she was also an adventurer, so she wasn’t weak by any means, but she was being dragged across the ground, her feet gouging furrows in the bank, and she was rapidly approaching the water.

“Oh, I shall come to your aid!” Kaho pulled up her rod and tossed it aside before running to Sae’s side. I followed right behind. Kaho was unbelievably strong, so I felt like my help would be redundant, but...

“Ugh, I’m struggling to maintain a stable stance. This spells trouble!”

Kaho was powerful, but she was also lightweight. She hastily drew her

greatsword and thrust it into the ground, then grabbed it with one hand while she used the other to help support Sae's fishing rod.

"Is the fish really that strong?" I asked.

"Mm. I have no experience fishing, but I can only imagine this is what it's like for fishermen who catch swordfish," Kaho replied. "Sae, spin the rod from time to time to exhaust the fish, but not too much."

"O-Okay! Ugh, this is really difficult!"

"Sae, let me take over," I said. "Can you use your magic to create something for me to stand on?"

I actually had somewhat more physical strength than Sae, since I wasn't an elf, so I took the rod from her. She nodded in response to my request and cast a spell.

"Y-Yeah, I can do that! *Earth Wall!*"

A thick and sturdy wall of earth emerged from the ground, and Kaho and I stood on it to brace ourselves.

"Hmm, yes, in this way, I am able to brace my feet and use both hands freely," said Kaho.

"That was a close call. We could have been pulled into the river if we'd messed up." *I don't want to think about the fact that we just came close to losing our lives while fishing in the river, of all things—although actually, I bet Kaho would have been fine. She would probably have strangled the fish and casually carried it back with her.*

"The fish at the end of this line must be huge," said Sae. "Do you think we'll actually be able to pull it up?"

"Hmm, maybe we should have brought something like a fishing net too," I said. "Actually, I doubt there's anything big enough..."

If emperor salmon really are at least three meters long on average, then we'd probably need something like fishing claws, right? I remember seeing some on television.

"Well, it is what it is," said Kaho. "Let us take it easy and wait until the fish has

spent its strength.”

“You can only take it easy because of how strong you are, Kaho,” I said. “Most people would lose in a contest of strength against this salmon, you know?”

Kaho looked very stable now that she had a good platform for her feet. I had put one of my hands on the fishing rod as well, but most of the force was coming from Kaho’s tight grip.

“I was the first to catch a fish, but I don’t have anything to do now,” said Sae. “Ugh...”

“You assisted us by creating this earthen bulwark with your magic, Sae,” said Kaho. “Even I wouldn’t be able to hold my ground without this...”

“You’re also our lifeline, Sae,” I said. “You can just cast the Explosion spell into the river if it comes down to it.”

“Hmm. All right, then. I’ll stand here and cheer you on. *Go, go!*”

We listened to Sae’s somewhat unenthusiastic cheering as Kaho battled the emperor salmon. She was working the rod almost like a master fisherman despite the fact that it was her first time. I felt like her beastwoman instincts might have kicked in.

“I bet you could record this and turn it into a one-hour television special,” I said.

“Heh, not even Oma tuna can compare to a fish this size! It’s about to surface!” Kaho forcefully bent the fishing rod, and soon, a giant fish jumped out of the waters.



The fish definitely appeared to be over three meters long, and it arced through the air before landing on the ground behind us.

“Whoa, it’s huge!”

Sae and I were completely terrified of the way the emperor salmon was flailing around, but Kaho sternly pointed at it and yelled at us. “Now’s no time to act shocked! Yoshino, finish it off! Smash its head!”

“H-Huh? O-Okay!”

The emperor salmon was a formidable foe in the water, but there was no way I’d lose to it on land. I grabbed my mace and crept up to the fish. The moment I struck it over the head, it stopped moving.

Suddenly, I heard some clapping in my general vicinity. The source turned out to be the people who had gathered nearby while we were battling the emperor salmon.

“Whoa, that was amazing!”

“I didn’t think you’d truly be able to catch one! Thanks for the show!”

“I thought you would give up halfway through!”

As a result of that feat, we became the heroes of Sarstedt for the day. *Hmm, actually, maybe heroine is the proper term?*

Afterword

One thing I always try to keep in mind when writing this series is to find a good stopping point for each volume, but I bet I know what you're thinking after reading how this volume ended above: I ended this one abruptly. Yeah, it was simply because I gave up on trying to always find a good stopping point. I'm sure that longtime readers already know this, but this work is based on a web novel. However, there are some characters who only show up either in the web novel version or the light novel version, and there are also some differences in the setting between the two versions, so you can probably guess the outcome: my poor memory is unable to maintain consistency between the two versions, so there have been a lot of cases in which I've had to look around to check whether or not I had already written something before, and the process was pretty time-consuming, so...

