

橙乃ままれ ● ハラカズヒロ ●

【B】雲雀（りぼり）たちの羽ばたき

「G」HORIZON

ロ・グ・ホ・ラ・イ・ズ・ン

マジックライトの光のなかで、
五十鈴は五十鈴ではない何者かになった。
細いだけで起伏に乏しい、
ぱっとしない身体を持った、
くせっ毛の女子高生はいなくなる。
自信満々の輝くような笑顔で
リュートをかき鳴らす
〈吟遊詩人〉の五十鈴になるのだ。







Originally, it was nothing more than an abandoned building but it became part of Oceanic Systems' experimental reform project and passed into the Adventurers' hands. After that, the store received many repairs and was now owned by The Seventh Drum and Fife Band. From the beginning, much of the management of the shop itself was done by People of The Land because the Adventurers were too busy to have time for managing a shop and business work. In Akiba, dual managed establishments were the current style, almost like symbiosis. The country style shop was lit extravagantly with Magic Lights. And in that light stood Isuzu with her head bowed as she clapped her hands loudly. There were about seventy seats, and all of them were filled. There were canvas covered sofas around amber tables, and hanging on the wall with the menus were hand written event schedules. The Adventurers and People of The Land gathered together in Akiba had, with some back and forth, built a store together. It wasn't focussed on building efficiency or safe interior design, the individual guild halls, houses and shops, all had to be hand built.

The shop was a mish-mash of moods, there was a small veranda like stage and it resembled a mix of a restaurant, a fast food joint, and a live house. In a fantasy novel, it would be called a tavern; but Akiba's adventurers weren't like the adventurers in those novels, bathing themselves in alcohol, if pushed, they'd say that eating was more important than drinking, the store reflected this way of thinking too, it had a bright and cheery atmosphere.

Looking over the store, Isuzu relaxed slightly. In the audience, she could see many unfamiliar faces, and firmed her resolve.

It was fine to be nervous.

If she could enjoy herself at the same time, she'd be able to become more skilled.

Isuzu stopped thinking, and strummed the first note.

Before the performance, her head had been full of thoughts, and she understood what bursting with emotion felt like.

They'd been given time for six songs. Those thirty minutes were long enough to grant any wish, but short enough to blink three times and miss.

Isuzu's joy and hope burst from her throat as sound, Tohya matching the rhythm, kicking the drums with a smile floating on his face as Isuzu scattered notes into the air.

The Amber Dragon's Claw she was given by Shiroe glided down the strings, it wasn't the usual way to play, but it made for a showy performance. In the corner of her head, she thought it sounded like the roar of the sea at the beach.

Happiness pressed upon her like waves.

Strumming the taught strings, the vibrations reverberated through her fingers, up to her wrist.

Hundreds of times stronger than carbonated water, Isuzu's happiness bubbled.

She had an instrument in her hands, just from that, her cheeks slackened. The instrument responded to Isuzu's wishes, giving the first cry of a baby, the first cry was a beautiful riff, it was Isuzu's duty to nurture it.

Like birthday wishes, Isuzu's words hung upon her lips.

It was her plain, ordinary voice, but it filled the room.

In this world with no electrical amplification, it was her natural voice, but it was still plenty to fill the small store.

Isuzu always felt strange doing this. Could a common country high school girl's voice echo like this?

Isuzu had been playing here for a month, but if she counted on her fingers, how many times she'd been on stage, she wouldn't need more than one hand. Of course, before the catastrophe, living in the outskirts of her hometown, she'd never done anything like this. Where there was mainly empty land and fields around where she lived, the closest she'd come was a box like karaoke room.

That was why, every time her voice was so sweet and carefree, she couldn't help being surprised.

However, that was only for a breath.

Her reverie only lasted a moment before it was swallowed up in the flood of sound.

A burning shiver ran through her arms, and she strained her voice through her quivering throat.

It wasn't anything special, on earth it was just a common rock number, a song Isuzu remembered from her childhood, hearing it in her father's collection. Isuzu played and sung the song that brought such a desperate heat to her.

Wrapped in Isuzu's troubadour aura, Tohya took care of the drums, but there were no other instruments.

By the old world's common sense, this wasn't a bad, it was a small scale group, just breaking onto the stage.

But even that, in front of Isuzu's happiness which was boiling like the air above the pavement in the summer, was meaningless.

Isuzu was singing on her stage.

It was a much more vividly moving experience than she had imagined.

In the light from the magic lights, Isuzu was no longer Isuzu, she had become someone else, the thin, freckled, curveless high school girl had vanished. She had become the lute-strumming troubadour Isuzu, who was full of confidence, wearing a shining smile.

The overwhelming happiness cleared her sight.

Many people were watching Isuzu from the filled seats.

They were all smiling.

The dwarf shop manager's mouth was drawn together in a line, but even they were enjoying the rhythm.

Isuzu's feelings were pushed out through the lute like an arch of F notes.

Nyanta and Serara sat by the counter, Serara shivering with red cheeks, and Nyanta smiling whilst watching over her. Serara holding her shaking fist in front of her chest was really cute. She was the girliest girl that Isuzu knew. The calm gentleman Nyanta's silver whiskers twitched as he enjoyed the performance.

Their calm aura flowed into Isuzu and gave her lute even more brilliance.

The first song ended. Most of the room were hitting the tables in time with the drums, like they were percussion instruments. It felt like she had a bass drum in her stomach. Her braid swinging in front of her eyes, she spun on her foot and started preparing for the next song.

It was irritating.

Had her happiness been received by everyone?

Even in her giddy dizziness, she still managed to properly thank her lute. The lute was her partner.

After being rescued from Hamelin, she didn't know what to do, and found this lute in the Crescent Moon Alliance. The guild master Maryelle was a carpenter, and had made it a long time ago. It had been added to and upgraded here and there, and barely looked like it had originally, even so, it had healed her feelings of loneliness from this alternate world.

Isuzu and the lute were already of one mind and body.

In this world without school or clubs, she didn't just play her lute, she did housework for the guild and hunted with her friends.

But in this world with no TV, web, cable or films, if she wanted to hear music, she had to play it herself.

At the end of a ribbon like cable from her trusty partner, there was a shell with a globe inside that raised her voice. An artificial spirit that magnified sound from the trunk of the lute. It was because the Roderick Firm had remodelled it with the low-level follower summon item Siren's Shell. It was originally a lute for old style music, but the remodelling gave it more width and feeling and evolved it into a deluxe mystery instrument. Even so, Isuzu loved her partner.

The Magic Light met her eyes and smiled brightly.

I forgot. Thank you.

Filled with those feelings, Isuzu nodded.

What song was it now? She was dizzy and didn't know. She thought it was the third or fourth.

She felt like she was about to fly away, like she had grown wings and blown away the fragments of fatigue.

Was this also part of the stamina of an adventurer?

That wasn't right.

Rather, it was like a cable had attached to her back and was pouring energy into her. The store was filled with the sounds of clapping and stomping, it was like a furious avalanche of happiness. Isuzu cheerfully sang an absurd rock number, one of the oldies from her father's collection.

She didn't think it was a good performance.

At any rate, Isuzu had no musical talent, she'd been told that time and again by her father. She was a country high school girl, the only things musical that she'd done were school festival type things, and after school karaoke. She hadn't received any instruction in those things, and was no match for her musician father.

However, or perhaps because of that, it had nothing to do with this wondrous moment.

That emotion wasn't happiness.

It wasn't anything so vague, it was the clear energy of the moment.

The invisible, intangible, colourless power that slept inside everyone. In Isuzu, in Tohya, in Nyanta and Serara, in everyone in that store.

It was overflowing and raining down upon the stage, the lute was connected to Isuzu and performing, so talent had nothing to do with it. This enjoyment, and everyone's joy were proof of that.

Next to the entrance furthest from her, Isuzu saw a glint of gold.

It was the dog-prince, his face full of excitement, waving both arms at Isuzu. Just from seeing that, Isuzu's lute broke past its limits. Isuzu was filled with feelings she didn't understand, her face relaxed and she broke into a big smile, waving the neck of the lute in reply. It was embarrassing and awkward, and she didn't know what to do. The notes around her turned pink and overflowed.

She needed to put her all into the next number too.

It was Isuzu's sworn friend, her colleague, her designated bag carrier and her guard when walking, the dog-prince, Rundelhaus Code's favourite slow ballad.

It couldn't be helped, this next song would be a prize for Rudy.

Isuzu thought that and took a deep breath.

Reading the mood of the soft light from the Magic Lights, Isuzu started singing the next song.

It would be today's most important performance.

2

"It's a little warm tonight isn't it ~nya"

"It is, Nyanta-san"

If you walked a little from the store, the streets were deserted.

In this alternate world with no electronic media, trains or cars, the noise of city life was non-existent. There were festivals like the Libra Festival, but that was different, and the mornings and evenings were getting colder, so the streets were deserted at night.

Isuzu, Rundelhou, Tohya, Nyanta and Serara were in good spirits, smiling as they went back from The Broom Hole.

On the main streets, there were Firefly Lights dotted here and there, and the party had Rundelhou's Magic Light to guide them as well.

Rundelhou and Tohya were talking excitedly ahead of everyone, Serara and Nyanta were enjoying themselves too, and Isuzu followed behind, wrapped in a fluffy aura of joy.

Tohya and Rundelhou were carrying large amounts of luggage, but Isuzu only had her lute, cradled against her chest. Because they were only walking through the town, they were all in casual wear and didn't have their weapons with them. Around the time they'd joined Log Horizon, their lives hadn't calmed down at all, so they had few personal belongings, but now, because they had their own rooms in the guild house, they had more casual wear. Now that they thought of it, it had been half a year since the defensive battle at Choushi.

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Rundelhou looked back at Isuzu, walking slowly behind them, and asked

"Miss Isuzu, are you okay, are you tired?"

"Not at all, I'm full of energy!"

He misunderstood, Isuzu was just satisfied with watching everyone else.

"We should go back to the guild house before we get too cold ~nya."

"To eat too!"

Whilst Nyanta and Tohya were having that back and forth, they crossed a small intersection.

They were all walking down the night roads with happy faces.

Isuzu and Rundelhou were used to Log Horizon now.

Log Horizon was a kind and comfy guild. Isuzu had become good friends with Minori, she felt like she had known the diligent younger girl for years now, Serara too. Isuzu really liked the girl standing next to Nyanta, with a melty smile on her face.

Isuzu's sworn friend, Rundelhou, had also relaxed since when they were in the Forest of Lagrandia. Rundelhou and Tohya had become friends as "the boys' group", when they were together, it was really noisy. Isuzu would say that their mental age fell when they were together.

They also gradually got to know the senior group of Shiroe, Nyanta, Naotsugu and Akatsuki. The eldest in the guild, Nyanta, was an easy one to get along with, calm dandy. The guild's kitchen was his domain. The young group had been caught by their stomachs and fallen in love with his cooking.

Tohya and Rundelhou had come to understand Naotsugu by talking with him. He always was the life of the party in their banter, but Isuzu thought he was a surprisingly considerate person. If there was a problem with the decoration or facilities in the guild, Naotsugu was the first one to talk to.

Recently, Naotsugu, Tohya, Rundelhous, and sometimes Nyanta had some male bonding time. They said it was special training, they're sometimes a bit childish, but Isuzu and Minori pretend not to see. According to Naotsugu, they went out here and there, but they came back with silly grins and mud clinging to them. Minori and Isuzu would smile wryly and go to prepare the bath.

Akatsuki was a quiet and sharp woman. She seemed shy but still replied somewhat curtly when addressed. When Isuzu first joined the guild, she disliked her a little, but she was really a kind person with a hidden sense of humour. She enjoyed washing and cleaning and, without any help would stealthily implement large scale cleans. In the blink of an eye the sheets would be airing on the veranda.

Since the New Year, Tetora had joined and was their free healthcare. She certainly wasn't a shy person, the first time they'd met, she'd grabbed Isuzu in a hug, not just Isuzu, everyone apart from Akatsuki, who had quickly side-stepped.

On the other hand, there was the guild master, Shiroe, who they didn't understand for a long time. At mealtimes he'd absentmindedly pass out the seasonings and plates, not anything special. He'd nap in the afternoons on the sofa in the living room, seeming exhausted. When it was time for cleaning or shopping he'd say something like

"I'm no good at this, so I'm going to my room." And hard-heartedly leave it to Naotsugu and Akatsuki.

If you listened to the rumours in the town, you'd hear all sorts of things, like 'His eyes are sharp.' Or, 'He's a wicked schemer.' Or, 'He's playing with Akiba's fate.' Or, 'He's the mastermind behind the Round Table.' Or, 'He's not good enough'. Isuzu would agree with the sharp eyes, but many of the others she thought "Is that really true?"

Aside from the rumours, Isuzu also had her long-time friend Minori, according to her, Shiroe was a "really upstanding young man, kind, good at taking care of people, wise, gentlemanly, the one I want to-"

It was like there were three types of Shiroe, inconsistent like daily specials for lunch.

The one that Isuzu thought of was when he stood at the cross-roads in Choushi with his strict face, asking for secrecy, she thought (even though she hadn't seen a real one) that he was almost like a judge.

She thought that saving Rundelhous wasn't a matter of chance, but a foregone conclusion, he really was an amazing person.

One day, after she knew him better, she'd asked Nyanta who had just said

"Shiroecchi has eldest-son-syndrome."

To Isuzu, Shiroe was someone who tried so hard it defied common sense. He was someone who had such amazing talents, but also unexpected bad points.

She could understand Shiroe a little better now, so felt like she could help Minori.

Like that, Isuzu got along with Log Horizon as time passed.

She thought everyday was busy, even if there was nothing that needed to be done, people still got hungry through the day, and if people got hungry, they needed food, so the food needed preparing. Log Horizon had Nyanta who had a sub-class of Chef, but that didn't mean that everything to do with food should be pushed on to him.

In the first place, in this world, there weren't any conveniences like pre-cut vegetables, seasonings, and instant meals, so cooking was hard labour.

If you wanted to cook something fancy, those preparations could easily take an entire day. On top of that, there weren't net-supermarkets that would do home delivery, you had to go and buy the food yourself.

Delegating all of that work to Nyanta would be unfair. Even if there wasn't anything cooked in the mornings, there was always something left out for breakfast, on top of that, two days of the week were set as "Chief Nyanta's rest days."

The preparation of food was on everyone's minds, so the most noticeable stores in Akiba were the food and drink stores. Places where you could just decide to go and eat on a whim, set meal and soup stalls were very common. As could be expected from a place where gamers gathered, there were many stores which sold food which was simple and filling, but there were also bakeries, take outs and other stalls. And even a few fashionable restaurants for dates.

From the beginning there were many shops which sold food and drink, but the 8th Shopping District had led the way, opening a shopping mall under the guard rails by the abandoned Akiba Station, where you could find familiar flavours.

On "Chief Nyanta's rest days" the guild members would eat out at one of these shops.

The range on offer had changed a little around the end of year celebration of Snowfell.

Isuzu had been scouted at an open stage night at The Broom Hole, and about once a week after that, she'd done small live concerts like today.

Being a bard didn't increase your singing or musical ability, but adventurers who didn't have bard as their class, or a similar sub-class had limits placed on their musical abilities.

If they had the Diva sub-class or similar, then, depending on their practice, they could sing well, the limitations wouldn't drag at their feet. Bards however, could remove the limitations from people around them, so when Isuzu was on the stage, Tohya, Minori and Serara could use backing instruments and keep a rhythm. Unfortunately, the dog prince himself had no musical talent so was mainly there for support.

"Minori-chan would have liked to do this too."

"She would have ~nya."

"She couldn't, she had work."

"With Charashin-san, right?"

"Miss Minori is a working woman."

"Ahahahaha."

"But, she should be finished now."

"Isn't she going home with Shiroe-niichan?"

Her heart was pounding in her ears, but listening to her friends' conversation in front was slowly soothing her. It was like the loneliness as a dream leaves you, but even so, the indelible happiness still followed her.

(She wasn't a pro like her father, but she sometimes played the lute to make herself feel better.)

She didn't think she'd ever go on stage.

But more than those worries, she loved music; she gently caressed the lute in her arms. Like a hanging fruit, the trunk hung from the neck. She was more accustomed to the wooden bass, but the lute had a more delicate, old sounding tone.

(Uehehe.)

The wooden bass she used to use was a mass produced model (though still ridiculously expensive for a student like Isuzu) but this lute was a one of a kind item made by Maryelle. It was decorated with two strings of elegant rainbow-coloured mother of pearl down either side. Compared to when she received it, it had been remodelled here and there, but it still had the resemblance to a dolphin that Isuzu liked so much.

“Rockers have to have a favourite instrument!” That was what Isuzu fervently believed, and her lute, the Flying Dolphin was hers.

“What’s up, Isuzu-nee-chan?”

“Fueh?”

“Isuzu-san?”

Before she knew it, everyone was gathered around her

“Eh? Eh?”

“You were grinning, nee-chan.”

“I was not!”

“You were, you were smiling.”

She put a hand against her cheek, to check for herself, and sure enough, her cheeks were drawn into a smile.

“Miss Isuzu is still excited.”

“That’s not it, Rudy!”

Isuzu’s voice got louder as she moved towards him, Rundelhaus looked around with an amazed face and a kind smile, looking for support. Tohya answered his plea with.

“Isuzu-nee-chan really is amazing.”

“That’s not true at all, it’s just because I had instruments in the house when I was a kid, so I can sort of play them.”

“That’s not it ~nya. It made everyone happy ~nyaa.”

With a smiling Serara agreeing at his side, Nyanta praised her too. Her face went bright red, and the one who struck the final blow was the one who was supposed to be her ally, Rundelhaus.

“Miss Isuzu is like a spirit of music, her enchanting melody enriches the night. Next week we’re going on a trip after all, I’m sure the people there will enjoy it.... Uh, what is it, Miss Isuzu?”

“I. Told. You. Rudy. Why do you say things like that with such a serious face!?”

Isuzu's embarrassment overwhelmed her patience and she started chasing Rundelhaus around.

She was happy, but couldn't look at them in the face. The chase through the cold night continued until they reached their guild house.

3

It had been six months since the apocalypse, within all the ruined and abandoned buildings in Akiba, the one that had received the most improvements was the Guild Hall.

On the first floor there was the Guild Information Desk, the bank and hallways. From the second floor, there were six floors of transfer doors to individual guildhalls, lined up along the corridors like a hotel. On the fourteenth floor, the Luquenje conference hall used when the Round Table Conference was formed.

The seventh floor and up were originally like tenantless buildings for rent, when Elder Tale was a game and immediately after the Catastrophe, it was just space without a purpose. When the Round Table Conference was formed, the space became very valuable as it could be repurposed for many uses.

The Manufacturing Guild Liaison Office and other sub-divisions of the round Table Conference had spaces set up for them during the Libra Festival. For all that the Round Table Conference was a self-governing organisation, it had little power in a political sense, and their ability to flatter couldn't be said to be high. Even though the Round Table Conference was imperfect, they governed well. As the major guilds that made up the conference formed a not insignificant proportion of the citizens, the city had confidence in them. There weren't many of the original citizens from when it was a game that opposed the rule, there were altruistic players which made voluntary events and such.

In the first place, Akiba was founded on freedom, whether you wanted to just carry on with your life, fight, or do something related to economics, the difficulty level wasn't too high. People in Akiba just went about life as they pleased, those who wanted to hunt lived went to the outskirts, people who wanted to manufacture shut themselves in workshops, and those who wanted to sell things or interact with people, managed stores. There was the self-governing organisation, but as long as they didn't get in the way of what people wanted to do, that was fine. That's how the general populace felt, but the Round Table Conference actually had far more to do than the citizens thought. If only they could let people just do what they wanted, but things needed doing, like determining priority for usage of buildings as stores because of course several people would want the same area.

One by one, these issues weren't important, but dealing with masses of administration was the fate of any self-governing organisation, the Round Table Conference was no exception.

"Phew, I'm finished here, Black Heart."

"Over here too, Isaac-san."

In the corner of a large cafeteria on the first basement floor of the Guild Hall, the two of them spoke to each other. Log Horizon's guild master Shiroe, and The Black Sword Knight's guild master Isaac.

It was called an underground cafeteria, but it was really just a space where you could eat and drink.

Light from the firefly lights around the ceiling streamed down onto tables which would seat two or four people, with geometric lines drawn on them. The space was split into many areas, further in there were private rooms and small conference rooms.

There were also two communal kitchens which could be used by cooking groups to sell food, the buyers took their food to the tables themselves under a self-service system.

Shiroe's group had taken up positions around an eight person table far into the area, maps, documents and writing tools lined up on top of it. Various tools and measuring devices had been added from the bag at his feet. It was the sort of table hogging that shouldn't be seen somewhere where you eat, but they'd already finished using it for food.

"What are you talking about? I'm the one that handles most of the admin for the Black Sword."

Said Isaac's second-in-command Rezarick, slumping with an aghast look on his face. Isaac just gave a smirk that said "don't sweat the small stuff."

Isaac was naturally not wearing his armour today, instead he was clad in the Round Table Conference's uniform with an ash coloured trailing coat draped over his shoulders.

It seemed like Isaac like the uniform, though Shiroe.

Shiroe however, was in his everyday turtleneck. The best kind of clothing for carrying papers around and doing office work.

Recently he'd been working a lot with Isaac, but office work didn't suit Isaac, every time he tried to have a meeting and draw up papers, they'd end up going for food and drink.

Staying in the bustling Akiba wouldn't work so he was grateful for the underground shared space.

"I don't really get it, but is this fine?"

"Yes, that's fine, sorry for letting you take the lead."

"I don't care about that."

"Isaac-kun was looking forward to be able to see this."

"Shut it you. And don't call me '-kun'."

Shiroe smiled at their conversation and began packing away the surplus equipment.

"But you know, since we came to this word, The Knights have been doing a lot of drills."

"It's The Black Swords, not The Knights."

He said that, but Isaac didn't seem to be too serious about it, he was more focussed on the documents in front of him. Titled "The first people of the land training outline."

"Like I said the other meeting, it sounds friendlier."

"And like I said, we don't need that kind of thing. How many levels do we want to raise them?"

"By two or three would be good – no, even a single level."

Shiroe answered without looking up from his papers.

The request to The Black Sword Knights was to go to Maihama and hold training. The target of course was the people of the land knights, not just those from Maihama, but for the other feudal lords' knights as well. It was for all the League of Free Cities Eastal's people of the land.

"I don't want to spend ages on them."

"They're people of the land remember, don't push them too hard."

"Is that so? Oi." Isaac turned to Rezarick who was standing behind him and asked "weren't we going to power level them?"

Power levelling was a term used in gaming, it essentially half forced levelling up. A high level leader would farm monsters that gave lots of experience, the low level members of the party stay a safe distance away gain a large amount of experience. It raised levels efficiently in a short time, so it was common to see in MMO type games.

"Power levelling would be a problem. They won't be able to use their actual power."

On the other hand, as with Shiroe's reply, there were many who opposed that way of thinking. Whilst it raised levels and physical ability, you wouldn't be able to use the suddenly increased abilities correctly. Even though attack power and stamina would increase, there would be the adverse effect of not knowing how to fight properly or what tactics to use.

Isaac let out a big laugh and said

"You're hard-headed, Black Heart. If we do power levelling and actual training, it'll be fine. Probably more training than levelling, what a pain."

Even Shiroe thought there was no helping it when it was put like that. In the first place, even he didn't completely oppose power levelling. For example, if a player already had a high level character, using that kind of method on a second or third character was fine.

Besides, Shiroe was working overtime in Akiba at the moment. Although it would take less than an hour to get to Maihama by Griffon, the one in charge of the plan was Isaac, so he couldn't just pick holes in it.

"That area is fairly open, so don't go all out please."

"Ah, leave it to me... But still, guarding."

Isaac's face fell into a thinking expression as he ran a hand through his hair and fell silent for a while.

It was just past dinner time.

If you were to think of restaurant type places, this should be their busiest time, but the space was less than ten percent full.

That was to be expected though, this space was like a cafeteria for the Adventurers and People of the Land that worked for the Round Table Conference. Many of the adventurers had their own guild halls, and would work there normally, Shiroe, Michitaka and Charasin all did this.

The only people that would still be here at this time, were exceptions like Shiroe and Isaac who were discussing things over arranged documents, people who lived in the guild building itself, or people who did little else but work. That number of people was by no means large.

"You haven't been able to contact that idiot Krusty yet?"

"No, the friend list isn't reacting either."

"What's he thinking, leaving his guild like that, it's going to fall apart."

"It doesn't look like it will go that far."

Answered Shiroe.

Close to three months had passed since Krusty had gone missing in the mountains. Isaac said "going to fall apart." But there had already been plenty of time for the guild to collapse.

In general, MMORPG guilds were fragile things, they weren't jobs with contracts, it was simply "let's play together". People who lived close, classmates or just people who wanted to communicate without the limits of a physical body, it was something more pure than friendship from physical meetings, but that itself was why they were so easy to break.

It only took someone saying "I don't want to be here anymore." And they could fall apart, guilds like Hamelin which interfered with the withdrawal process were the exception.

In many cases, the core of the guild was its leader.

The leader was the one who chose where the guild would go, the one who set the mood. If some trouble appeared within the guild, it would be up to them to solve it. For a guild to be a guild, a leader was needed. After Krusty had vanished, there had been people leaving D.D.D, they probably felt uneasy being in an organisation with no leader, and they couldn't be faulted for that, especially when this world becoming real meant that a mutual-aid organisation was needed for survival. The fact that in three months with no leader, the number of people who had left the guild hadn't reached fifty was a quiet miracle.

Shiroe had received the report from the grave-faced sorcerer Rieze, her management skills weren't just praised to keep the Round Table running expediently. Shiroe truly thought that it was an amazing guild.

"You worried, Black Heart?"

"What about you, Isaac-san?"

"No way would I be worried about him, he's a Berserker, he's just off playing or fighting somewhere."

"Hmm."

Shiroe nodded vaguely in assent, he couldn't quite deny Isaac's words. He thought that Krusty had probably been launched into another server, or possibly a zone where telepathy didn't function, events with those zones had existed when Elder Tale was a game. Of course, all that aside, it was still a serious incident, the possibility that Krusty himself was in trouble wasn't small, but as Isaac said, if he were asked to choose who out of the Round Table personnel would be most likely to come back alive from some unpredictable issue, it would be Krusty. Even so, he couldn't help but worry.

"He'll probably just appear back here suddenly." Declared the one who Shiroe thought would be the second most likely to come back.

"What I'm worried about isn't Krusty-san, but D.D.D and the Round Table Conference." Revealed Shiroe.

D.D.D was certainly a self-sufficient group who could continue their administration even without Krusty. But being able to continue the administration and being able to alleviate their member's worries were different. Already a small number had been driven by those feelings to leave the guild. The possibility of D.D.D collapsing was not small enough to neglect.

D.D.D was the biggest combat guild, and also one of the most rigorously organised. For example, if you were to judge by their achievements in raids and battle quests, there were many shining stars in Akiba. Isaac's Black Sword Knights and Soujirou's West Wind Brigade were two of them. However, as the scope of the battles increased so did the need for a highly ordered structure and chain of command due to the needed tactics. In this, there was no guild to substitute for D.D.D.

If D.D.D were to fall, not only would it weaken the Round Table, it would weaken Akiba as well, that couldn't be avoided.

Shiroe felt that the Round Table was a good self-governing organisation, but that didn't mean he thought it was faultless. If a parliament of influential guilds was to temporarily show discord, it would show its unexpected fragility.

(Eins-san probably can't be stopped...)

Honesty's investigation of the Fairy Rings was proceeding well, but the amount of attention paid to it within the town was low because of the constant technological breakthroughs within the city. Those breakthroughs were slowly eroding the measure known as levels. The period where high levels meant prosperity were passing away.

The formation of the Round Table Conference, and these breakthroughs were changing the world. Now, new ideas and the ability to carry them out amassed wealth.

Many adventurers hunted, but left a wide safety margin, for example, level ninety adventurers would hunt in level eighty five areas. Of course, they earned money and items, but their levels wouldn't go up. Some guilds continued with extreme challenges, but it was safe to say they were the exception. They were the only ones with levels above ninety, but casual hunting could no longer make a large profit. There were people showing irritation with the current situation, to unite them, Krusty was important, Shiroe was having some difficulty handling the fallout.

He thought that he'd finished with securing financing from the Kunie clan, but yet another headache was added to his pile, so even Shiroe felt like crying. He at least had help from Nyanta and Roderick, but they could only appeal to people's self-control with dangerous flavour text items. On top of that, it wasn't only cursed items which could cause disasters, even items with no clear curse in the flavour text could cause issues, with their tactics, the list of dangerous items should be finished soon, but that was no guarantee that nothing would happen.

"Shiroe-san!"

"Yo yo, Shiroe-dono, Isaac-dono, are you finished? We bought food."

Charasin and Minori, who had been helping the head of the manufacturing guilds' liaison committee appeared. Charasin was dressed as normal, but Minori was wearing civilian clothes for in the city. She looked like a student coming back from lessons as she looked happily at Shiroe.

Isaac gestured at a sofa and said. "Hey, go ahead and sit."

Whilst the gesture was forceful and could cause others to get cold feet, Charasin just said “Thank you, thank you.” And cordially took the seat. His amiable nature was Charasin’s weapon, as Shiroe thought this, Minori had stood next to him and skilfully cleared the documents and set down sandwiches and a drink.

“Shiroe-san, have some ginger ale.”

“Thank you, Minori, you didn’t have any problems at work?”

Looking at Minori with a despicable smile as she shook her head, Charasin said.

“Hey hey, Shiroe-dono, how about this, why don’t you give Minori-chan to us, she’s really skilled.”

Isaac came to Shiroe’s rescue as he searched for a reply.

“Oi, Charasin, you’re making passes at middle schoolers now? Been too long since you had a woman?”

Charasin frantically replied with things like “That’s not it, Isaac-dono, it’s about work!”

To the giggling Minori, Charasin’s talkativeness was an everyday thing. Shiroe relaxed in relief and took a sip of his ginger ale and smiled. All of the drinks in Akiba were homemade, the ginger ale with a light hint of honey felt good.

There were a mountain of things to do, and the future looked tough. The capture of Seventh Fall where the Goblin King reigned wasn’t complete, and the round table wanted to raise everyone’s levels to at least thirty. But Shiroe had another plan riding on that, and for that, he had to lay the groundwork. That was why Shiroe had more things to ask of Charasin and Isaac regarding the People of the Land’s knights’ training plan.

4

Rieze was being worked to death.

Her original work, the supervision of the training squads, hadn’t changed since Krusty had disappeared, but, along with the spreading uneasiness within the guild, the amount of trivial things that needed attending to had increased. The hand over hadn’t gone smoothly, there were things which needed checking on one by one, and the amount of counselling and comforting that was needed had also increased.

Above all, what was wearing on her was knowing what was important and what wasn’t. What to do and where to do it, Rieze had no idea. With the unease within the guild, and trying to understand and oversee the majority of the administration, the information volume was beating her down.

It would be fine to give up, but her worries and working right up to her limits were causing trouble for others.

She didn’t know what to do or where to go and felt like everything she had done and everything she should do had failed, and continued through the night feeling like she was getting in the way of the administration. Her sleep was light and there were many times she’d shot up in bed through the nights.

Her feelings about what had happened were swirling in confusion, little troubles seemed like they were big problems standing in the guild’s way made fear sink in to her teeth.

On the other hand, there were things which absolutely had to be done which were underestimated, widening the scope of the damage even more.

Even without Rieze’s regard for Krusty, she’d had the pride to say she had seen his guild management the closest, it’s wasn’t just Rieze, but all of the Drei Klauen that had that kind of managerial role.

But now that he’d vanished, it felt like they didn’t understand the management, the division of work, or even the report system.

The individual divisions autonomous management systems were still functioning as well as they had under Krusty, if there had been a problem there whilst Takayama Misa hadn’t been able to act for a month, D.D.D would have disintegrated.

That the guild had been able to struggle through the month was no doubt thanks to the organisation structure that Krusty had made.

However, after Snowfell was over, like invisible metal fatigue, the guild was slowly crumbling and there was no end to the darkness in sight.

The thing that saved them from those days was Henrietta and the others.

“You’re looking pale again.”

“Oh, am I?”

Rieze had been abducted by Henrietta again to the Crescent Moon Alliance’s guild hall.

The dining room wasn’t confined and had decorative plants dotted around the room, and in between them were strange stuffed animals. It should have been a disorderly mess, but instead it gave off a welcoming feeling. The table was a simple beige wood, and sitting under the orange tinted light, brought about a cheerful harmony.

Rieze thought that the room gave a warm familial feeling.

She'd been invited under the pretext of a late lunch, a cream stew made by their chef, Girov. As it was still early February, the days were still cold, so it was a welcome meal.

It had become a quiet meal, the members of the Crescent Moon Alliance had already finished their midday meal, and about half of them had taken out lunchboxes with them to nearby areas.

Silence flowed through the afternoon guild hall, with only the occasional small voice, or the sounds of the kitchen being cleared.

It was the sound of life in a mid-sized guild, Rieze felt a sense of assurance from the sounds.

"You're glaring too, Rieze. You look like my lord."

Another person who had been invited, Akatsuki, told Rieze. She had black hair and a small build, and was staring at Rieze motionlessly with hints of worry flickering around her round eyes. Rieze had become friends with her and could see the worry on her face.

"I'm okay, I'm not exhausted yet."

"Don't push yourself too hard."

Henrietta chided Rieze with a soft expression. Akatsuki was held tight in her arms where she'd grabbed her from behind.

"Akatsuki-san is twenty, right?"

"Hmm? Yes."

"And Henrietta-san is twenty e-"

"Ahem, and I'm twenty."

After the interruption, Rieze let it go quickly, there were some things in the world it was better not to investigate too much.

"Yes."

Rieze could see Akatsuki's displeasure, and wanted to draw her out of it.

She still took exception to the difference in her appearance and age, but if pushed Rieze would say there were some advantages to looking young, of course, she wouldn't have thought so in high school.

Rieze surprised everyone after having been thinking for a while by saying.

"It's sort of strange."

Akatsuki was a twenty year old student, Henrietta worked as an office lady for a big company, Mikakage was going to a technical school for chefs, aiming to become a confectioner, Minori was a middle school student, and Nazuna was a dentist's assistant.

"Our ages?"

"No, in the original world, I'm sure we wouldn't have become friends."

"You might be right."

Answered Akatsuki with a puzzled face. Seeing her friend being teased by Henrietta, the first smile in a long time found its way onto her face.

Rieze was surprised at feeling her face go loose, she'd been under more stress than she'd thought.

"No, that's not true! It's said that the cute are drawn together, we would have met no matter what!"

"We don't need that kind of assurance."

"But recently, when I rub against you, you haven't been getting angry, I'm so happy."

And like that, Henrietta and Akatsuki's normal playful fight unfolded. Henrietta with hearts flying off of her and Akatsuki with a resigned face but not actually hating it. She didn't like it, but had given up resisting.

Rieze was sure it was because before the incident last year Akatsuki still felt inferior, but she didn't hold out a hand to help.

Akatsuki needed the warmth from being hugged closely.

At any rate, the time Rieze passed with her close friends was peaceful.

She naturally relaxed, the tension leaving her spine and the numbing weariness slowly melted away.

Akatsuki quietly bore Henrietta's assault with a small shrug of the shoulders and asked Rieze a small question, it was what was worrying her.

"...Is it hard without the scary glasses guy?"

"It is, I really relied on Krusty-sama a lot."

"My lord is also troubled."

"Shiroe-sama too, I suppose he would be, Krusty-sama had become the face of the round table's diplomacy. It's fine now, but when you take into account what might happen, it's obvious."

"The round table's affairs can't be ignored, but I can't take any more."

The Round Table Conference too was part of Krusty's responsibilities, but of course, Rieze couldn't handle that as well. She couldn't handle it and had finally admitted it.

As the commanding officer of the training squads, she could direct large scale battles, and write strategy

progress charts, however, in the end that was a game's strategy. If she could praise herself a little, she was proud of applying those game tactics to the current real life Akiba. After the Catastrophe, Krusty constantly said things like "Nothing has changed" and "How we have managed the guild, and how we will manage the guild, won't change. Life won't change whether we're here or there." Many members thought it was just Krusty giving false promises, but Rieze knew, that was, without exaggeration, what he truly believed. On the contrary, people who said "The world after the Catastrophe is the same as reality, there's little stimulation." Probably also truly thought that. Krusty followed his words and unswervingly supported D.D.D.

The youth that Akatsuki called 'my lord' was also someone to look up to. Log Horizon's guild master also put his skills from conquering the game into conquering the Catastrophe.

If their plans and techniques were explained, then they could be understood. MMO-RPGs were communication games, so when those words were coming from the depths of your heart in a risky situation, the experience in the game could be transferred to reality. She could understand the logic, but couldn't believe it worked in reality.

But was it really that strange?

Krusty and Shiroe were certainly special, but Oceanic Systems' Michitaka, Roderick Firm's Roderick, 8th Shopping District's Charasin and Soujirou, Isaac, Eins, Maryelle, Kushi Yatama, Henrietta right in front of her, and many others. Had they too, in some sense, not changed through the Catastrophe?

Had they continued to fight as themselves in this world which was changing completely, minute by minute? Krusty and Shiroe had meshed with the situation, and without being shaken had used their experience up until now to solve the problems in front of them, but there wasn't one of the others who hadn't felt inferior to them.

In short, last year's Akatsuki, and the current Rieze were the same.

Focusing on the tactics and manual from when it was a game, was that right or wrong? Was it enough or not? If you looked at it from that perspective, whether you won or lost, you didn't win, you had an uneasy feeling every day. It was like Akatsuki worrying about her levels or lack of Phantasmal equipment.

Rather than that, focus on your own will and decisions, and how you wanted to live. That's what Rieze thought. Krusty was like that from the beginning, Michitaka and Isaac were like that as well, so they were strong.

——She didn't suddenly gain self confidence, but.

"I'm sure I'm causing a lot of trouble, and I'll probably cause more."

"You don't need to worry. We know it's tough, and I'm sure Shiroe-sama will do something."

"...My lord won't think of it as a bother. Besides, even if he did, I'd help."

Henrietta's unconcerned face gave reassurance, and the small girl clasped to her chest had a resolute smile dyeing her cheeks.

The always expressionless girl's smile was like flower petals becoming visible.

After that battle, Akatsuki had changed. And she too needed to change.

She needed to take a step forward and stop hesitating due to impatience or unease. The self-condemning Takayama and Rieze weren't the only ones trying to improve the situation.

Now that Krusty was gone, D.D.D needed its Drei Klauen.

5

In this world, many magic items exist of many different types, weapons and armour, equipment, books, furniture.

After the Catastrophe, the amount of magic goods available explosively increased, since before that, one of the most convenient items for an adventurer was a 'bag'.

To be precise, in Elder Tale it was a 'container', an item which held other items, from convenient carryables like pouches and bags, to larger things like boxes, strongboxes and chests of drawers.

Generally, the container items could hold various things inside, if the container was big enough, you could put it inside. Magic container items however, could ignore the physical dimensions, reduce the weight and transform specific items, the amount of variation was hard to grasp.

Dazanegg's Magic Bag was a magic container item which could be equipped at level 45. There were other magic container items around the same equip level, but they couldn't compete in terms of storage capacity and ease of obtaining.

Moreover, if you procured items you couldn't sell for a while, the base level of the bag would hold plenty of materials, 200 kilograms in fact, and there were also higher level quests to raise the bag's abilities, so for

many adventurers, it was an eternal companion.

Dazanegg's Magic Bag was a must have item for mid-levellers in Elder Tale, the gateway to magic bags.

"Are you all ready?" asked Naotsugu, poking his head into the living room.

"Definitely, Master!" Answered Tohya, puffing his chest out.

The younger group of Tohya, Minori, Isuzu and Rundelhaus were preparing for a journey in the big room. If they had a magic bag, the preparations would have been simple, unfortunately they didn't have one yet, rather, the journey was to obtain one. The quest for Dazanegg's Magic Bag, 'Get the Magic Bag' was a quest you could take at level 45. Until now it was a mostly meaningless restriction, but even after the Catastrophe, equip levels were a binding force.

They were going to leave Kanto for the first time to obtain the raw materials needed to make the bag.

"The carriage is ready too, Naotsugu-san." Added Minori, concentrating on her notebook with the preparations in one hand.

The destination is the Redstone Mountains.

The trip is about 180 kilometres, using a horse drawn cart, that should take about twenty days for a round trip?

Tohya had never seen mountains before so he was daydreaming and being fidgety.

"Ahh, but the Redstone Mountains right, that's around Nagano? There's mountains, rivers, forests! And even villages we've never seen!"

"Hmm, It's been a while since I travelled, but if you need any information, just ask me, Rundelhaus Code."

"Oh yeah, you travelled here, didn't you, Rudy-nii?"

"Yes, until halfway I was with Adventurers, but I came here from Bogport alone, so I have plenty of experience."

"Good, make sure you put a barrel of water on the carriage too."

"We know!"

"Tohya, make sure you put another two pairs of underwear in."

"I've already got enough, Minori."