With all of that in mind, I tried my best to write this volume as close as I could to the web novel version, but it's gotten to the point that I can't really fix it by editing the web novel chapters. I have to compare the web novel and light novel versions to find the parts that didn't appear in the light novel version, and then I have to use that information as the basis for rewriting while making sure everything fits within a certain number of pages.

During this process, I was thinking about what information is available to different characters at different moments, and about what to write at the end of various scenes. That was when I realized something—namely, there was no natural stopping point that I could put at the end of this volume. However, rewriting the majority of the story wouldn't have worked either. If it had ended up rushed and lacking in vividness and detail, that would have defeated the purpose of rewriting in the first place, so I gave up. Instead, as a goal to work toward, I focused on the scene that was absolutely necessary to the story. That's right, it's the scene on the cover of this volume! Whew, I'm glad that I managed to write things in such a way that the cover isn't deceptive.

Speaking of the cover, I believe one thing that stands out in this volume are

the new outfits the characters are wearing. Nao and his party have managed to save up a decent amount of money and have become accustomed to life in a different world, so they're all wearing new winter clothes, including Metea and Mary. On top of that, there are some sketches of casual clothes for a few characters, like Haruka. Thank you very much for all of your art, Nekobyou Neko-san! Light novels in which the characters change outfits are actually quite rare, aren't they?! I-I hope that Kaho's group can also get new outfits next time...

On a side note, the character who has changed outfits the most over the course of the story is Yuki. She happens to have gone through seven different outfits, including a swimsuit and outfits from Nao's imagination! Haruka is technically the primary heroine, but she's no match for Yuki in this regard. In fact, she's only even with Yuki if you include the promotional art that Nekobyou Neko-san drew to post on Twitter. Strange, isn't it? By the way, the art of Haruka on Twitter is very cute, so please look it up if you haven't seen it yet! I suggest taking a look at the depiction of Haruka back on Earth, before she became an elf!

Itsuki Mizuho


"Okay, it's time to roast this boar," said Yuki, who was acting as the chef.
She lit a fire under the spit with charcoal, then started to rotate the spit and slowly roast it with high heat from a distance.
The sisters, on the other hand, were standing near the pit and staring intently at the boar as it roasted. The way their tails were swaying in sync was kind of fun to watch.
Mary
"Mary, Metea, the tusk boar isn't going to finish cooking any faster no matter how hard you stare at it," said Yuki. "Just so you know, this is going to take a while."
Metea
Metea was beaming. "Just the smell is enough to make me feel happy!"
Tusk boar barbecue!


A dungeon full of foes to slay for their meat?
Tyrant Picow
Touya
Haruka
Marbled Meat
Inside the room was an enormous picow.
It looked even bigger and heavier than a normal cow.
From my Third Eye skill, I learned that it was, in fact, a *tyrant* picow.
It definitely looked every bit as intimidating as its name
as it glared at us from the back of the room, but it was
otherwise mostly the same as a normal picow,
so in a way, it also looked sort of charming.
However, the tyrant picow had three horns
instead of one, and all of them looked very dangerous;
each horn was as long as a normal one-handed sword. If it rammed
Touya, I had no idea whether his breastplate would survive.
But Touya actually seemed happy to see the tyrant picow.
"Hell yeah, more marbled meat!"
Touya exclaimed.
"Lots of delicious meat!"
Metea exclaimed.
"...Yeah, depending on how
you look at it, I guess 'fancy' kind of
works as a way to describe what's
going on here," I said.
Nao
To Another World... with LAND MINES!
8


What do you
think of him?
Yuki
Natsuki
"Has your relationship with Nao changed at all?!" I blurted out. "The 'Will they or won't they?' has been bothering me for a while! It bothered me even back in Japan!"
Side Story
Will They or Won't They?


Kaho
Saeko
Yoshino
Side Story
Jade Wings: Episode 4


story
Itsuki Mizuho
art
Nekobyou Neko
To Another World... with LAND MINES!
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To Another World... with LAND MINES! 8


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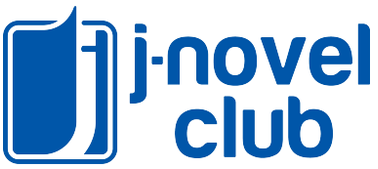
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To Another World... with Land Mines! Volume 8

by Itsuki Mizuho

Translated by Yen-Po Tseng Edited by Shakuzan

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