Tohya was uncontainably excited. He hadn't been travelling in the old world for a long time, and travelling far away was rarer still. On top of that, this time, it was just the young friends going on a trip, so it was much more exciting than a school trip, and using a horse drawn carriage just stirred a sense of romanticism. They had belongings strewn across the floor.

After being checked by Minori, changes of clothes, preserved foods and first aid kits were packed away. Tohya thought they probably didn't need to be as thorough as Minori was being. For the clothes, in the first place, the equipment from when Elder Tale was a game had a high enough endurance, and dirt and tears would automatically disappear, so even for a long time, it was fine to wear armour and just change your underwear. For rations, if you weren't after enjoyment, there were plenty of simple things available in this world.

Even so, he didn't voice his thoughts, he knew Minori tried so hard, and to be worthy of being called an older brother (though Minori called herself the elder sibling) he had to look after his younger sister.

"Mugh."

With that, Rundelhaus fell to his knees and began scrabbling through the things on the floor.

"What's wrong, Rudy?"

"My brush is gone. I need it to keep my appearance as an elegant adventurer."

"Eh?"

Ignoring Naotsugu's quip of "Really?" Rundelhaus continued searching.

"Oh no, my precious item, it must be worth at least a hundred gold."

"Rudy."

Isuzu called to Rundelhaus and stopped packing her self made bag of ethnic fabric to deftly pick out a smoke blue pouch from the things he'd strewn around. "It's in your toiletries right? You'd better clean your mess up, Rudy."

"It is, thank you for finding it, Miss Isuzu."

Seeing the two of them start tidying away, Tohya felt happy too; Rudy and Isuzu were both precious members of Log Horizon and felt like they'd become older siblings.

When he was young, Tohya loved football, looking back on it now he didn't know why he loved it so much, but for the energetic Tohya, running about with his friends after school, kicking a ball around was plenty. After his legs stopped working, he showed up to their gatherings a few time, but stopped after about two months.

It wasn't through jealousy or hate, but he didn't want them to stop playing because of him, so he put some distance between them, making sure they were all smiling was very important to Tohya.

Tohya's family, when he had to rely on the folding wheelchair hadn't made upset faces. Tohya knew they'd placed him above them, but that wasn't why, he'd seen the moments their faces tightened, or their lips pursed, so he smiled for himself because others were there, Tohya understood that pain.

So seeing Rundelhaus, Isuzu and Minori happy relieved him.

And he respected Shiroe.

What he'd protected wasn't Rundelhaus' life, but everyone's smiles, and all the time they'd been able to spend together. It was amazing to an extent Tohya had never imagined before.

"Nfufuu~"

After finally gathering everything into a small mountain, she gently stroked the lute case she was carrying under her arm.

When they were planning the quest to gather materials for Dazanegg's Magic Bag the one most excited was Tohya, but he thought Isuzu wouldn't lose in happiness, though he didn't really understand why.

"Isuzu-nee-chan, are you excited for the trip too?"

"Of course I am, travelling with everyone is fun, and it's sort of like a tour, isn't it?"

A tour? Everyone in the room, Naotsugu included, didn't know what the word meant.

"It's like 'jakajakajaan' on a carriage."

Isuzu stood up and strummed a hand across the case, her braids swung back and forth showing her happiness.

"A tour is when musicians go on a trip to play music nyaa. Famous artists travel the world and indies pay for trips out of their own pocket nyaa." Explained Nyanta as he carried a tea set from the kitchen to the table next to the sofa where Naotsugu was sitting.

"That sounds awesome, let's do a tour of the galaxy!"

"You're just going past Izu."

Tetora appeared, followed by Akatsuki scolding her. If Shiroe came in, Log Horizon's members would be out in full force.

When it was explained like that, Tohya had heard of it.

He'd never been to a live house or stadium, but he'd seen video clips on the web.

He'd not thought of going on a tour with the five of them (himself, Minori, Isuzu, Rundelhaus and Serara who had been invited from the Crescent Moon Alliance.) but it was an exciting idea.

"That's right, a tour! Like dododon."

Tohya drummed on his rucksack, Isuzu looked a little surprised, but soon broke into a smile and imitated an instrument.

"A tour?... It's the first time I've heard the word, but it sounds amazing, are you going to go around the villages with the forty two?"

"No, there aren't that many villages around, right, Minori?"

"On the way to the Redstone Mountains, there are four or five villages, according to Shiroe-san's map."

"Then it's fine, let's go, we need to go to a few anyway, for water and supplies." Tohya proposed immediately.

Climbing mountains and hunting small wyverns might be fun, but visiting the People of the Land's villages and performing sounded equally as fun, and getting somewhere to stay for a night was even better.

Hearing everyone's agreement, Isuzu's face light up and she said "Yeah! A tour will be great!"

"Alright, leave the locations and negotiations to me."

Rundelhaus declared, standing up with a sunny expression.

Tohya didn't really get music, but he could keep a rhythm on a drum, Serara could play on a simple

keyboard, and Minori had been learning the lute from Isuzu, they might not catch up with 'artists' but just helping Isuzu should be plenty of fun.

"This is going to be brilliant!" shouted Isuzu, grabbing a confused Rundelhou's head. Rundelhou was the eldest among them, and the tallest, but he was still powerless to resist in the face of Isuzu's skinship.

Hehehe, Rudy-nii is cool

Tohya swallowed the words with a smile, realising he was the same when trying to go against Minori.

We have to show a man's dignity through this trip. He thought, remembering Naotsugu crossing his arms and proclaiming.

"Men show what they're made of when it counts."

Of course they were reliable friends, but three of them would be girls, what would he be as a man if he (and his friend Rundelhou) couldn't protect the others.

"Minori, Minori! I need to go buy some more strings!"

"Mou, Isuzu-san!"

These were Tohya's thoughts as he watched the laughing guild members.

6

In Elder Tale, there were several types of carriages, but there had been innovation even there since the Round Table Conference was formed. Originally, the first high-class carriages used leaf springs, but new, lightweight materials for suspension and spring systems were being introduced.

With liberal use of abnormal techniques, The Roderick Firm amazed the citizens of Akiba with their goods. There was no clear meaning to adding aerodynamic tail wings, but the incessant addition of those parts was causing the market to be slowly saturated with cheap products.

In Akiba there were many products being manufactured, but carriages were the thing with the highest demand amongst the people of the land.

Among the items produced in Akiba, many used magic, so the people of the land with their low mana couldn't use them, and the items to bring the comforts of modern day earth mainly made them wonder why the adventurers would go that far.

Items that were pocket change to adventurers were harder to buy for people of the land. Of course, nobles from the League of Freedom Cities Eastal could easily buy expensive items, but they didn't bring the needed demand.

For that, the new forms of carriage were ideal.

There were of course those which used magic, but there were also mechanical carriages to provide convenience for people of the land. If the capabilities were raised too much, it would also raise the required driver level, but for the majority of lucky coachmen and tradesmen, this wasn't a major problem.

The price was high of course, but carriages weren't consumables. If a trader bought one, when considering the increase in trading efficiency, the carriage would pay for itself before long, and for farmers to buy one, the whole village could contribute and buy one jointly. Because of this, the high price wasn't an issue.

Along with chrome molybdenum steel farm tools, carriages were the items most sought after from Akiba by people of the land.

The carriage Isuzu and the others had bought was one of these.

There were high end carriages for adventurers, but they had a basic carriage, the carriages with rank eighty elemental resistances were too much for their pockets.

A robust, easy to handle carriage which could carry plenty of luggage and five or six people was enough. They considered dedicated luggage carts, but settled on a covered wagon, and splurged on water repellent cloth for the covering. It could be used as a tent for camping, but comfort in rain wasn't a main priority.

It was a relatively lightweight carriage.

The group were still in the mid-levels, and the road to their destination had lots of uneven sections, so the weight of the carriage should be less; that was the advice they'd received from Nyanta and Roderick.

They'd divided the price evenly between the five of them so the carriage was genuinely theirs. Serara and Minori bought quilted cushions in the market place to put under the canopy. Because the luggage was made waterproof, even if they became submerged temporarily, they should be safe. Tohya suggested adding "LOG HORIZON" to the canopy, which was unanimously supported.

After that Isuzu remembered having to pin Minori's arms behind her back to stop her from drawing a picture on the side that she didn't want to remember.

They finished everything off with adventurer like summon flutes.

Summon flutes were a type of magic item which summoned a working beast. High levelled ones could summon Griffons, Flying mounts and phantasmal beasts. This was an item type with a huge variation, there were a fair number which just summoned horses even. The type of horse and their strength, how long they would help from a single summon, the cooldown time, how many times they could be used all varied. All these elements caused the price to also vary wildly.

In this world there were also ordinary horses that weren't summoned with a flute, that didn't run away when a time limit was reached and always stayed by their owner's side.

However, those had to be fed and looked after properly, and may not be able to do what an adventurer needed. The safer choice was definitely using a summoning flute.

They'd bought the Twin Horse Flute of Lyman. To pull the cart, they'd need two horses, and rather than buy two flutes, they'd gone for the cheaper option of a flute which summoned two horses. But, if pushed, they'd admit they fell in love with the name and horses. The name "The Twin Horse Flute" made Tohya and Minori imagine pack horses with a sturdy toughness.

"Wafaaa. Wafaaa!" Serara fed the horses cabbage while letting out meaningless cries of happiness. They were summoned horses, so didn't need feeding, but that had nothing to do with it.

Rundelhaus was wiping their back with an old rag and Isuzu whispered to him.

"Hey, Rudy?"

"What is it? You don't need to be that quiet."

"Can I touch them?"

"It should be fine, they're obedient, and not too irritated now."

The horse glanced at Isuzu before losing interest and focussing on Serara's cabbage. Isuzu still had doubts they weren't being more greedy than obedient, but her curiosity won out.

Swallowing, she timidly stroked it.

They'd ridden borrowed horses to the summer training camp at Choushi, but she could feel the sinew under her hand again. Even with no special reason, touching a large animal conveyed a sense of awe.

From just the small movements of it shifting foot to foot, the horse's strength could be understood. That undeniable vigour made Isuzu think. "*Ah! It's really alive!*"

She couldn't really explain it, but Isuzu hadn't touched other living things skin. Isuzu felt that ordinary high school girls wouldn't get the chance to touch large animals and high school students were past the age where they were spoilt by their parents. She'd hugged friends, but in the end, it was clothes she touched, not direct contact with the body.

"Mm mm, living things really are amazing" She thought with a nod.

"Huh? Miss Isuzu, what's wrong? Are you scared of horses?" asked Rundelhous, looking at her with concern.

"No," Isuzu shook her head back and forth "They're not scary, they're cute."

It was fine if it was like that, she would stroke Rudy's hair freely. When she did that, Rundelhous would draw his mouth up in a line and make a dissatisfied expression, but it scrambled her shy feelings.

"It's fine, it's just like stroking a puppy" Isuzu thought to herself.

The moment she touched the horse, she was suddenly embarrassed and felt surprised, and grabbed hold of Rundelhous. She felt bad for Rundelhous resisting, but some things couldn't be helped.

Isuzu wasn't good with boys. If she was still the original high schooler, she would probably be bad with animals too. She couldn't understand what other living things were feeling, they were big, and a little scary.

But Rundelhous was fine.

He was her morning escort, her golden retriever.

"Isuzu-san, would you like to feed them too?"

Serara's question dragged Isuzu out of her thoughts.

"I will, I will! Hey, you too, Rudy!"

"I'm fine."

"You can't ignore your friends, They're your friends on this tour too."

Isuzu cried out, her awkwardness blown away.

Her voice startled the horses, making them snort, and Rundelhous scolded her.

"Horses are shy, so you can't be that loud."

"Shy?" She asked with her eyes as the horses looked away and flicked their ears backwards and forwards.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." She apologised to the ill-tempered horses.

These big, beautiful companions couldn't hate her.

"You need to apologise better."

It was difficult, apologising to horses wasn't in Isuzu's repertoire. She could only cling on to Rundelhous' peaceful puppy aura.

"I'm sorry, you too, Rudy!"

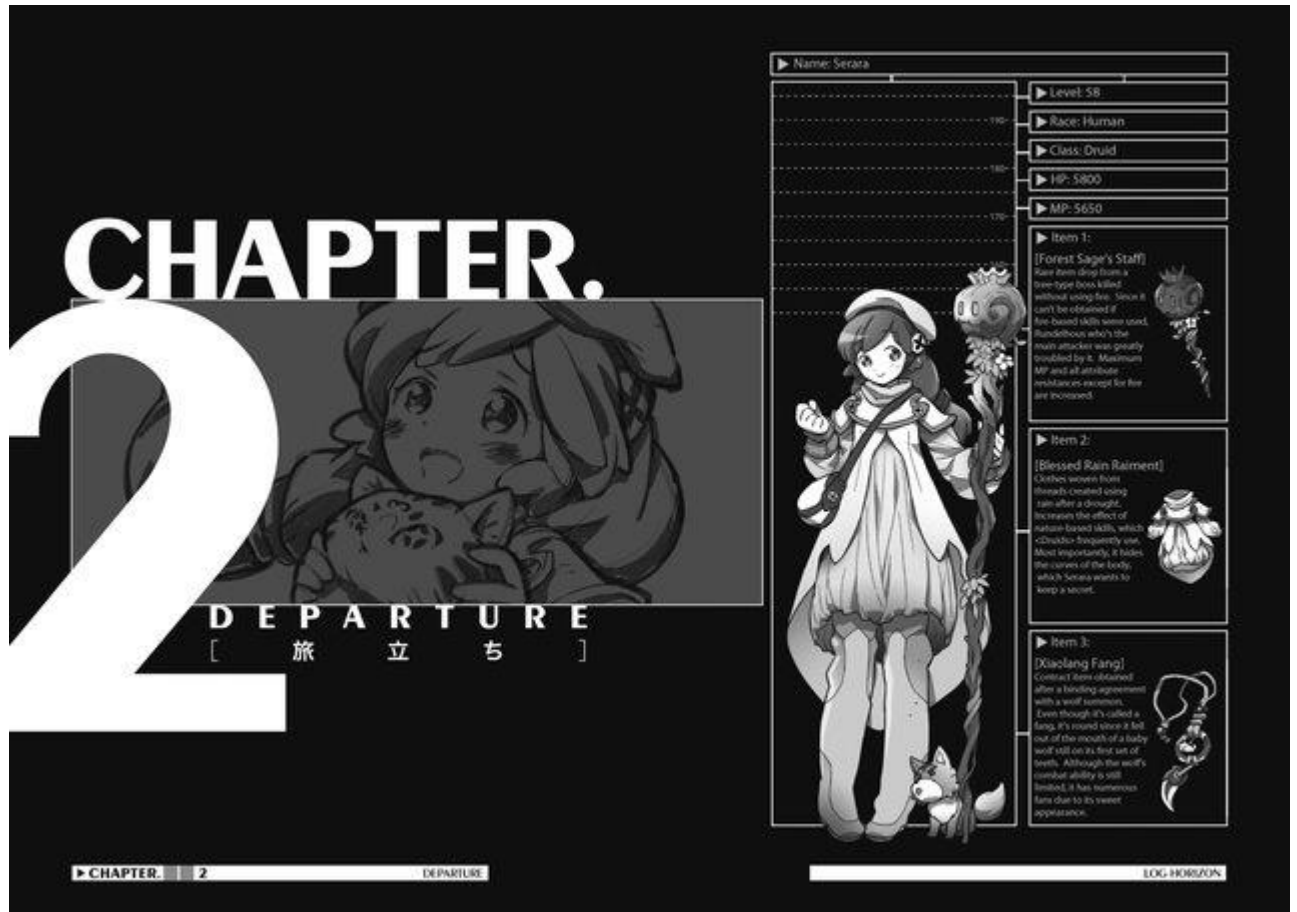
“Wha- Honestly... Forgive me, horsey.”

The horse that was originally in a bad mood with them accepted their tribute of four carrots and opened its heart as the sun sank.

Rundelhous' unwilling mood also gave way to good humour. Serara and the others took care of the horses together, leading them back to the guild house, and gave them names (Sweet and tasty ones!).

And just like that, the day of their journey arrived.

Chapter 2 – Departure



They left on an abnormally clear day for the season.

Seen off by their guild seniors to the Ancient Palace of Eternal Ice, their journey west began.

Looking to their left, the group crossed the Eight Canal High Coast; in the original world, it was called the Tama River, like the original world, it was a fairly large river in Celdesia.

The area around the river was familiar to them; taking about two hours to ride to from Akiba on horseback, and with many wild monsters, it was one of the places they trained.

However, just past the river was a completely unknown land.

It was at a distance that would make a day trip from Akiba somewhat difficult, so it was past the boundary of territory that the group had experience with. With that being said, the group felt more excited than nervous.

Before long, the zone name had changed to the Plains of Zuland.

The area was mixed between spaces where grass grew up to Minori's waist in height and barren land. The grass swayed in waves with the wind, and poking out from the grassy fields were occasional ruins of small buildings. The majority of them were uninhabited apart from the vines and animals they provided shelter to.

"I can see something that looks like cows." Came Isuzu's voice from the covered part of the carriage, followed by Serara asking.

"Eh? Where, where? Where are they?"

After making sure that Tohya was holding the reigns, Minori turned around in the driver's seat to look, Isuzu was pointing at a group of large four legged creatures.

"I think they're a group of Green Elk." She told them, the information she'd studied from Shiroe on the characteristics and distribution of monsters quickly coming in handy.

"Are they dangerous?"

"It's okay, they're far away, and I've heard they're not aggressive."

Monsters in Elder Tale were enemies to be defeated, but were differentiated by their aggression. There were monsters that would become aggressive when you approached too close, monsters that would attack on sight, and monsters that would ignore you until attacked. The Green Elk came under the latter group.

The carriage was travelling along a red clay road, occasionally patches of asphalt would appear, but it was fundamentally a red clay road with furrows carved into it by wheels that they travelled along at twice the speed of walking.

The wind was still cold, but it wasn't the biting chill of winter, it was an invigorating spring breeze.

The area had fallen into ruin, but Minori still felt it was a beautiful place.

The road through the planes drew a gentle curve, following south west, essentially parallel to the coast, but separated by several kilometres so the sea couldn't be seen, hidden behind the rolling plains.

Minori remembered Shiroe's lecture.

How he'd told her that the road was Highway 1 on Earth, called the Eastern Sea Road. Of course, Minori knew the word 'highway', but had never given it's meaning much thought. She had just vaguely thought that it was a road with many lanes that lots of cars drove along.

According to Shiroe, a highway was a state-administered main arterial road. The main roads of the country were all state-administered, but the mid-range sized roads and below were administered by local authorities. This efficient division of labour was invented and used since the Meiji period.

Highway 1 was the first road from the Highway plan, a road which connected Tokyo and Osaka.

A corresponding road existed in Celdesia, but couldn't be compared to a maintained, four lane highway, that was the red clay road they were using.

"Hey, Minori, the weather's good, should we hurry a bit further?" Asked a lively Isuzu as Minori turned the pages of her notebook.

"Shall we go?"

"Let's go, let's go!"

"Let's keep at it!"

"In front of I, Rundelhous, the road is clear!"

"Alright!"

Pushed onwards by her friends' voices, Minori also roused a "Let's do this!"

It was a mistake.

Without stopping in the Village of Calbe, they hurried further along the red clay road, when in the late afternoon, the gear tethering the horses to the carriage suddenly disconnected.

In front of a surprised Minori and Tohya, the horses let out a loud whinny and continued galloping, disappearing over the horizon.

Inside the carriage left behind on the road, after exchanging dumbfounded looks, they burst into laughter.

The time limit for Twin Horse Flute of Lyman had run out.

Because no one had noticed the daily six hour limit approaching, and because no one had expected that when the time limit ran out the horses would leave at full speed, they couldn't help but laugh.

"No way, even after they ate cabbage from my hand?"

"They ate from mine too."

"They really don't understand human empathy, those treacherous people!"

"Well, they're horses."

"I wonder if you can call them treacherous horses then."

"Treacherous horses, horses, just, ahahahahaha."

Isuzu and Serara were rolling about laughing in the carriage. Tohya, Rundelhou and Minori were of course laughing too. They were saying that, but the horses had looked at them with cute round eyes and even Minori had given them vegetables. There was no mistaking that the twins had swindled the group out of snacks.

They'd coaxed the horses, and after the time had passed, the horses ran without looking back. Being able to deal with things, they couldn't hate the twin horses.

They weren't as worldly as the horses, so Minori laughed and felt admiration. Being in the plains at twilight, with a carriage with no horses, was a massive failure, so they shouldn't be laughing so much and they were taken aback.

"It's no use, Minori, come on."

Still giggling, Minori took Tohya's hand and stepped down from the carriage.

Swaying from being seated for so long, Minori leant on Tohya. Her brother who could do the things she couldn't.

On the night when she'd become aware of her love for Shiroe, whilst she was sitting in the dark, Tohya had stayed with her. Although she'd never say it to him herself, she was proud of her brother.

"The horses ran away, but isn't that exiting itself?" Rundelhou said whilst stretching, "So, where about are we?"

According to Minori's map, they were roughly in between Calbe's inn and Wisteria village.

But whichever one they went to, struggling on through the night with the horseless carriage could be good. Of course, once the recast time had elapsed, they could re-summon the horses, but that was another eighteen hours away, Ten o'clock the following morning.

So the five of them decided they should camp.

Together, they moved the carriage to the side of the road to stop the now stationary carriage from causing trouble to merchants or adventurers.

Then the group prepared to set up camp.

It was a camp suitable for the fairly large failure.

Because they weren't skilled at setting up a camp, preparations took much longer than expected. Using the Newly-wed's apron, Serara happily made a stew, by the time it was finished, it had become pitch black.

After the horses ran away at four o'clock in the late afternoon, for a middle schoolers like Minori, it took a little more than an hour to find somewhere to camp, and after starting to cook, the sun had set.

Whilst they occasionally made mistakes whilst setting up the tents, and preparing the campfire, it was somehow well ordered, and took them probably around two hours.

Tohya was in high spirits and the tent that he set up was slightly off balance, its right side slanting somewhat, making the five of them laugh. All of their hands were covered in grass and dirt, but that too was nothing but something they could point at each other and laugh about.

Serara's stew was somewhat watery, and couldn't be called tasty by any standard. Rundelhous pulled out a piece of carrot that was still connected by the edge to another, and Serara bowed her head over and over apologising, but even so, the groups humour wasn't dampened in the slightest.

Minori suddenly understood nature, it was like a nice natural park. A hiking course along Ozegahara's mountain trails was the limit of her imagination. With no experience beyond that, she was surprised, but somehow felt that there was no place more peaceful than nature., sitting on the grassy plains, with bits an pieces of broken concrete appearing here and there, and tree roots winding beneath the ground.

After sitting cross legged for so long, Tohya leapt up with a cry, and with the tent partially collapsed, they might not be able to spread their bedding out properly and sleep well.

Regardless, the five laughed and ate warm stew together under the starry sky.

With distributing anpan from their luggage, thinking back to the heartless horses, sitting around the fire watching sparks rise and inspecting the carriage axle by magic light, the five had stayed up for a long time under the star dusted sky.

The start of their trip couldn't be praised at all, it was awkward and clumsy, but it was their first expedition.

With no one around for several kilometres, Minori's heart pounded and she was exhilarated by an uneasy happiness.

To catch up with Shiroe who she liked, she wanted a little more power. Going on a trip with her friends so she could gain that power made her happy.

All the troubles they'd met that day, and all the mistakes were spinning round, but felt like a blessing to the group. If she'd been alone, Minori might have wanted to go home defeated, but all together they were just funny things to liven up their trip.

Isuzu started playing a sweet number for practice, and they hummed along until late at night.

By the time any of them considered going to sleep, the sky was starting to lighten.

2

It was three days since they'd left on their trip, and Tohya's party was in the town of Sazan.

It had taken just over a day longer than they had calculated to reach the town. Whilst greeting many waving townspeople from the top of the carriage, they continued on to an inn with a horse signboard attached.

The road the party were following was called the Western Highway by the people who lived nearby.

To the people living nearby, it was an arterial route which boasted a traffic volume second to none in Yamato. With how the various villages, fishing and slightly smaller farming villages were distributed, along with the occasional markets and such opening, there was a great deal of merchant traffic, and inns were commonplace.

They'd heard before, but since they left, they learnt, everything had a reason.

When they looked at the map, they thought things like "Why does the road bend like that, wouldn't a dead straight road to the destination be more efficient?" But whilst actually following the road, they saw all the things like deep forests, pits and hills that made making a completely straight road impossible.

With modern engineering methods, it might be different, but with the middle ages style technology of this world, it was impossible.

The placement of the individual villages had a reason too. How close they were to water, road connections, whether the land around it was fertile, the distance to forests and resource rich land. All of these factors coordinated together, and when they were right to create a village, a village would be created there.

Among other things, if the standard of living and the number of citizens increased, the village's scope would grow, and it would become something which could be called a town. A village could grow a number of ways, the resources and geographical features around it, the volume of trade and the safety of the area, combined with many other reasons would cause a village to grow.

When compared to the surrounding area, the town of Sazan was a large base for people of the land.

The first floor of the inn called itself a bar, but rather than a bar or cafeteria, it had an atmosphere more like a meeting area.

The building was huge and made out of strong logs. The ceiling of the first floor was higher than a classroom, the floor was made of brick like blocks, and for about half of the room, they were then topped with wooden floorboards.

The reception and payment area were in the same place, and food and drink orders were made by just calling to the cheerfully sitting old man. When the old man was dozing at the side of the fire, with a huge dog lying at his feet, his grand-daughters who worked as waitresses would take the guests' orders.

Tanned sailors sat around a large table enjoying a quick drink. The menu consisted mostly of marine products and alcohol.

Thirty minutes after the group entered the inn, they were performing on top of the largest table.

The village of people of the land didn't have much entertainment, and because they were asking for so little, the inn didn't even think of refusing.

Serara was playing a toy like organ, Tohya beat the back of boxes, and Isuzu and Minori alternated between playing the lute and whichever was free did the singing.

It was more like a student performance than a concert, but the gathered crowd of people of the land enjoyed it a lot.

The owner's granddaughters (there were so many!) sold record breaking amounts of face reddening alcohol.

The old man with snowy white, goat like eyebrows excitedly told the group.

"As a special offer, you can all have bed and board free."

They drained their glasses over and over, especially Isuzu, who was surrounded by people of the land hurling praise at her.

Tohya had too much fun too, he eventually hit the wooden box that used to be a suitcase so hard that he broke it. It normally would have made Minori mad, but she was happy too.

Rundelhous had said that he was originally a noble of the people of the land, but without fitting Tohya's image of a noble, he'd taken control and made this party fun.

To begin with, Rundelhous had said to the owner.

"We are a travelling party of Adventurers, but our master musician has said that they would like to perform here for a night. If it won't cause you any trouble, could you offer us somewhere to perform?" But it was really an excuse for a party.

Afterwards, Isuzu stood at the front of their stage and introduced the others. When they started playing, Rundelhous' hair sparkled from the corner he'd moved back to, he looked like he was the person having the most fun in the world, waving his hands to them the entire time.

Tohya thought that Rundelhous was a pretty amazing guy.

When Tohya hadn't been able to join his football friends, he couldn't have cheered them on with that kind of expression. That filled his chest, and filled him with strength to perform. Isuzu may not have understood the subtleties, but that was fine, this was the respect shared between men.

They stayed up extremely late that night; Isuzu sung every song she could think of and performed as much as she could.

Of course, they interspersed breaks for food and rest, and every time they were resting, a group of people of the land who hadn't been in the meeting room yet would enter. When they heard that the performance was over, they dropped their shoulders in disappointment. For those people, they kept adding song after song, slowly dragging the performance out until five hours after sunset, the owner stood and shouted.

"That's it for today, everyone's tired and you all have work tomorrow! Go on! Go home!"

"The girls are already asleep, so keep it down, Rudy!"

"Good night, Tohya-san, Rundelhous-san."

"Night, Tohya, Rundelhous-san."

Leaving behind those words, the three girls disappeared off to their assigned room.

The inn didn't have a bath, but they'd boiled some water in thanks and the girls used it to wipe their bodies off and wash their hair. Tohya and Rundelhous had roughly dusted themselves off and would do the rest tomorrow.

Going in to their own room from the corridor they'd separated in, it was a simple room that traders would stay in. It was smaller than they'd imagined, with wooden planks as beds, with a thick quilt futon on top of each. If they compared it to the pebble filled camping grounds, it was like heaven.

“Magic Light.”

By the light the Rundelhous summoned, they checked over the luggage they’d brought from the carriage and sat on the beds.

Their throats were dry, their stomachs full and their arms sluggish.

It was all because of the clamour, but Tohya and Rundelhous basked in the echoes of happiness in the room.

A journey to capture a wyvern. This was different than what they imagined, but this was even better, that’s what Tohya thought.

The five of them putting their efforts together and travelling across the plains was like an adventure drama. But camping on the plains was harder than they’d thought. He didn’t want to accept it, but Tohya was a city boy, not a wild child.

Stopping in the village to perform was a popular idea and a really enjoyable experience. On top of it being like a festival, standing in the bright light at the centre gave them a sense of dizzying giddiness.

Stretching on the bed with a sigh, the sense of excitement remained like the roar of the sea and they couldn’t fall asleep.

“...fufu.”

“...I know....Right?...Knew it!”

In the quiet of the room, voices echoed intermittently through from the next room.

They couldn’t understand what was being said, but from the tone and type of voices, they could tell it was Serara and Isuzu. Minori also chimed in and the three of their giggles could be heard.

“They sure are energetic.”

“Too energetic.” Said Tohya in a voice that matched Rundelhous’ smile, sitting up.

“What are they talking about, I wonder.”

“Are you curious, Rudy-nii?”

“Of course not, I’m not one to gossip over what ladies talk about. It’s just I admire how they can keep talking about anything.”

“Well, they’re girls.” Tohya answered with a meaningless response and a smile.

It reminded him of school, the girls would chatter on and on about things; talking about the patterns of their socks would last half a day, sometimes even a whole day, Tohya and the other boys couldn’t understand it at all.

Tohya felt that compared to the other girls, Minori was relatively calm, but once she got heated up, she'd chatter on and on too. It was something about pudding from a shop in front of the station, she spent about half a day explaining it to him, but he didn't follow it at all.

Judging from appearances, Rundelhous was happy; He may have sounded suspicious about the girls' chatter, but he had a smile on his face and was polishing his Mage's Gauntlet.

"Rudy-nii, you're excited too."

"Hmm. This is just... ah, you always need to keep your equipment maintained."

"Fufun. I'll do that too then."

Tohya started examining the leather belt of his armour that was in the luggage.

Just before they left, the party had their equipment examined by the craftsmen of the Eccentric Grotto. They couldn't have their equipment getting damaged and breaking after a few days. Despite saying it was maintenance, it was about 20% for taking care, and 80% making it look good.

It was already approaching midnight, there was no way they'd do proper maintenance whilst their bodies were so tired. If they were asked why they were up, it would be embarrassing, but they couldn't quite sleep.

It was a magic like night.

Tohya and Rundelhous still had jewels they wanted to get from the night, so they continued talking, holding the remains of the night.

About the carriage, the horses, the trip, the food, the camping grounds, and battle.

Before stopping at this village, they'd easily dispatched the wild boars. Minori stayed on high alert, but in the first place, the area around the road didn't have high level monsters. Battles didn't seem like they'd be a problem in this zone.

And then they talked about their friends again. With a downtrodden face, Rundelhous sighed and murmured.

"Say, Tohya. Why is Miss Isuzu so childishly innocent?"

"Is she?"

To Tohya, Isuzu didn't seem particularly innocent or childish. She wasn't calming and intellectual, but she acted her age. She was a good friend who understood what the people around her felt. He could understand why Minori had become best friends with her.

"Well, she instantly grabs onto me and brushes my hair."

"Ah."

That was true, but she didn't that to Rundelhous, not to Tohya.

“I feel like she doesn’t think much of me but... Don’t laugh, Tohya, I’m serious.”

Tohya fell back onto the bed under the overwhelming laughter, squirming and holding his stomach. After wiping the tears from his eyes, he started looking for a response. It was difficult, how should he answer without saying something funny.

“Well, uhh.”

“Hmm?”

“It means you’re special.” Tohya answered, fighting the urge to laugh. The thought of Isuzu standing imperiously and, with her mouth drawn up in a line, saying.

“Rudy is my henchman, so he’s special!” was too much, and made his stomach shake.

“Special?”

“Isuzu-nee-chan is like that when you spend time together and enjoy yourselves.”

“I see.”

“That’s right.”

Rundelhaus folded his arms and seemed to come to some sort of agreement with himself.

“But I don’t think she thinks I’m ‘specially beautiful’ or ‘specially amazing’ or ‘specially amazing and strong’. How does she think of me? You adventurers have strange expressions.”

“No, you saying ‘beautiful’ is a bit strange, Rudy-niichan” Was what Tohya didn’t say. Rundelhaus was bewildered, and Tohya’s precious older friend. And now a member of his party, and an adventurer too.

“Rudy-nii, you get on really well with Isuzu-nee-chan.”

“Do you take me for someone who would make a woman walk alone? Miss Isuzu is a lovely lady, she might get caught up in some trouble she doesn’t want, couldn’t she?”

Tohya praised himself for only having his mouth wobble slightly, keeping it firmly closed. Tohya liked this golden haired youth, he’d stayed and listened to the performance, even if he felt uncomfortable and wanted to leave.

“It doesn’t matter, either way, we’re friends.” said Tohya, keeping a serious face.

“Well, yes, I guess so.” Answered Rundelhaus, cocking his head in confusion.

Then the conversation moved on to their plans.

They planned to follow the red clay road along to the Ruins of Ariba. The Western Highway didn’t follow the coast, but mostly went through the plains near the Pacific coast and joined Akiba and Minami. Their destination was the Redstone Mountains, at the Ruins or Ariba, the road split, and they would have to take the thinner roads, or where there was no road, they’d have no choice but to climb the mountains.

Tohya didn't hate fighting. Of course, it could be scary or painful, but he felt that it brought them together, and felt like they accomplished something. It was fact that there were monsters in this world where they were adventurers, if you wanted to live there, you should be able to fight.

"Tomorrow, we're going all out to Sakawa, aren't we."

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to it!"

"We should go to sleep now, Tohya. We can't be sleepy whilst travelling."

The two of them went to their beds and fell asleep with a sense of satisfaction.

3

Sakawa was a level area which included Odawari in the original world.

Minori's speciality wasn't geography, but she could strangely understand this world fairly easily; it probably had something to do with the thoughts of "This is where we are going from here." giving an interest.

According to Shiroe's knowledge and what Minori had researched before leaving Akiba, this area had an abundance of water, so was an agricultural centre. Small villages of people of the land were dotted around, and mainly farmed wheat and rice. That's what she'd heard.

The enemy classification was nature centred, there were many monsters like wild hounds, boars and plant monsters. However, they mainly lived in the forests and on the mountainside, the plains were by no means absolutely safe, but the monsters encountered had relatively low levels and the encounter rate was low.

Nevertheless, the group were put on their guard by a slight tension in the air.

It might have been a difference in the smell of the air, or in how the treetops swayed, but it settled in their chests and told them that something was different. Within half a day of resuming their journey, they'd happened to catch glances of goblins running far away twice. They'd also had a battle which couldn't be called anything more than a skirmish.

Of course, they weren't hurt, but it served as an omen that things would change from how they'd been until now.

"Dire Rats are coming out."

"They surprised me."

The party talked and gradually progressed up the steepening incline in their carriage.

As they climbed the gentle slopes, a pure white landscape greeted them. When they first laid eyes on it, it looked like a snowy expanse, but the slight, sweet scent of flowers reached them and they understood.

“Cherry trees!? Are those cherry trees?”

Isuzu asked, leaning out of the carriage, and Serara held her up and revealed what they really were.

“No, Isuzu-san, those are plum trees.”

It stood out amongst the remaining cold scenery of early spring, a hamlet of plum trees.

“They smell good.”

The scent was weak, but held a certain presence in the fields.

The slopes of the hill were divided into rows by stone walls, with gaps in them for workers to pass through. In the rows of fields, plum trees were scattered here and there. Whether the exposure to the sun had been thought of, this hill had become a forest of plum trees.

They continued following the road around to the west, it was a little off from the direction they needed to be going, but straight ahead was a large river. To cross the river, they needed to choose a place.

The white scenery continued. Isuzu and Rudy were earnestly moved, and Serara was explaining to the two of them and Tohya about how she had gone and bought plums with Nyanta and pickled them into a jam.

It was a peaceful scene.

The wind was still cold, but the glorious sunlight had made the carriage pleasantly warm as it went through sunny areas. As they drew closer to the river, the wind had more water in and the temperature dropped, and the calm atmosphere that had quietly begun in the forest continued.

From the forest, they could hear the distant voices of people of the land.

They might have been farming. The five of them listened carefully to the voices and smiled slightly.

The atmosphere changed as they detoured around the riverside forest, searching for somewhere to cross the river. From the dense trees blocking out the light, there came a sharp scream and fervent sounds. The tension from the morning returned in an instant.

Minori held up her staff in front of her chest.

“Minori, I’m going ahead, there’s something there!”

“Tohya!”

“What is it!?”

Rather than screams, the heavy breathing of someone short on oxygen running grew louder and a single man tumbled out from the trees. He was a person of the land, wearing brown and grey clothes to protect against the chill. In the time it took to look over the burly man, people who were likely his friends ran out after him from the darkness.

Tohya leapt from the driver's seat and raced forwards several times faster than the men.

“An attack, get ready!” In response to the yell, Minori waved her staff and put a Purification Barrier on her younger brother. The breathing drawing closer through the forest sounded like a beast, it was ogres.

Ogres were one of the evil demi-human races, they were in similar locations to the goblins that the group fought in Choushi.

Compared to goblins, ogres were taller and more solidly built. They walked with a hunch, but if they straightened their backs, they'd be around the same height as Tohya. They were also stronger than goblins, in exchange, they were poor at coordinating and team work and weren't as strong with weapons as the goblins.

High level goblins would use weapons, tame Dire Wolves and similar creatures, and rarely an individual would use magic.

Most high level ogres however wouldn't even wear armour, they just became bigger, stronger and gained greater stamina. Then there were those altered by sorcery, ogres named things like Ooei in quests. They were a famous race.

Ogres and goblins both had a wide range of levels from the low to mid levels. When Elder Tale was a game, they were both arranged in characteristic areas.

From Kanto to Tohoku, eastern Japan's field zones had many goblins, and from Chubu westward it was ogres. It's somewhat of a digression, but Shikoku had lizardmen and Kyushu had Orcs.

Each area had their influences and characteristic quests.

Shiroe had told Minori all of this.

And according to Shiroe, the levels of the monsters near the road were kept pinned down. Of course, there might be influences from the change in the worlds so he'd advised caution, but even so it was a little strange. The ogres they encountered had levels of twenty one, of course, they weren't much of a threat to the party, but weren't they monsters which were originally away from the road, from the forests and mountains?

“Wolf-chan!”

Alert from the feeling of unease at Minori's side, Serara descended from the carriage and summoned her helper summon. It appeared as a young, still chubby grey wolf. Clad in magic light, it ran around the group of people of the land, guarding them.

“For now.”

Serara's eyes shone strongly.

In the past the next move with the same feeling of unease would be to rush after Tohya, but now, he could go ahead on his own.

“What's the situation, Miss Minori?”

“Ogres came from the forest, chasing the people of the land. Reinforce and guard them!”

Minori called out as she ran ahead, going past the lead person of the land who's legs had given out on him. Tohya was already even further ahead, crossing swords with the ogres. The enemies levels were twenty two, twenty two and twenty one, there were three of them.

It was a strange coincidence, but they were roughly the same levels as the skeletons they fought in Lagranda Forest. However, in the half a year since that summer's training camp, the party had grown much stronger. Minori cast the level fifty four spell Mystic Spell of the Mirror. A magic mirror appeared in front of her and launched a beam of light, as it pierced the wicked looking ogre and reddened its skin, it also healed Tohya's scratches.

Tohya pursued the ogre hit by the light with Izuna Cutter. Using that momentum, he used Ukifune Ferry, transitioning into Kasha's Long Sword. Compared to the offensive classes, a samurai's accuracy and damage were lower, but they had ways to compensate for that. Whilst breaking up the attacks, it blocked the monsters' line of sight and kept Minori safe as the rear guard.

“Minori-chan, the woodcutters are okay!” Reported Serara from the rear.

Simultaneously, a well aimed Frost Spear blew away one of the Ogre's arms.

At this rate it would be fine, against three opponents, half of the party's fighting power would overwhelm them. The party had grown enough in levels and in how they fought, they would be more than enough.

“Watch out! Fifteen adds!”

A voice they'd never heard before called out, the carrying voice echoed around the forest and a flock of monsters was disgorged from the forest. They were unfamiliar monsters, looking like a black haze.

Following Shiroe and Naotsugu's rigorous training, Minori drew back a leg in preparation and confirmed their statuses.

Nightshade Servants, level forty.

A much stronger enemy than the ogres, and fifteen of them. Minori quickly dropped into thought. From “Nightshade” they should be ghost type monsters, from their type they should have a high resistance against attribute damage. Dark spirits had a wicked poison or a resistance against abilities that affected the mind. They should also have a resistance against one hit kills.

“Servant” showed their role and rank within the same kind of monsters. This marked them as relatively weak in fighting ability amongst Nightshades. But even so, at level forty, they were within about ten levels of the party, since the catastrophe they were not enemies that could be taken lightly.

In all likelihood, they could win. However, the people of the land may be injured. There were many to fight whilst defending as well.

Tohya didn't hesitate and raised his voice using Samurai's Taunt, leaving the direction to Minori.

“Rundelhous-san, concentrate your firepower and finish off the ogres! Isuzu-san, keep up the defence!”

“Leave it to me. Orb of Lava!”

“Strengthening Pastoral!”

They were likely waiting. Rundelhous' flying ball of fire stabbed through two of the ogres. At the same time, Tohya leapt back about ten paces, stretching the battle's line. The decision to retreat to regroup was correct.

However, behind the party's front line of Tohya and Minori, there was still the group of people of the land. Serara and Isuzu were guarding them, they didn't think anything excessive would happen, but there were countless ways it could go wrong.

Meanwhile, the Nightshade Servants manipulated their mist covered bodies and attacked Tohya. His sword skills were polished, of course, the movements weren't like kendo, but as well as Naotsugu, he'd also been taught by Akatsuki and Soujirou to use the vital points of an attack to turn it away.

Minori cast her eyes around.

The woman that warned them was most likely in the forest.

Depending on the situation, she may need help too.

But against her expectations, from the dark under-brush a woman wearing a fluttering, snow white cape and glasses sprinted forth. She let out a surge of soundless energy from the end of her staff, changing two of the Nightshade Servants rainbow coloured. She raised the staff again.

“Servant Summon: Princess Wraith!”

Servant summons were a fundamental means of attack used by summoners. They would summon monsters called servants and put them to use. As there was no time limit, to balance with the other eleven classes of the same level, the summon's fighting ability was less than the summoners. Summoners didn't have simple access to as simple, strong magic.

However, that was compared to the same level.

Clad in level ninety strength magic, the woman and her servant ran through the battlefield, exterminating the enemies.

Her own attack magic could not be said to be superior, but with the summoner's skilful manipulation, and possibly a hidden energy wave from the servant's death, the female adventurer took down the Nightshade Servants one after another.

In front of the dumbfounded group, she adjusted her glasses and said in a clear voice.

"Let me introduce myself, I am Roe2, a summoner. I guess you could say I'm... a travelling vampire heading south."

A summoner with a snow white coat and round glasses had appeared in front of the group.

4

The people of the land who had run out from the forest were woodcutters who had been attacked by the ogres whilst working. The party split up and gathered their tools, they had abandoned their large axes and shoiko[1]

Of course, the people of the land could have gathered them, but there was still the possibility of enemies being in the forest.

They had no obligation to help the people of the land, but even with no one suggesting it, they spontaneously became an escort for them. Minori felt that they'd already started it, and after helping them once, if they were attacked in the forest again, it would leave a bad after taste.

Roe2, who had appeared so impressively, was currently collapsed in the back of the covered wagon.

She was a high levelled summoner, but she had said that she was weak to the sun, that was why up until now, she had always travelled through forests and mountainous areas.

Now that they had gathered the tools and attempted to continue onwards, a shocking incident came to light. The red light that the Nightshade Servants had fired was deflected from Tohya by Minori's damage interception spell, but that stray attack had hit the party's horses. The horses' wounds were horrible, but even so, they had ran off and disappeared over the horizon and the Twin Horse Flute of Lyman had cracked.

Because of the re-use time limit, they couldn't check immediately, but even if that wasn't the case, the damage was severe enough that they would hesitate to use it before repairing it.

Therefore, Tohya and Isuzu were moving the carriage to the people of the land's village.

Even though they were still in the level fifties, they had the strength of an adventurer. If they weren't worried about speed, just walking and pushing the carriage was easy.

According to the woodcutters' boss, Hayes, the people of the land would walk, travelling together like this was more convenient.

Out in front were Serara and her follower, Wolf. The bright grey lump of fur was full of curiosity and kept sticking his nose into the thickets to the left and right to smell, and then rushing back to Serara as if to report, barking sweetly.

Tohya was pulling the cart and guarding Hayes and the three helpers. At the back, Isuzu was in charge of pushing. Roughly next to her doing the same was Rundelhous who had said. “Making a woman do physical labour is...”

But the difference in classes was cruel. Even though they were the same level, the difference in physical strength between the magic using sorcerer and the weapon based bard was significant.

“You don’t need to worry about it, you can just ride the carriage.”

“I couldn’t so that.”

“We can go on a walk together then.”

“Why are you so happy, Miss Isuzu?”

“Because we’re walking?”

Minori was inside the covered wagon and could hear the two of them talking.

Roe2 had collapsed, so she’d decided that she needed to treat her.

“No, you don’t need to, I’m weak to restorative spells after all.”

“Weak to?”

“Because I’m a vampire.”

With an extremely dull expression, Roe2 put her index finger in the side of her mouth and pulled it to show her teeth and sharp canines peeked out.

When Minori saw them, she suddenly remembered the sub-class vampire.

She’d heard about it while talking with Shiroe, it was originally added for some kind of event, but it seemed it was a fairly unbalanced sub-class. In the night they were strengthened and could absorb HP in close combat, but in the day time they were greatly weakened, and HP recovery spells would in fact inflict additional damage. They were mostly unviable for party play.

The woman called Roe2 was a summoner. She was about the same height as Minori, but her thin sweater emphasised her chest and she was a beautiful woman.

In this alternate world, everyone was beautiful or cute. It was a remnant from when Elder Tale was a game, adventurers had better looks than the faces they’d left behind on Earth.

But strangely, even so, ‘beautiful girls’ and ‘beautiful women’ still definitely existed. It was their behaviour and atmosphere, or perhaps their aura that drew people in.

For example, her guildmate Akatsuki was like that, she had a charm about her more than her physical appearance. Within Minori's acquaintances, there were others, Henrietta, Maryelle, Takayama Misa, and Nazuna, who she'd recently been learning from, were all the same.

If she went even further, there was Rayneshia. She'd only greeted her a few times, but she was the first person who'd remained so strongly in her memories like that.

All of those beautiful women (or girls) had some presence about them, that with just a smile, even Minori's heart raced.

And right in front of her eyes, Roe2 was the same.

Her hair looked as though it hadn't been tended too, but somehow appeared glamorous, she had a listless expression beneath her round glasses, but it still evoked a fascination.

Her white coat and angular bag were both unrefined adventurer items, she spoke similarly to men and had a boyish atmosphere. But even so, there was no one that would mistake her for a man, she couldn't be seen as anything but a charming woman.

Minori felt her complex grow slightly.

She knew love so her melancholy grew.

She knew she was average.

Of course, she did what she could, she wore cute clothes as much as possible, especially when she went out with Shiroe. She spoke with Isuzu to chose clothes that weren't childish, but also weren't over reaching.

(Isuzu called it a strategy to make her a proper young lady.)

Even so, when she walked next to Shiroe, she felt embarrassed and ridiculous. She felt like a silly child who didn't know anything next to him.

When she missed him setting off, walking next to him was also difficult, it seemed she was more of a coward than she thought. But the instant Shiroe stopped and looked back, that discouragement was blown away and she was filled with happiness and was surprised by how self interested she was.

She was the one that had said to Tohya she wasn't doing anything on the night where she'd decided to do all she could to be with Shiroe.

But she was lost for what "all she could" was. Shiroe was an adult, but even in this world with no schools, he still saw her as just a middle schooler.

Her chest hurt with the feeling of being a worthless person, but even so, she didn't want to let go of the throbbing pain.

"It makes me feel pretty disheartened."

“Ah, what?”

Minori was answered by Roe2

“...Is that a Celestial Spirit Cloak?”

“Hmm? Ah, it is, I’m impressed you know it.”

“Well, my, hmm... teacher, Shiroe-san wears one.”

“Eh? Ah, are they a magic user too?”

“Yes, an enchanter.”

“This robe’s pretty good, it’s got wear resistance and it’s convenient for everyday use. It’s comfortable as well, and even stays nice through long journeys, right?”

Certainly, the robe wasn’t damaged or dirty.

Even though she moved through the countryside, she was a level ninety adventurer. Even choosing solo routes, she should be able to continue without being too exhausted. But being a vampire really was inconvenient, activities in the day were limited so it was fairly restrictive.

“Where did you come from? What’s your destination?”

““Where did I come from and where am I going”? What a philosophical question.”

“No, uhm, that’s not what I meant.”



Roe2 replied with “I know.” and smiled complacently. It was like she was teasing her. Minori who had started to retort was taken aback by the expression.

It seemed like she had more of a sense of humour than it first appeared from her appearance.

“I came from around Ouu, I think it was around three months ago now? It’s awful, I didn’t think it would be so hard by myself.”

“Ouu?”

Minori searched her memories. It was in the Tohoku region of Japan, towards the end of last year, Shiroe had gone on an expedition there. In that area was where the Coronation of the Goblin King raid quest was happening even now, the underlying cause of the battle they’d encountered in Choushi. Thinking about it like that, it was a familiar place.

“Before that I was even further away, I got that far using Castling.”

“Ah, that’s a summoner’s ability, a special spell to switch places with your summon, isn’t it.”

Castling was a special spell of summoners, it allowed them and their summoned creatures, or existences they had contracts with to switch places. It seemed Roe2 had switched places with a summon in Ouu.

In Elder Tale, summoned creatures couldn't get too far away from their summoner, but now you could go a large distance with the technique, even to other servers. That was the method one of the guilds of the Round Table Conference was using to investigate the fairy rings, it was common knowledge.

“Yeah, but whether it was my summon or my brother... Yeah, it was my brother, let's go with brother. I switched places with my brother.

Roe2's face coloured as she said that and she quickly continued on.

“I kept to the mountains from then to avoid the sun, I'm going to Ikoma for now. If I can get there, I can get rid of this vampire sub-class.”

“A sub-class change quest?”

When Minori heard that, she understood.

Normally, sub-classes could be overwritten. If you did that, you would lose your current sub-class. Minori had overwritten seamstress with apprentice like this.

However, there were sub-classes which couldn't be overwritten. It was a characteristic of sub-classes from hard quests or limited time events. To change one of those sub-classes, you had to complete a sub-class change quest and wipe the slate clean.

Vampire was a sub-class with many disadvantages. There were few people who still had it, and it was a fairly embarrassing sub-class is what Minori had heard from Shiroe.

The vampire sub-class had probably cause Roe2 a large inconvenience on this journey, so of course she'd want to get rid of it if possible, that sub-class change quest was in Ikoma.

“Well spotted. I really want to ask the one responsible which I have this sub-class. My brother... probably? It's just the appearance, I mean I guess it's convenient on the moon, but think a little about what happens when you come down to earth will you.”

Minori was about to question Roe2's recollection, but with a judder, the carriage came to a stop and interrupted the conversation.

“Hey, adventurers inside, and our little benefactor adventurers, this is our town, Koyurugi. We've got an inn too, so please rest, we'll come to say thanks later!”

Poking her head out of the curtains, Minori saw a splitting river forming a wide delta. The carried water kept the ground fertile and kept the fields supplied with water. Surrounded by that patchwork of fields, there was a town.

In the slowly setting sun, cooking fumes hung in the air, greeting the party.

The room was simply decorated.

February was too early for trade. The merchants struck by the enthusiasm of Akiba were an exception that for this winter had strove to frequently find work, but for agricultural traders, they couldn't get into the swing of things until spring.

Isuzu's party had put their luggage in a room of the cottage like independent inn and, keeping only their valuables and equipment with them, returned to the cafeteria. The room was for traders, so other than room for the five of them and beds, there wasn't much space for anything else. It wouldn't be a problem when sleeping, but the sun hadn't yet set.

There was also the woodcutter group who said they'd come to greet them, and they had to think about dinner too.

So the five of them returned to the cafeteria where the owner was waiting.

The cafeteria was a wooden construction with a low ceiling.

Making best use of fallen trees, the pillars and joists were naturally made of wood to make a skeletal frame, within that were impressive white painted walls. The lamps weren't oil based, but something more like phosphorescent stones. They were a magic item made in Akiba, they would be exposed to the light throughout the day, and then slowly release that light for four or five hours. They were much cheaper than firefly lamps which shone through magic power.

The cafeteria was furnished with short sofas died green with plant dye, set around low dining tables and around the pillars were decorative plants; rather than a cafeteria, the room gave off the impression of a living room.

On one of those sofas, Roe2, who had accompanied them to the village had thrown herself down.

The other customers weren't her acquaintances and felt awkward, so purposely went to other tables. The party drew close to her sofa. Tohya readily accepted her faint smile and beckoning and sat opposite her, Isuzu and Rundelhous sat on the other sides of the table, while Minori and Serara sat at Roe2's sides.

Roe2 was drinking a purplish red juice, and in response to Serara's question answered. "I think it's plum juice?"

"Are you staying here as well, Roe2-san?"

"Yeah, it's been a while since I had a bath, and it looks like this inn has one."

"I heard that!" Answered Isuzu in an excited voice.

Most adventurer equipment had self repair and self cleaning functions. Even if they were covered in mud, dirt and bits of plants, they'd soon return to looking like new. Sweat would vanish off their bodies in an instant, so as long as adventurers were careful about damage, compared to the original world, there was no real need to bathe.

But even if they were clean, and weren't actually sticky, they felt sticky and wanted to bathe. Isuzu was a girl of age, so that feeling was even more apparent. Serara and Minori also felt the same.

Without asking, food was brought to them.

According to the man bringing the food, it was a gift from the woodcutters they'd saved, he also relayed words of thanks from the mayor. The food was a somehow extravagant fried egg based dish. From the bowl sausages and tomatoes stuck out, the bottom layer was white rice, and the top was two seasoned fried eggs.

It was this inn's signature dish, present at nearly every table.

With a smile spread across his face, Rundelhous began looking restlessly around the table. Without anything being said, Serara pulled out several condiments from the pouch at her waist.

"I'll take soy sauce."

"Geez, of course you would, Tohya."

The twins belonged to the soy sauce faction.

Isuzu wordlessly passed a similar bottle to Rundelhous.

"Thank you, Miss Isuzu."

"When you're done, pass it back."

Isuzu and Rundelhous were part of the Worcestershire sauce faction. In Isuzu's family, her mother went for soy sauce, whilst she and her father would go for Worcestershire sauce. If the two of them were in Akiba, they'd also use luxury teriyaki sauce. But recently, as long as it was tasty, they weren't worried about what they ate. Compared to when she was in Hamelin, their current eating habits were like heaven.

In front of them now was a (peculiar) egg dish, but this itself was a sign it wasn't bad. In this world, Isuzu thought that the tastiest foods was cheap every day food. In other words, food culture brought by the adventurers.

This egg dish was probably an adventurer's idea. If food was arranged like a five star meal, if you were exceedingly lucky, it would taste nice, otherwise, it would be tasteless.

Food that couldn't be made at the touch of a button, when compared to menu made food based on appearance, wasn't anywhere near as extravagant. In other words, food which looked average would most likely be food with flavour, originating from adventurers.

Compared to the Crescent Burgers, it was further from the norm, but because of that, they could have expectations of the meal.

Rundelhous certainly felt the same, lightly closing his eyes and waiting for the command to start eating, looking like he had an invisible tail sweeping left and right behind him.

“There, and there.”

Serara was spooning mayonnaise onto the food with a wide smile. Isuzu had great sympathy for continuing travelling and looking forward to food.

Minori spoke to the confused looking Roe2.

“This is soy sauce, this is salt. This one is semi-thick Worcestershire sauce and this red one is ketchup. Which would you like Roe2-san?”

“Hmm. Hmm hmm...”

With a wondrous face, Roe2 took each of them and used them consecutively.

To Isuzu, using both soy sauce and Worcestershire sauce wasn't right, but that was something people were free to choose. Touching on people's delicate spots made arguments inevitable. And these eggs could be called chief among these. It was like that in Isuzu's house, she always wanted to scold her father for using ponzu[2].

“Let's eat!”

The party all took their meals. There were spoons set out, but Isuzu and Rundelhous both used washable chopsticks. Rundelhous had become quite skilled with them.

The cafeteria was around half full.

The surrounding merchants and craftsmen were mostly exchanging information about the area. Isuzu had come to understand since leaving on the journey, in a fairly small town or village like this, inns and bars, besides being trade institutions were also a sort of public facility. Of course they were there for drink and food, but they were also used for gathering information about the area, discussions and establishing routines.

In the twilit cafeteria, the party enjoyed their meal. Eating outside in the fields had its own charm, and (assuming Serara didn't make a mistake) was tasty, but settling down like this and eating together was pleasant.

Isuzu took a piece of rice that had stuck to Rundelhous' face and filled everyone's cups with cold tea from the pitcher.

“Okay, I've got it! This glugging black thing is Worcestershire sauce, and this gushing black thing is soy sauce, right?”

Roe2 mumbled this and added more of each.

The glance exchanged by Isuzu and Minori held the same feelings, this too was a competition between soy and Worcestershire sauce.

“No no, that’s perfect. You should study them both.”

“Mayonnaise is tasty too.”

Serara tried to draw in allies in her own way and Roe2 gingerly added mayonnaise as well. It worried Isuzu but she didn’t say anything. The politics surrounding fried eggs were complex and strict after all. You couldn’t intervene with anything other than saying your preference.

“It looks like he had to go back part way through...”

“Caravan life is hard, isn’t it?”

“Even so, individual merchants somehow...”

Travellers were butting heads with influential men of the village and craftsmen. It was no idle gossip, rather it was an important information exchange to determine the town’s policies from now on.

Hearing the conversation interspersed with sighs, Isuzu looked up, and looking closely could see the merchants’ faces were dark.

“I wonder if something happened.”

In response to Isuzu’s quizzical inquiry, each of them looked around the room.

In the comfortable cafeteria, there were many merchants and dejected looking craftsmen who looked like they’d been there for a while.

“Continuing west from here, there is a mountain district called Boxurt. It has beautiful lakes and nobles that flourish on taxes, but monster activity is rising in the area.

“I see...”

Roe2 ate a spoonful of rice mixed with egg yolk and explained the conversations. She’d heard the circumstances whilst the party were returning to the room.

“They’re mostly monsters from level twenty to thirty. The ones we fought just past noon were the same, it looks like there’s some power conflict in the mountains. Stronger monsters from higher up are coming down the mountains. Their spheres of influence are shifting like billiard balls.”

“Did you see them whilst you were travelling, Roe2-san?”

“Yeah, I’ve been travelling in the forests’ shadows after all.”

Roe2 easily answered Minori’s question, and with thanks for the food, put her bowl down. She’d nonchalantly finished the food first among the group. Contrary to her beautiful

appearance, she ate fast, altering Isuzu's evaluation of her, bringing forth feelings of affection.

"We're fine, but it must be hard for all of the merchants."

Isuzu thought over Minori's words for a moment.

"If they only used the main road, the monsters' levels would be around ten. Especially around the red clay road, the ancient techniques were to repel monsters after all."

Rundelhous also added his opinion after thinking on it.

Isuzu replied with.

"That's why if monsters over level twenty appear neat the roads, it will trouble the traders."

The merchants that had been here for so long couldn't cross the mountain pass and were stranded.

"We're still troubled too, the horses were hurt."

Serara's words made Isuzu notice too, that was certainly a large problem. In this people of the land town, it was unlikely there would be stores for adventurer equipment, and the likelihood of finding a craftsman for adventurer items was close to zero.

"Horses? Oh, that's right, they ran off. Couldn't you just summon horses?"

Roe2 had a full stomach and cheerfully said that.

If they were summoners, they could, but none of the party were.

"You can do that, Roe2-nee-chan?"

They were all thinking the same. Then in his usual happy voice Tohya asked that."

However, the answer wasn't anything like what Isuzu was expecting.

"Nee... Ah, nee!? You, could you say onee-san?"

Isuzu felt that the atmosphere had somewhat broken, and before she could interrupt, her friends replied with.

"Onee-san?"

"Roe-neesan?"

"So rather than miss, saying lady is better? No, it's different, sister Roe2."

The spectacled woman held her fist before her eyes, seeming to be moved greatly and nodding silently with her mouth tightly closed, repeatedly breathing deeply.

"Onee-san, I like it, onee-san... Hearing those words makes me feel like I'm being relied on."

Isuzu went to say that that wasn't the case, her best friend Minori noticed this and put her hand in the way.

However, the two of them couldn't interject into Roe2's monologue. She was filled with pride and had a cheerful expression.

"Somehow being relied upon lifts me up. Being an onee-san is a good thing. I want to be treated like one, lifted up as an onee-san. Alright, I'll join you on your journey. I don't mind if you rely on me in battle. Of course, I'll also provide horses. A stack of horses better than anyone has ever seen. In exchange, I will be your onee-san. What do you think!?"

Roe2 had a nice face and body, but from Isuzu's point of view made a not quite as stylish proclamation. Against that request with no respite, the party couldn't resist.

6

"Wow, it's huge."

"Yeah, it's amazing."

With a pleasant sound, a Bug Light came out and illuminated the thick steam and a bath surrounded by rocks. They'd been told there was a bath, but it wasn't just something a room had inside, they went several minutes walk along a gravel path from the back of the inn to a depression in the ground.

The trees around the area hid it well enough and the hot water and cold river water fell down like a waterfall. Rather than a bath, it was more like a hot spring, made by hot water drawn from its source and mixed with the cold water from the river Ricouart.

There was a small, hut-like building for changing in. Serara was excited from having caught sight of the bath and went into the small building with Minori and Isuzu.

The bath earlier was the same, but there was no one in the changing area.

Normal people of the land had early nights. Werecats could see well in the dark, and you could use phosphorescent stones like in the cafeteria, but normal houses only had lamps. To use those, fuel and preparation were needed, and it wasn't possible to simply light up large spaces. Carrying a light and using the bath would be a bother.

So rather than going out of their way to light areas and use them at night, the majority of people of the land had a lifestyle where they would finish whatever business they had whilst the sun was up and go to bed early.

The owner had said to the three of them,

"No one's reserved it now." It was obvious, but Serara had needed to make sure.

Serara knew that asking if it was reserved was because of her shyness, but adventurers had magic lights so even at this sort of time could freely enjoy a bath like this.

Isuzu had already undressed and put her hair back and headed towards the exit with a towel wrapped around herself.

Serara was hurrying but was still slow.

She may have been disappointed, but if the only ones around were her same-sex friends, even though she was called pudgy and had taken off her clothes, she had courage.

There was no need to be so cautious, but she was easily embarrassed and too self conscious.

Serara pinned her hair behind her head as quickly as she could and, covering her front with a bath towel, timidly went out, caution was important in an alternate world.

Minori was waiting for her there.

“It doesn’t seem too hot. There’s a paved area over there, so shall we wash ourselves first?”

Seeing her younger friend’s care free smile, Serara felt slightly more at ease and nodded with a smile, heading in that direction.

The “Natural Product, Additive Free Shampoo and Conditioner” and “Trial Model Creamy Soap” that they’d brought from Akiba weren’t particularly high class products compared to those of the original world, and their performance was likely worse too. But to the people of the land, they were super high class products, and were good enough for practical use. The three of them used these with sponges and towels and washed their hair too.

Since the Catastrophe, Serara thought she’d changed.

Before she herself knew she was clumsy and slow to understand things. Even if it was just bathing, on school trips and such she felt she caused trouble to the people who had long baths.

She didn’t know whether the reason for her change was her housekeeper sub-class or her lifestyle in this world.

In the original world, she didn’t hate jobs like cleaning and washing and was responsible for a lot of jobs like that. But her skill level was never more than average.

After having been in this world and doing a lot of housework, her skill level had risen.

Rather than game-like bonuses due to a sub-class, Serara felt that if you mastered a skill yourself it was nicer.

Even now she wouldn’t say she was particularly skilful, but she was much better than before. She felt being able to do housework well was like being a young bride and a wonderful thing.

She and Minori washed each-other’s backs and dried their hair with the same pace.

“I’m finished, Serara-san.”

“I’m finished too, Minori-chan!”

The two of them met gazes, and with a smile, rushed Isuzu, who was blankly staring, and began washing her hair.

When it was untied, Isuzu’s hair cascaded down to her waist.

She said things like “I’m not feminine.”, “I’m all skin and bones.”, “I’ve got so many freckles.” and “I’m a high school girl you’d find anywhere.” but in reality, her long hair was important to her. Serara had noticed that, even while complaining, the amount of time she put into washing it properly made it apparent. Minori and Serara had been waiting for a chance to touch their friend’s hair.

“Isuzu-chan’s hair is so fluffy.”

“We brought two types of comb.”

“It’s fine, it’s a bother so I’ll do it myself.”

“Not at all, this is part of a housekeeper’s job too.”

“An apprentice won’t run from any kind of job.”

“Do you have any itches?”

“Geez, Serara.”

“If you talk you’ll get soap in your mouth, Isuzu-san.”

“You too Minori?”

“It’s practice for Serara-chan’s future.”

“Eh?”

“A newly-wed’s practice.”

“Eeh!?”

In response to Minori’s serious way of speaking, “Really?” “Is that true?” “Why has this happened!?” and the three’s uncontainable laughter echoed around the bath. Even so Serara didn’t stop washing, she knew washing long hair was actually a lot of work and had been talking about washing Isuzu’s hair with Minori before.

It was wonderful that the chance had come with this journey.

In the cheerful illumination of a magic light, Serara sunk in the water up to her shoulders. The warmth of the water slowly permeated her body, feeling heavenly, the two next to her also closed their eyes and let out a happy sigh.

The bath was about five metres in each direction, much bigger than the cast iron baths in high class people of the land inns, big enough to stretch your legs and relax, and deep enough to have the water come up to your chin.

This bath had two water currents, a hot and a cold. After finding the right temperature they happily lowered themselves into the bath.

“Aah, the water’s nice!” Proclaimed Isuzu with a smile.

Minori smiled and Serara was happy too.

Looking up at the roughly half full moon and magical light floating in the sky, the three started to giggle for no reason.

Adventurers’ bodies were surprising, despite continually sleeping out in the fields on their journey, they didn’t have any muscle pain, and there was no lingering fatigue. However, they still became stressed and being able to sit in warm water like this was something to be thankful for.

In all honesty, they were somewhat reluctant to continue camping.

Minori had said that in the original world this area was a tourist destination, with tasty fish and famous for its dried seafood.

Serara vaguely thought *“I’d like to come here with Nyanta-san at some point.”*
“It’s warm, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“Right.”

The three had gone limp and relaxed as they talked.

Even Isuzu, who was normally full of energy was smiling like a cat napping in the day. Serara found it funny and put her mouth below the water and blew bubbles to disguise her laughter.

All people became like cats when in a nice, warm bath like this. Serara herself felt like napping.

“Maybe I’ve grown cat ears too... If I grew cat ears and whiskers, I’d be a werecat. No, werecats are almost totally cats, maybe a catwere. I’d be one step closer to my dreams.”
Serara wriggled her toes at the happy image that made her want to giggle.

“You’re making a sleepy face too, Serara-san.”

“Because I’m a caat.”

Enveloped in warmth up to the neck, it was hard to think of complicated things, so it was only natural the conversation became childish. Or that's what Serara told herself as she answered.

“So, you want to bathe with Nyanta-san?”

That warm, peaceful mood was shattered in an instant by Isuzu's questioning with a smile hiding a tinge of teasing.

“That's not what I said.”

“But you think he's attractive, don't you?”

“Nyanta-san is a dandy, good looking and stylish.”

Serara tried her best to answer and Isuzu caught Minori by the shoulder. Minori looked at both of them in confusion, but Isuzu's attitude of Minori being on her side remained.

“If we're talking about that, then what about you and Rundelhous-san?”

“Hm? He's my friend for walks isn't he?”

Isuzu's puzzled response amazed Serara.

Thinking about it normally, Isuzu and Rundelhous appeared more couple-like than Serara and Nyanta, but somehow, Isuzu hadn't noticed that.

“But Isuzu-san and Rundelhous-san suit each other so well.”

Serara couldn't think of them as anything other than early morning dates. To Serara with her kitchen dates (or so she liked to think) Isuzu's thickheadedness wasn't understandable. But that might be because she wanted Nyanta too much, but while thinking that she wondered what 'too much' was to a girl and felt a heat that didn't come from the water begin to well up.

To hide that, all she could do was hide the lower half of her face in the water and blow bubbles.

“Serara-san will become a good wife.” Said Minori with a bright voice, striking the final blow.

“Well you might become Shiroe-san's secretary, Minori.”

“Uu... There's no way that would happen.”

“But you're all lovey dovey, trying to help.”

The focus moved away from Serara. Isuzu turned her teasing gaze to Minori but from Serara's point of view, Minori was an amazing girl. She changed her sub-class to apprentice and other than when they went out hunting, she helped the 8th Shopping District, she was a super middle schooler.

Since they'd become friends Serara had seen many of Minori's cute and clumsy points but she thought she wanted to follow her sense of responsibility and skill. Especially her work rate. Even when they were cleaning up or making something, Minori would finish first, it wasn't that any of her individual actions were amazingly fast, but moving between things and the preparations were done quickly. Serara felt it was a difference in thinking, or intelligence, but Minori was amazing.

She was a little younger, but in this world with no schools, that didn't hold much weight so Serara thought of Minori as a friend of the same age.

"Everything would go well if you became a secretary."

"That's not true, I just want to help, even if it's a little."

"She's doing it again."

"She's doing it again."

"Isuzu-chan, Minori-chan is saying something."

"Serara-chan, Minori is cute."

Following Isuzu's lead, they put Minori in the middle of them and pushed her back and forth between them.

Giggling and smiling was a strange feeling to Serara. When she was in Susukino, she couldn't imagine being able to laugh like this, but it felt like it had been years since then.

Holding on to Minori's soft hair, it was Isuzu's turn now.

"What will you do in the future then, Isuzu-san?"

"Eh?"

After teasing the other two, Isuzu was surprised to have the questioning suddenly turn to her, but her expression returned to normal quickly.

"I'm normal, if we return to the original world I'll become an office worker or something; and if we stay here I'll do hunting, quests and work for the round table, and sing at Bloom Hall every week."

"You'll become a singer, Isuzu-chan?"

"Eeh? I won't," Isuzu laughed for a while and clapped her hands. "I won't, I won't, I'm not a singer or anything. That's something someone who stands out more does. I just sometimes sing a bit in a restaurant, giving people some background music when they're happy, along with Rudy."

She couldn't see any sadness or distaste in Isuzu's expression so Serara thought she actually meant it. Thinking about it, it was only natural, not everyone was aiming to become a music artist, Isuzu just liked music, she didn't have that kind of interest in it.

"The future, huh?"

Hearing a voice from nearby, the three jumped up in shock, they didn't think there was anyone else bathing.

Roe2's composed nodding and steamed up glasses shone.

"Ah, you're so young."

Serara for some reason meekly nodded at the kind voice. Roe2 was a mysterious woman who'd also showed childish reactions, but sometimes she appeared like an all knowing, kind, older woman.

"Roe2-san..."

"Of course, as your older sister, my body's better."

Roe2's words shocked Serara, and Isuzu didn't stop with just being shocked, her mouth dropped open. The impression of her as a reliable older sister they'd had until now vanished completely.

"Eh, ah, uhm."

"My chest is bigger too."

Roe2 saying that again made comforting the two difficult.

They protested, were calmed and then somehow the conversation moved from love, to the world and then to the towns they had lived in.

"Roe2-san, where did you live?"

"Just where the city becomes depopulated."

"You lived alone? That sounds nice."

"I'm an adult after all. And with communications advancements, physical distance doesn't matter much."

"I see, that's right." Thought Serara.

This was a web-game, that became another world where Serara had met Nyanta. Physical distance had nothing to do with their meeting.

Time passed like rushing wind, but their conversation didn't.

Serara noticed she'd never been bored with Minori and Isuzu, and Roe2 had easily joined the group.

They were fun times like Pipi joining the Settergren siblings. Of course, enjoyable times game with a price, but the four were absorbed in the moment.

[1] A wooden rack carried on the back for carrying loads, seen here

[2] A sauce made using soy sauce and citrus juice.

Chapter 3 – After the Gig

CHAPTER.

3

AFTER THE GIG
[ライブがはねたら]

▶ Name: Minori

▶ Level: 57

▶ Race: Human

▶ Class: Kannagi

▶ HP: 5468

▶ MP: 5318

▶ Item 1:
(Kagura Bell Prayer Staff)
Staff that greatly raises the effectiveness of the skill "Chorus of Bell Chimes". Its casting range is increased, and cooldown is shortened, allowing for continuous usage. Since the weapon damage is extremely low, the staff is used solely for damage interception.

▶ Item 2:
(Kagome no Chikaya)
Clothing decorated with woven-lens-like patterns, exclusive to Kannagi. Chat tolerance is greatly increased due to the water girl's dense protection. It also strengthens damage interception abilities by increasing the amount of damage negated. Popular due to its appearance and performance.

▶ Item 3:
(Purple Cloud Fragment)
Consumable item consisting of a small bottle with purple clouds sealed within it. This powerful elixir increases the casting range of revival spells and instantly reduces its cooldown time by 50%. The price of the item matches its ability, but after the liner experience at Chouhi, she spent a fortune on it.

▶ CHAPTER. 3 AFTER THE GIG LOG HORIZON



Boxurt.

The name was well known throughout the Yamato Archipelago.

Originally it was the name of the mountainous region, but it became the name of the area, the name of the ridge, and the name of the fortress.

There were several roads going from east to west Yamato, but the ones along the pacific coast all had to pass through Boxurt. Excluding marine trade, it was essentially the only trade route and was a strategic location.

On Earth, the place was called Hakone, and of course Tohya had heard of it. He was sure he'd heard about it from a friend during social studies classes when they had said about going there with their family.

The strongest impression was that of a WebTV travel program.

Tohya's family often watched those programs over dinner. His mother liked travelling, and the only places they could take Tohya with his legs were places like tourist hot-springs, so they watched a lot of those programs. The impressions of Hakone across the monitor were lakes and hot-springs.

They were now approaching a mountainous trail to Boxurt.

It was nearing half a day since they'd joined the trail, but they were surprised, you might even say dumbfounded. It was a genuine mountain trail.

You might ask them what they were talking about and call them idiots, but those were Tohya's true feelings. The road was only about three metres wide, only just wider than the carriage. Sometimes it was reinforced with stones and stakes but the majority of the red clay had been turned to mud by falling rain.

The road was unstable, but seemed to cling to the slope as it wound its way up. To the right was the slope continuing up to the summit, tightly packed with foliage like Japanese Cedar trees; to the left was the slope dropping down to a valley, a dizzying difference.

Rather than just the scenery, the road itself had to wind back and forth, sometimes seeming to double back on itself to deal with the whims of the uneven terrain. It was March, and though the signs of winter remained, the natural vitality was strong and the thick scent of greenery filled the air.

In other words, despite having gotten used to Celdesia after the catastrophe, it was enough to give Tohya, Minori, and Serara a shock.

Isuzu was more used to 'nature' than the other three but that was things like hills past a farmers fields, amazingly wide floodplains with tall weeds growing on them and taking mysterious watermelons from vegetable gardens behind disrepaired school buildings, she was 'used' to things of that level, but this actual mountain path left her dumbfounded.

This was a world filled with ruins from the age of the gods.

They wanted to complain that even though there were lots of destroyed places, there were urban highways, so why was Hakone in particular left without asphalt for the mountain roads.

It wasn't just mulched leaves covering the forest path, huge, wet, black boulders, twice Tohya's size jutted up from the ground making the road detour just to avoid them.

Rundelhous, the only one of them with this experience was nodding sagely, tiredly saying.

"This is why I told you to get fired up this morning."

If that was said, Tohya couldn't help but get fired up.

Their saviour was their fellow traveller, Roe2, and the Pale Horse she summoned. This pale white horse, even after Roe2 had lowered her level with the mentor system and could only summon one, had enough strength to continue pulling the originally two horse carriage.

The winding and undulating road meant that even in the carriage it was uncomfortable and their speed wouldn't increase, so Tohya and Rundelhous got off the carriage and walked ahead as if they were guiding it.

The girls were exhausted in the back of the carriage and occasionally walking behind.

A white wolf cub was running around Tohya's feet with a boasting gallant expression. Tohya couldn't help but see it as a white shiba, but according to Serara it was Wolf-chan. It was a helper summon, summoned by a special skill in the summoning family, it would stay around as long as Serara didn't order it away. Therefore, apart from when they slept at the inn, it had spent the journey like this, surveying their surroundings, on guard.

"I can summon a patrol spirit too."

Rundelhous turned back to Roe2, languishing on the drivers seat and shot back.

"No, you don't need to, sister Roe2."

In the early morning, Roe2 had tried out her Zombie Bats, they were fairly grotesque looking and Serara had crouched down and gone teary eyed. Moreover, there wasn't a need for that much vigilance, so the strategy of having Roe2's Zombie Bats patrol was rejected. She was already maintaining the Pale Horse summon and they judged it would take too much mana.

"It might not seem it, but they're cute when you get used to them."

Roe2 had the class of summoner, which specialised in summoning. There was a great variety of summons that they could call forth to work for them, so they had a wide range of applications, making them the most active class since the catastrophe. Undines that could produce water and manipulate coldness, and Salamanders that could create fire and manipulate heat were examples of this.

In short, though there was a great variety in summoners, most could be separated into four types. Elementalers that controlled things like water and fire spirits, Beast Tamers that had Unicorns and Carbuncles, Alchemics that controlled Slimes and Golems and finally Necromancers that had Skeletons and Phantoms.

These trends weren't exclusive, normally,

“Around seventy percent of summoners contracts with spirits, but they also summon beasts with talismans.” and create their own style. With those combinations and balances, summoners have many opportunities to show their skill. Minori read aloud from her notebook, most of it was second hand knowledge from Shiroe.

But Roe2 was a real necromancer, she only had contracts with dead spirit type monsters, not making a single one with other types. Because she had a pure build, her applications were limited. After the catastrophe, Tohya had heard that their popularity had vanished from Naotsugu. Their summons looked scary and grotesque, and they were hard to come to an understanding with.

If you looked at the wolf that Serara summoned, he didn't really think it could be helped.

Of course, in battle, the white puppy-like monster would fight gallantly, but it was brimming with curiosity and seemed pampered, almost like a pet. Tohya guessed that together with normal sensibilities, these fluffy ones would be more popular.

“Tohya.”

“I'm looking, Rudy-nii.”

On this mountain with poor visibility, there weren't many places where their line of sight was good.

In exchange, when the mountain jutted out, they could see three or four bends ahead.

Probably around fifteen minutes from where they were, they could see two carriages which had come to a standstill. It didn't appear they were under attack, so they probably had some kind of trouble. Tohya began to think what to do.

From the looks of things, they were going in the same direction, west in other words. Normally this wouldn't be a problem, they'd just follow behind. But with them stopped it was a different matter, the road here wasn't wide enough to pass. They might be able to solve things with an adventurer's strength, but they didn't know the situation yet.

“It looks like they're stuck.”

“Yeah.”

“What's up? Did something happen?”

They heard Roe2's voice from the driver's seat. She was exhausted and dealt poorly with sunlight, so she probably missed the scene from earlier.

“It appears that two carriages got into trouble around three or four turns away and stopped.”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to pass them, Roe2-nee-chan.”

“Hm, I see. I’m your Onee-chan after all.”

Roe2 meaninglessly puffed her chest out, but she didn’t appear to have a particularly good idea or anything.

“At any rate, let’s get there first.”

“Let’s do that.”

After getting Minori’s agreement, they continued along the trail and, as expected, met a stranded group of traders.

“Hey, do you want to buy a sword? They’re fine gems from Akiba, equipment level 20.”

This was what greeted them, a trader with bags beneath his eyes called out to Tohya with this.

Tohya was surprised, but quickly shook his head.

“We’re already a higher level so we won’t use those swords. What happened?”

The merchant slowly shaking his head seemed to be the leader, but looking around there was an escort of three people exhausted, sitting on wooden boxes. Most of the luggage was trade materials and one of the carriages had a broken axle.

The carriage Minori and the others were riding was around twenty metres away, because if they needed to go back and change direction, it was easier to not come any closer. This area was narrow, even compared to the rest of the narrow mountain trail so there wasn’t enough space to pass and one wrong step would lead to the carriage rolling down the sparse slopes.

“Looks like we’re stuck, Tohya.”

“Yeah.”

Most likely, if the luggage was all metal swords the carriage was overloaded to begin with. The solution was simply, push the broken carriage into the valley and take what they could on the other carriage, abandoning the rest. However, this was stock they’d obtained, so they likely would hold on to it tightly.

“It’s been a whole day since the axle broke. Please forgive the merchants if they’re rude.”

From inside the carriage, a gentle looking woman descended.

Before them was a woman, with light brown hair, like the ears of silver grass, wearing a long skirt and a bolero jacket, co-ordinated with yellows from daisies and dandelions, and a large

hat. Her eyebrows traced out a gentle curve and the beautiful woman looked affectionately at them.

With the slight scent of Hepatica in the air, Tohya felt strangely melancholic as he looked at the woman. Tohya's premonition was correct. This woman who seemed nothing but gentle was enduring awful feelings. But he couldn't understand why.

"I am a travelling writer, Dariella."

The woman sweetly curtsied in greeting.

"You're young, but you are adventurers, correct? Spending another night here would be tough on the merchants, so even if it's just to Boxurt fortress, could you carry a few boxes? With your help, I think we'll quickly be able to get over the next ridge. It would save the merchants from their predicament too."

The woman who called herself Dariella's plea was graceful, her kind words held persuasive power and Tohya and Rundelhous reflexively nodded.

There was no other choice in a situation like this.

The two of them turned back to go and discuss it with Minori.

2

What had broken the merchant cart's axle was the sharp bumps in the mountain road. It was hard to tell by looking because the earth covered them slightly, but the road had stones jutting out of it that the axle had run aground on. Following that, it had fallen down onto another, pointed rock. It had only fallen around ten centimetres and normally this wouldn't have happened.

However, the merchants had been greedy and piled on twenty four boxes of steel swords, the impact of that had broken the wheel.

For a person of the land, lifting just one box would be hard, but Minori and the others had no trouble lifting two or three. Holding the boxes, they continued up the road for around twenty minutes, reaching an area where it widened out into something like a viewing platform.

It was an area carts could pass each other and for the moment, they could pile the boxes up there.

Serara made preparations for lunch and the others spent about two hours ferrying the boxes up. It was unfortunate but they pushed the cart into the valley, the merchants had brought the safe cart up and used all of their energy with their escort and were now dozing.

"It's a mountain where demons may appear, so spending a night protecting their cargo will naturally exhaust them."

Dariella the writer gently smiled at Minori.

She was a person of the land she couldn't place the age of. She was probably older than Minori, but she couldn't imagine how much older. By looks alone, she appeared a little older, perhaps the same age as Maryelle, but by speaking to her Minori unexpectedly thought she might be the same age as her, and she could see her lovely smile.

"Dariella-san, are you one of their wives?"

Surprised, Dariella closed her eyes and burst into laughter.

"No, I'm going how and just rode on their cart."

"I see, Minami then? It's in the same direction as Ikoma."

"Yes, it's very close, my house is in the mountains of Ikoma."

Dariella replied to Roe2's call as she approached.

"Oh, I see."

The Merchant's safe cart, the mound of their luggage and the party's cart were all lined up on the platform. It was surrounded by a not particularly sturdy looking wooden railing, but the area itself pushed out into the mountain air, and a superb view of the valley below was spread out beneath them.

The merchants were truly exhausted.

They had someone guarding the luggage, sat against it, but the other members had taken refuge in the carriage and fallen asleep. Serara had passed out soup, but they showed no sign of waking.

Minori and the others took a late lunch.

The wind was still cold, but crossing the mountains it was laden with a particular impression of greenery.

"What's this soup?"

"It's miso soup with potatoes and carrots."

"And this long thing...?"

"It's a spring onion."

From a little distance away, Minori listened to Serara and Roe2's conversation with a smile.

Eating on the mountain was fun and like they had a packed lunch. Isuzu was sitting on a fallen tree, swinging her legs, with Rundelhaus next to her, stuffing his cheeks with rice balls. Dariella was with them and offering around pickles with a gentle aura.

"Tohya, does your stomach hurt?"

“Not at all.” Minori was worried about Tohya, sitting by himself and thinking absent-mindedly and called out to him, her reliable younger brother smiled widely at her and answered. “What about yooouuu? Are you yearning for Shiroe-niichan?”

“Geez, I’m not.”

“Well, that’s fine. Once we cross, we’ll be much closer to our destination.”

“Yes, and the wyverns, right? According to Shiroe-san, it’s not impossible for them to appear in these mountains. Flying monsters have a wide sphere of activity...”

“Ah, then we’ll need to watch out.”

Following Tohya’s gaze into the sky, Minori noticed something.

There was a group drawing near.

A vanguard party of knights, all clad in full armour and with heavy equipment.

There were probably around ten adventurers, for some reason leaving an impression of gloom. They soon noticed Minori and the others and climbed the mountain road. Coming from Minori and the other’s direction of travel, it was a route to the foot of the mountain.

Minori quickly travelled checked their status.

The vanguard was a samurai named Ishijirou, his guild was Plant Hwayden, level 90. The others had the same guild and similar levels, there were fourteen of them.

On the Yamato server, there wasn’t much PKing. Or at least not much was heard of around Akiba. However, they couldn’t hide their unease at meeting another party deep in these mountains.

Rundelhaus moved nonchalantly to Tohya’s side.

He took a pose with his cloak like a young noble, but from his positioning, Minori knew he was protecting Isuzu and Serara behind him.

The party walked unhurriedly, at a constant pace.

Being high level, they should also have high level mount riding but there wasn’t a single one of them on a mount. The fourteen approached the mountain in nearly double file.

This was a wide space, so it wasn’t like the narrow paths where they couldn’t pass. They could just watch them go. It might be thought of as cowardly, but Minori was relieved.

The central four in the group were supporting a large object.

It looked like one of the portable shrines that were dedicated to shrines and used in festivals. It was decorated in a very western fashion but was surrounded by thick poles that crossed wells, one person in each direction held them as they carried it.

“It’s the Mobile Shrine of Boreas.”

Dariella murmured.

Amongst them, the only one who didn’t show a sign of unease was Roe2, and she asked in an unconcerned tone of voice.

“What’s that?”

“I’ve not seen it much. The Odyssey Knights carry it everywhere. I heard it’s used as a sacred tool of the adventurers.”

“Hmm.”

Isuzu and Serara had puzzled expressions on hearing that.

Minori hadn’t heard of it.

The words ‘Odyssey Knights’ were the same. Just by hearing them, a chill ran down their spines. When Minori had just checked them, their guild was Plant Hwayden.

So the Odyssey Knights weren’t a guild.

Minori didn’t know what to think.

She’d heard the word ‘Odyssey’ before.

An organisation with the supreme goal of returning to the original word. Hearing just that would be fine, in some meanings they were a group acting by proxy for all Adventurers’ feelings. But whilst working in Akiba’s guild hall, helping the 8th Shopping District, she’d heard rumours they were all clad in the hue of gloom.

The group approached, they could already distinguish equipment and their individual faces. All of their equipment was clean and in order. Rather it appeared systematic to Minori. Without idle chatter, they moved forward at a constant pace. Adventurers had inexhaustible stamina, and they were level 90, so that shouldn’t have been anything, but they gave off the impression of an exhausted group of corpses.

“The Mobile Shrine of Boreas revives adventurers.”

Dariella probably didn’t understand, being a person of the land.

Her words were distant, sounding like it was someone else’s problem.

“And, I don’t know if it’s a side effect, but it’s said it disturbs the voices of their heart. It seems important to the adventurers.”

Minori and Serara exchanged glances.

Despite her words, this was the first time they’d heard of such an item. Troubled by the response, they didn’t understand Dariella’s words completely. Within Minori, she had the feeling of refusing an understanding of something.

If it was as she said, that ‘mobile shrine’ would act in place of a shrine and revive adventurers that lost their lives nearby. It was like a substitution for a revival point, no, it sounded like it itself was a revival point.

It could be thought of as a blessing which enhanced the adventurers immortality but on the other hand, it still seemed horrendously ominous.

Minori quietly murmured her brother’s name in unease.

Tohya was furthest forward out of them all, watching the Odyssea Knights with a daunting pose, so Minori could only see his back.

Tohya didn’t reply.

However, his twin Minori knew the air of tension dwelled within him, just as if they were fighting.

The group approached the side of the plateau, and with no regard to Minori and the others, continued their constant walk, as if they were searching for something, or being lead.

It felt like a long time passed, but if they were thinking calmly, it was only around ten minutes.

They just passed through, with no trouble.

However, Minori couldn’t erase the growing feeling of unease in her chest.

3

A track made of magic circles was projected about thirty metres forwards, and nature was twisted according to their established effect. The wildlife, overgrown from the interference of dryads and treants was made into a tunnel. The surrounding trees were avoided by warping them.

The magic circles continued ahead, bringing light. They didn’t just interfere with nature to make space, they produced a floating force-field rail that made movement easy.

On top of them, moving via a repulsive force were steel vehicles. They were eight metre large box-like vehicles. With boorish armour and glass inlays for windows, those were tinted and you couldn't see inside.

In the fourth back, a two floor construction that had a canopy that could open, there was a woman.

Her proportions brought to mind a carnivore and she wore a military uniform, Mizufa Trude.

She was a highly ranked general for the Holy Empire of Westelande.

The general had a cynical smile on her face that brought together stubbornness and shallowness as she gazed out through the glass. One beautiful leg rested over the other, showing her relaxation, her left index finger caressed circles on her sword's hilt.

Mizufa was satisfied with the vehicle's performance.

The vehicle had enough mass that it wouldn't move without the chained rail but thanks to the magic circles, it could even navigate uneven terrain like within these mountains. Even the hard to deal with mass, when its defensive properties were taken into account, it wasn't only a flaw.

The adventurers desired flight, this steel vehicle had failed mid-development and been discarded as an unusable toy. But to Mizufa and other people of the land, even this discarded toy was worth more than gold. That overwhelming difference in technological strength made Mizufa smile.

It wasn't just technology; magic, stamina, inventiveness, adventurers had many times more of these than people of the land.

It was as if someone had decided they would play the lead role in the world.

And Mizufa and the others would be the supporting role.

Mizufa suppressed her amusement in the back of her throat.

She didn't know who, but it was a cruel comedy.

"Our progress is good."

"Our location?"

"As before, the eastern part of the Forest of Deep Sorrow."

As Mizufa sat in the the centre of the steel vehicle, her soldiers were currently carrying out a top secret mission, Operation Red Night. There were only a few involved. However, it was an important mission involving the cutting edge technology of the steel vehicle, Summon Orb and EXP pots.

Even the Ten-Seat Council confirmed its importance, but Mizufa thought it wasn't there yet. The adventurers didn't even slightly understand the meaning of this operation.

At the same time as allowing the council's whimsical leader to escape the castle, it encouraged the soldiers. Mizufa herself had been greatly effected by the scheme. Here, the soldiers would give their life and soul and wage war at Mizufa's orders. Nureha was a princess that inspired blind devotion and wild enthusiasm in the Holy Empire of Westelande. Her charisma was beyond words.

"Though — Nureha-sama is capricious."

However, despite all the devotion she had, Nureha was still an adventurer.

She may have gotten tired of progressing through the Forest of Deep Sorrow and had unexpectedly disappeared. The chamberlains and maids were frantic, but her disappearance was not a rare occurrence. Mizufa was calm.

Besides, her aim of encouraging and inspecting the troupes was accomplished, once that was over she wasn't needed anymore. Rather, her being nearby and meddling would be a nuisance. Leaving her be might be in and of itself a problem but one of the Ten-Seat Council, Roreil Dawn was pursuing her. It was already five days since she had disappeared. They would probably have joined up by now. This was preferable to Mizufa.

The only thing left that could be called an issue was Kazuhiko, also part of the Ten-Seat Council.

The arrogant, stubborn person was the leader of the Mibu Wolves, a private army, and stuck his nose into many of the happenings of Minami, he was an eyesore to Mizufa. They even undermined her military authority using the name of the Ten-Seat Council as a shield and acted like a secret police. Their leader, Kazuhiko had remained, insisting it was to confirm the safety of the Summon Orb.

However, that too, she had taken into account.

Red Night had worth. No, strengthening this company was a process that couldn't help but further her ambitions.

Mizufa laughed in her throat.

The steel vehicle wasn't particularly fast, it could do about thirty percent of the speed of one of the latest four-horse carriages on a highway. However, that speed didn't drop on unfavourable terrain. Naturally, it slowed through the forests and valleys, but it was faster than marching.

It was certainly inferior to the machine the adventurers wanted, something that would get from Minami to Ezzo in ten hours, but it was useful in its own right. Compared to the sky, where visibility was unobstructed, moving hidden like this could be said to be better. In the first place, even the adventurers hadn't completed an aircraft. To Mizufa, this steel vehicle was treasure enough.

Zeldys developed Mana Breeder and it was made useful on a large scale as Jered Gan's Mana Furnace, an ancient technique passed down the Kunie line. The magic technology that their children were born into was the nucleus of the adventurer's fortune but the leftovers went to the people of the land. This steel vehicle was the same.

It was simple to say "It can travel over uneven terrain." but that wasn't limited to the wilderness.

The Circled Rail guaranteed their course and had the power to distort the trees from their path. In other words, although it was slow, they could secretly move troops through the entirety of Yamato, with its many mountain forests.

Mizufa currently had ten of these armoured vehicles under her command. Among them, four were particularly large. The lack of numbers was a worry, and Mizufa preferred more standardised equipment but there was no helping it.

Adventurers were capricious and liked new things. They held no interest in mass producing things that were already practically complete. Always moving to the next, new, different, stronger, better thing. Of course, that was beneficial for innovation, but it was irritating for military people like Mizufa. Despite its use and application in the current location and circumstances, standardised equipment was much preferred.

Despite this, as she was taking their unwanted inventions, she had no intention of requesting such luxuries. She could only request a minimum of maintenance and if push came to shove, she knew various bribes would be needed too.

Adventurers were childish, and weak to greed.

"Report, the Nighshade Servants status?"

"Squad 1 has returned, Squads 2 and 3 are progressing from Boxurt to Redstone, 4 is backup, Squad 5 is currently guarding our surroundings, Squads 6 and 7 stand relieved."

"Understood. That's fine. Onwards, remain on guard."

Mizufa ordered the two Arcane Mancers in the cockpit, two floors down.

"The Nighshade Servants on reconnaissance appear to have hit upon the upper parts of the Fevae River."

"Hmm."

Mizufa turned her gaze to the topographic map stuck to the wall.

The vehicle didn't shake much so there were various maps, documents and files around. Mizufa was currently in command, and despite her love of soaking her sabre in blood, she was still a highly ranked general and knew her weapons well.

"Fevae River hmm, this map..."

Whilst scanning over the small notes, she licked her well formed lips and narrowed her eyes. The black mark of three claws marked it as a wyvern habitat.

They were at the perfect level, and the neighbouring residential areas kept *just* the right amount of check on them.

Mizufa's head was filled with bustling strategies.

A dream of the scent of blood, the red of a red spider lily.

However kind adventurers were, Mizufa felt no sense of duty to follow that. No matter Yamato was facing chaos. The Holy Empire of Westelande was the only ruling organisation that had a blood connection with the Westelande Imperial Dynasty to this day.

The League of Freedom Cities Eastal were traitors.

Of course, Mizufa didn't believe this, a just cause was good to have. Military personnel like Mizufa rose in the world on their exploits. So originally, in the nobility of Westelande, prone towards elegance and entertainment, their rank was low. They had to take the chances they got.

And Mizufa knew bloomed above her blood, thanks to her merits.

No, she was drunk on blood. Whether she was searching for merits, or the scent of blood, Mizufa herself didn't know anymore.

“Wyverns then... It's a lot for just the servants but hmm. Ku ku ku, The Odysseia Knights should be close by.”

Silence reigned within the vehicle.

“Give subjugation orders to the Nightshade Servants, notify the Sergeants.”

That communication was passed immediately with the command crystal to the following vehicles.

In those vehicles lay over a hundred people of the land, in cramped, coffin like beds with black masks on and in a false sleep. Connected to the beds by sockets, the summoners orb glittered ominously.

This orb would summon projections of the users will as Nightshade Servants.

It was equivalent to giving the people of the land another body. Whilst their bodies lay in these beds, they obtained bodies of monsters they could move freely. Nightshade Servants were summoned at the same level as their summoner but the maximum limit of 45 hadn't been broken.

To adventurers, it was worthless for fighting, in fact, the adventurers who had handed it over had done so easily, as if it were a joke item.

But Mizufa said differently.

This item gave people of the land temporary immortality.

Even if they were destroyed, the person lying in the bed wouldn't be damaged. And the experience went to the summoner, that is to say, the people of the land could receive it.

It was a joke like, earth shattering magic item, that you couldn't enter without humour.

“After ten minutes, begin administering the EXP Pots.”

The potions doubled the rate experience was gained. Taking them orally was inefficient, a direct injection gave a greater burden on the recipient but their effectiveness rose markedly.

“Lord Kazuhiko has requested we stop the inhumane treatment?”

“Do I care? What a hypocrite, he's an adventurer, we're people of the land. What do the deathless know about war, those who scatter life do, right?”

Mizufa laughed, a dark laugh.

Mizufa's life didn't cause the scattering, but weapons needed to harvest even more flowers.

“The vanguard squad has encountered enemies.”

A strained operator reported in a low voice.

Without panicking, Mizufa had waited for the follow up report confirming wyverns.

Unconsciously, her lips twitched upwards and she gently stroked the hilt of her sword.

“Vanguard squad, attack! Drive the wyverns from the mountains! Keep for ranged magic attacks in mind and herd them into the town. Do that and those death-seekers from Odyssea will help! It's time to make a profit.”

They'd found a good hunting ground. The adventurers might call it power levelling, but to Mizufa, it was a drill. To temper weapons, they needed to get hot and fired up, then be sharpened in blood.

“We're in full battle, 6, 7 and five of the area defence, do not enter the battlefield!”

“How is the surrounding guard?”

“Tell Londark to arrange our defences. Ah, no, better make it a request.”

“Contacting Lord Londark, the speaking tube.”

Instructions were relayed to the adventurer following them, drawn by phantom steeds.

“...Do you attach ‘Lord’ to Londark as well because he’s an adventurer?”

The operator turned to Mizufa’s murmuring.

The female general whet her throat with wine and curved her lips.

“It doesn’t matter, I was talking to myself.”

A dirty job on the extremities of the operation was suitable for the defeated man who’d washed in from Susukino, she could even think of it as gratitude.

Everyone had their roles.

Under Mizufa’s good humoured smile and command, The Holy Empire of Westelande’s secret force moved speedily to the centre of Yamato.

Mizufa’s dream Red Night would oddly include where Minori and the others were headed, the town of Safiel but Mizufa herself didn’t know the meaning of that yet.

4

Serara and the others had brought the luggage to the Boxurt Mountain Fortress and placed it there, as the merchants had requested, then they continued onwards, with Dariella riding the carriage too.

After losing a cart, the merchants didn’t have the energy to spare to have her ride too. Whilst the highway was relatively safe, this was for people used to travelling and adventurers, a single, female person of the land couldn’t feel at ease travelling alone that far.

So it was settled that she would accompany the party to her current destination, Safiel.

Safiel was one of the party’s destinations too.

Going west from Akiba, it was a relatively prosperous town on the highway, they planned to ease the fatigue of travel before departing.

The carriage progressed along damp and mossy paved paths, along an road of red clay that looked easy to slip on and a road passing over a ridge, hidden under an arch of deep greenery. It was slow. On these mountain roads, no matter how strong the Pale Horses were, they weren’t that much help. If they galloped at full speed, they’d easily get into an accident.

The party slowly meandered onwards, at the same pace a person would walk at.

Serara strained her ears to listen to the flute-like bird song that was coming from somewhere, she looked at Minori next to her and she looked like she was searching for the birds too. Wolf was looking around restlessly, and in his gaze, birds with blue wings and a yellow line, about the size of a bread roll let out another cry.

Happy at the discovery, she pulled on Minori's sleeve to tell her and it looked like she saw them too. They exchanged a glance and smiled at each other.

Thanks to that, Serara was considerably relaxed.

The Odyssey Knights were at the Mountain Fortress they passed through too.

According to Dariella, they weren't a particularly rare sight around this area of Yamato. They were a target of respect for protecting the people of the land's villages and towns. They were severe, and a somehow gloomy group but if they were called courteous and their equipment was that of righteous knights, Serara could see that being the case.

Minori and Tohya also seemed to dislike them.

Since passing them on the mountain road, they'd felt the atmosphere tingle. It had been several hours since then, and Serara felt they had to thank the bluebirds for relaxing the atmosphere.

Originally they had planned to ask to spend the night at the fortress, it being equipped with lodgings for travellers.

However, after spending a night on the plateau, they had passed the fortress at high noon, so they'd lost the chance.

"Minori-chan, are we camping tonight as well?"

"We are, there aren't many inn-towns around here."

"And tomorrow?"

"We'll definitely leave early and carry on to Fuji. Then we can stay the night."

"Right, we'll do that."

Serara smiled widely and agreed.

She'd been able to check that the trip was going as she'd imagined, and Minori was happy she hadn't overlooked anything in the area.

The mountain road finally ended as it gradually grew wider. There was still an incline, but it was gentler and the thick forest turned into a copse. The visibility was less obstructed, so Mount Fuji was clearly visible. Serara didn't know what it was called in this world, but she was deeply familiar with Japan's number one, snow-capped mountain.

"It's Mount Fuji."

"Ah, you're right, it's Sacred Mountain Fuji."

Tohya and Rundelhaus raised their voices in excitement.

Serara herself was somewhat excited. Living in Japan you'd see it more than once a month on WebTV weather forecasts, and it was actually visible from where Serara lived if the weather was good. It wasn't that much of a curiosity that she'd make noise about it, and if you thought about it, this wasn't their world, so it wasn't the real Mount Fuji.

Even so, it felt like a somehow special mountain, maybe it was because she was Japanese. She didn't really understand it but Serara had nodded to Isuzu's words of "It's the feeling of a journey!" and really did think it felt like that.

As it became early afternoon the sounds of the base were carried to them on the wind, they had finally reached the coast. It wasn't a sandy beach, it was covered in pebbles about the size of Serara's little finger, but even so, the blue-grey sea was there.

The sea was calm, and they could see several boats floating there.

Maybe they were fishermen of the people of the land.

"It's like Choushi."

"But the coast seems harsher here."

Serara and Minori shared their impressions and frantically began looking for Sahuagin.

Of course, thankfully there weren't any of those monsters, and the two of them smiled at each other.

"Now that we've come this far, Safiel is only a little further."

"Have you stayed there before, Dariella-san?"

"Yes, it's on my way home, so I've stayed several times."

"We'll reach there tomorrow."

"If we hurried we could reach it in the night..."

Serara and the others all shook their heads at Minori's words.

Pushing themselves was forbidden. This was another lesson they had learnt on their journey.

However, that being the case, they had to camp tonight. Serara looked up at the heavens. The wind seemed strong, but it was clearing the skies, and it didn't appear like it would turn bad. So there wasn't much difficulty in camping, the shoreline was a little scary, so they should go further in land and found a copse of trees. Just from looking around there were several that would work as windbreaks.

Despite the road they'd been travelling on along the coast was level and easy to walk on, and had many places you could camp, they had hustled around and it was already evening.

"I should make dinner then..."

Serara's thoughts swirled in her head.

She'd volunteered for dinner duty.

Cooking on the road was always difficult.

Before they'd left, she'd learnt from Nyanta but now that it was the real thing, she couldn't make even half the things she wanted to.

Outside without even a chopping board, the circumstances were just too different.

She felt sorry for only being able to make disappointing food.

In actual fact, her worries were unfounded. For people of the land, 'travel provisions' were hard and heavy bread and watered wine or mead.

The party's food, soups and okonomiyaki were part of the adventurer's culture, and not popular in this world. Even what Serara had learnt from Nyanta as outdoor cooking was what skilled chefs had done to pass the time in their new life after the catastrophe, so it was a little off from common sense.

"Maybe pasta soup."

Serara mumbled, having gone red.

"If I use the pot I bought on Gluttony Street and make a soup base and add some dried meat, then put in the leaf shaped pasta, it should be filling. It might be a little sour afterwards, but some apple mayo-salad should make that better."

"One plate, it really looks like I'm cutting corners..."

"That's not true, warm soup is delicious."

Minori encouraged her from by her side.

Serara smiled slightly in shame. She wanted to work hard like Nyanta and be able to gauge how much she'd need and be able to feed a stadium, but without a magic bag, she was limited to the ingredients and seasonings she could carry, and outside with no place to prepare food, and having to manage the heat source, it took a lot of work.

When she tried to do something a little complicated, she simply burst in failure. With the Newlywed's Apron (with Nyanta-san appliqué) she couldn't use her housekeeper sub-class as an excuse either.

"You all seem to get on well."

Dariella spoke with a gentle expression to Serara and Minori who had comforted her when troubled.

“We’re friends after all.”

“It’s because we’re friends!”

Isuzu called back along with Minori’s answer from where she was walking ahead.

“Are you, in the same guild?”

“No, I’m in a different one.”

Serara answered, but her chest was filled with the feelings of friendship.

“Serara-chan is part of the Crescent Moon Alliance, we’re part of Log Horizon.

“Ah, and I’m a travelling vampire with no guild.”

Roe2 joined in the conversation too from the driver’s seat.

“If you’ll pardon my curiosity, why are you all going to Minami?”

“We’re not. We’re stopping on the way over in the Redstone Mountains to hunt wyverns.”

Tohya answered her question.

“Well, wyverns...? They can sometimes come down to the village.”

“Can they, Minori-chan?”

“Shiroe-san said that happens sometimes.”

Serara cocked her head in puzzlement.

According to Minori’s sketch, she’d thought of them as monsters like planes with limbs. Flying in the sky, maybe they did come down to human habitation.

“And afterwards, we’re doing a tour.”

Isuzu had fallen back from the front at some point and spoke up.

“A tour?”

“What’s that?”

“That’s right, you haven’t seen either, Roe2-san.”

Serara began wondering how to explain it and looked to Isuzu for help.

Isuzu hugged the spear she was using instead of a walking stick to her chest and mimed playing the lute. Saying “It’s a travelling performance.” with one eye closed.

“Isuzu-san is a bard.”

“Ehehehe. Though I’m still only a beginner.”

“So with Isuzu in the centre, we’re playing music in villages and towns.”

“Ah, music?”

Possibly pleased from the admiration in Dariella’s voice, she span lightly as she kept stepping forwards.

“Though I look like this, I’m known as the Rock ‘n’ Roller in Akiba’s Bloom Hall.”

“Rock ‘n’ Roller?”

“Umm, umm... it’s...”

“It’s?”

In response to Roe2’s dubious question, Serara answered with.

“It feels cool.”

Minori had been restraining her laughter, but couldn’t hold up to that, Serara started protesting at her. She’d thought the explanation might be a little strange herself, and couldn’t stop blushing.

It was Isuzu’s fault for using a phrase like Rok ‘n; Roller that wasn’t really heard recently and she couldn’t explain. Puffing out her cheeks, Serara decided that was right and looked at Isuzu, full of conviction, but she didn’t notice because she was rolling her shoulders and stroking down from above, taking a ‘Rock ‘n’ Roller♪” pose.

The only one sympathetic to her was Wolf, gambolling around her feet.

“I’ve an interest in music.”

“Yes, it’s amazing.”

Roe2 and Dariella appraised her and Isuzu was in a good mood.

“Then, then, tomorrow evening, we’ll play in Safiel, so come and watch please.”

“We’ll play?”

“Hey, Minori, it’s fine, right?”

Isuzu braced herself and asked Minori.

They'd planned to stay two nights at Safiel, and after recovering their energy, finally push through to the Redstone Mountains. In Boxurt, even though it was a mountainous district, it was still a route used for trading, so they could pass through. In the Redstone Mountains though, there was only hunting, so at the worst, there might be no road and they'd have to travel on foot through the hills and fields.

"I'll sing with Isuzu-san too."

Serara joined in too, and Minori nodded without worry.

"Okay, that's fine. We'll take it a little slow in Safiel."

With those words at their back, they kept going a little further until dusk.

5

The concert they announced that night was the best.

Everything seemed to sparkle, to be warm, with Isuzu's heart pounding in her chest, everything was wonderful, even the dirty walls and the clumsy innkeeper.

Her voice was more carefree than usual and An Die Freude was loyal to her.

The notes progressed along the top of the stave like putting on matching hats, in chorus with the rhythm that Tohya beat out. Serara's portable organ gave a surprisingly extensive accompaniment, perhaps because of the white wolf cub pushing frantically at the pump. Even the song where she left the lute with Minori was fun.

There were mistakes, but they all vanished in the happiness like the foaming waves of the sea. At any rate, it was the best.

Roe2's eyes were wide, and she clapped until her hands were raw, and Dariella discreetly complimented them. And above all, they got a standing ovation from the gathered people of the land, it was more than a bard could ask for.

She didn't know how many times she'd sighed happily, but Isuzu relished the feeling of being so happy she could burst.

"Another, another."

"Miss Isuzu, please go to far."

"I won't."

"I've got it, I've got it."

Rundelhous spoke out, sitting in a chair terrace café at the back of the inn as Isuzu sat her slender body in a large chair. Rundelhous looked like he was sparkling more than usual, not just because of carelessly drinking alcoholic drinks because of the concert.

It was already deep into the night.

The moon was high in the sky and a cold breeze was blowing.

Safiel had a large tavern, The Noble Mountain's Snowdrop, it faced onto the main street and had a large terrace of seating. For the concert, all of the shutters were thrown wide and it was packed out with people even looking in from outside the building. The noise and excitement still lingered inside like embers, reaching Isuzu's ears.

That said, the tides of that enthusiasm were turning.

It had already been five hours since the sun had set, Minori and Serara in particular had raised the white flag and retreated to the room they were borrowing.

After regretfully going back to the customer seating, Isuzu had drunk the alcohol she was offered by the people of the town and been escorted to the cool back yard.

"Here, Miss Isuzu."

"Thanks."

In a slightly reflective mood, Isuzu took a mouthful of the well water that Rundelhous had given her. It was still March so the nights were early, and the well water of this town to the south of Sacred Mountain Fuji was extraordinarily cold, making her head hurt.

"Fu fu fu fu. Fu fu fu fuuu."

Isuzu happily lay the top half of her body on the wooden table. The wood was cool against her cheeks, but it was a comfortable temperature against her flushed body. With Rundelhous drawing up another chair and sitting nearby, it was a nice mood.

With her upper body still on the table, Isuzu looked over the yard.

Unlike Akiba, even though this was called a town, it wasn't crowded with residences. There were ruins that were used but they could be counted in Safiel and were limited to places like The Noble Mountain's Snowdrop.

The rest were nearly all single story wooden bungalows, and there were large spaces between the houses. They had hedged off garden things, but they were more like vegetable gardens and copses in size.

This was one of those, a space of untended wild flowers and a vegetable garden, with a large well, a cattle pen and a grove of trees. The orange light leaking through the open back door and the moonlight raining down from the heavens gently illuminated the dark nature of the night.

She wasn't tired, she just closed her eyes a little and her heart was exhilarated by the spinning of the world. She didn't feel as cold as she thought she would, perhaps because the wind was weak, cracking open her eyes, Rundelhous was reflected there, brushing hair hair away from her forehead, wrapped in a cloak and sitting up-wind from her.

Their gazes met and Isuzu suddenly felt embarrassed.

Normally it would be nothing, but sometimes this mood appeared. It was probably the puppy's magic power. Pretending she hadn't noticed, she lightly kicked his chair away with the tips of her toes.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing?"

"Is that so."

"Yeah, it is."

"It was a good performance today."

When the concert's at an end—.

An old fashioned phrase passed her lips.

The festival was over, the concert at an end, all of the passion packed into Isuzu's body came undone in the night. It was a heartrending feeling of loneliness but it wasn't unpleasant. Today's concert was great, but it was over. All concerts ended. That was certainly lonely but it was the interval to start the next.

She could hear Rundelhous' gentle breathing.

Isuzu was satisfied, her stomach and chest were full.

"Today too, right."

"Yeah, today too."

Rundelhous' voice echoed with a wry smile and Isuzu once again closed her eyes. She spread her arms across the table, it's size made it look like a wood base, thinking of that, her smile chipped slightly and she moved her fingers.

Today was over, so tomorrow would come.

The concert was over, so she could play the next.

"Miss Isuzu, you really like music, don't you."

"I love it."

“But you still won’t become a pro musician? Even though you’re particular about the tour?”

“Yeah, you see.”

Isuzu lifted her body and let out a satisfied sigh, looking at Rundelhous.

The light leaked from the windows and added a border of light to his blond hair.

Facing a puzzled Rundelhous, Isuzu slowly began speaking.

“My dad. I might have said, but he’s a pro musician. He did studio music, how should I explain it... Umm, a pro among pros might work. To help many people with music, he played at recording places.”

“Hmm, so you’re so skilled because of your father and his teaching.”

“Ahahahaha, no way, that’s not it. Dad is, hmm, a free man, a rock ‘n’ roller. He looks good, has long hair and wears stuff like leather jackets, and his legs are thin! We live in the countryside now, but even there he’s fairly famous. There are fans, and old fans.”

Isuzu took another mouthful of water.

It wasn’t something she normally talked about. A musician father. It was like a shoujo manga’s setting but Isuzu didn’t think it was that good. In other words, it was the same as her father being away. In elementary school, she was teased about it. The ‘difference in their surroundings’ was itself a cause of friction. Or at least, that was the common sense of the world she was born and raised in.

However, in this world, on a night with a concert containing all the secrets, Isuzu’s prideful different dimension puppy had asked to hear it. There was no need to stop these thoughts that she always felt.

“As a child, I was so proud of him, like those stories of heroes when you’re young? He told me about how someone worked and bought a beat up van and filled it with musical instruments, and went on a tour. He went on a tour too. He left high school and did that for so long. He was a band child, so when he left school his part time work was in live-houses, and when he ran out of money he’d work again and travel everywhere from Tokyo.”

“Like us now?”

“Yeah, exactly! Just like us!”

To Isuzu’s childish yearning, he was a hero.

“Back when he wasn’t famous yet, even if he did concerts he didn’t make much money, so he did a lot of part time work.”

“What’s that.”

“Umm, like bar-tending or being a guardsman.”

“Hmm.”

“But, going on journeys, he had to take long breaks from the work, so he had to resign. He resigned and went on journeys.”

“A challenge he risked his life on.”

“Eh?”

Is that so? Rundelhaus’ words made it sound like a cool, militaristic deed. Isuzu wanted to say wasn’t, that he wasn’t that cool of a person... But it was hard for her to say that it wasn’t a challenge he risked his life on.

So she shrugged her shoulders and continued on.

“Geez, he was always going on about stupid stories. Like how popular he was in elementary school, how many girlfriends he had, how many times he went to live houses and got a good looking, long-legged girlfriend. Drinking booze and making a noise, eating ramen and rushing down the roads at night. He was proud of being poor, like he told me about taking out a loan to buy a fender, and breaking it in a fortnight. About taking a car down to the beach with his friends and stalling in the sand. Like buying oden at the convenience store and hiding from the rain under a bridge to eat it...”

Thanks to these stories, Isuzu would never forget her father’s face.

With a proud grin on her face, Isuzu would push her father away saying “That’s creepy, go away.” but she was really just jealous.

He seemed happy. If she were to put it into words, it would be that ‘special youth’. He’d lived his youth, and even now was running on the edge. To a normal schoolgirl like Isuzu, it could only be called a heroic tale.

An unattainable fairy tale.

“That sounds like fun.”

“No, not at all! It’s about how he’s an idiot.”

She got embarrassed and denied it, but even she had noticed it.

It was a story she was proud of.

He was frivolous, long haired, optimistic and a bad father, but she was proud of him even if she didn’t want to admit it.

“He didn’t have much money, and he’d go to live-houses, um, like the tavern today, he’d go to taverns and play music and get some money and sleep in the live-houses waiting rooms. Different from us, it was a male bonding trip, so they’d quickly get into fights. About like what kind of girl they preferred? It was stupid. Ku fu fu fu fu, but, then they’d not be able to

do the next concert, so they made up and got in the van... got in the car, and went to a different town.”

“Right.”

Just to show he was listening, Rundelhaus nodded. Put at ease by that, Isuzu continued talking.

“Dad was a rock ‘n’ roller like that and had his major debut.”

“What’s a major debut?”

“He had his music distributed by a record company — Ah, umm, I mean.”

Isuzu couldn’t find the words to explain and completely stopped.

“In other words, he became a famous musician. Enough that his songs were played in town.”

Isuzu looked at her explanation and thought.

“It’s not a lie, right?”

In a world where they called things like “There’s a goblin swinging an axe!” It was very difficult to explain record companies, web stores and downloadable music. She wasn’t Minori.

But she probably got the nuance across.

Isuzu’s father was a musician.

Isuzu knew how people would react.

“That’s amazing.”

“It is, looking at it like that. Relatively... but.”

The moonlight was a pallid blue, the night was serene and enveloped Isuzu and Rundelhaus.

“A major debut is amazing, but the world were were in, has lots of amazing people like that. Every year, over a hundred people have a major debut. Being famous just once is no good. There are lots of people who don’t sell well. Dad was one of those.”

Her sigh ended without starting.

“So dad became a studio musician. It wasn’t a major route, but he always wanted to. I never heard that, but that’s what I think.”

Even her mischievous father, her talented father, couldn't stay in the light. He didn't look bad, but to Isuzu, it was nothing but bad, there was no way she could do something her father couldn't.

"I really think, that because you have the blood of your father, you'll have a major debut."

"No, major debuts are for pros."

"But, at today's concert, I was happy to hear your song. Today's song was better than always, gentle and felt like it permeated you. Aren't you happy to sing?"

"You see, I."

She was lost for words.

"Compared to my dad, I'm not like that. I mean, of course, I like the lute, I love it, and I love singing too. But I wonder when I compare it to dad, that weirdo that slept with his guitar... And anyway, I've got no talent."

"..."

"Dad... said that."

Rundelhous' presence was like a rebuke. She understood what he wanted to say. It probably looked like she was trying to escape. But, Isuzu had a point. Music wasn't something ordinary people could do. You couldn't become a pro just from wanting to.

Even talented people had to put in a lot of effort to stand on the start line. Her father couldn't become a star after all.

Music was a wonderful thing, but the road was long and hard. She had heard her father's troubles and complaints. It wasn't something that could be easily guaranteed.

"But you know, I love music."

To forcibly change the mood, she made her voice cheery.

"Yeah."

"And today, was fun. Everyone was happy, and the old guys, even though we're like this, treated us to a feast, they praised us and praised us, I'll get conceited."

"I love your songs too."

"It's because you said in the beginning. That I was interested in playing in front of everyone, and that I could suggest a tour like this. I'm... nothing special. But, I could play like this."

"Your songs are wonderful. Everyone knows that. The one who doesn't is you."

Rundelhous interrupted her with a slightly angry expression.

His strained expression looked more grown up than usual.

Scared of that, Isuzu was about to say “Again and again, you’re kind, Rudy.” but Rundelhou’s extended finger stemmed her words.

“Instruments, songs, performance... sound, scales — the forty two is the forty two.”

“Eh?”

“The forty two.”

“Music.”

“What do you mean, Rudy?”

A long time had passed, and Rundelhou’s too-kind smile was on his face, piercing Isuzu’s chest. With that expression, she just forgot his slightly lowered finger and could only stare motionlessly at him.

“Since becoming an adventurer, I’ve understood several things. Adventurers have the blessing of the soul of language, right? Adventurers can’t speak the language of the people of the land. They can only grasp the meaning and say words that the people of the land can understand. That’s the power of magic, the blessing of translation.”

Isuzu nodded without understanding the meaning.

She didn’t even slightly understand what Rundelhou was saying.

“For people of the land, Music and The Forty Two are the same word.”

He was talking about the automatic translation feature, she understood that, but she didn’t understand what he wanted to say, she tilted her head with a vague uneasiness.

“To us, there are only forty two songs. In this world, there are only that many songs. Our ancestors couldn’t make songs other than that, and we can’t make new songs... So Isuzu, your songs, that make us cry in happiness, all those songs, are important, they make us happy, and we really love them.”

Chapter 4 – Crimson Night

1

“Haah... Eh?”

Letting out a wordless sigh, Isuzu listened as if it were someone else’s problem.

She didn’t -really- understand what Rundelhous was saying.

“That’s all we have. As music. Of course, we love the familiar melodies passed down from the past, but we have no other music. It was like that when I was born. And probably far before that. Then we lived like it was only natural, holding no questions of it.”

“Rudy.”

“Then you adventurers appeared and lots of things happened, terrifying, sad things, but at the same time, so many wonderful things. Flavour was found in cooking, the town markets overflowed with goods we’d never even seen or heard of, and music that made our hearts want to scream was born.”

“But that’s.”

“And you adventurers, you Isuzu, gave that gift as if it were nothing. Playing without distinction for adventurers or people of the land. Do you remember? In Bloom Hall. Their waitresses are all passionate, put they change at fixed intervals? Waiting at Bloom Hall is a popular job among people of the land. So they change at fixed intervals. Do you know how many young elves go to Bloom Hall, gripping tips? They’re travelling bards. They learn new songs at Bloom Hall, frantically memorising them, and then spread them over Yamato.”

Isuzu herself noticed how shaken her expression was.

Her fists, gripped tight on her lap shook, her nails biting into her palms was a distant sense of reality.

Her eyes and ears drank in Rundelhous’ words as she was forced to understand.

“Do you remember? The bars and inns we’ve been in since leaving. With you just announcing a little song, everyone is so happy they’re moved to tears? They’re truly happy. Bright and boisterous songs they’ve never heard before. Songs that lighten the mood and make them rush and dance. Or songs that make them want to be close to their loved ones, to give open thanks to familiar people. We had never heard them before. You’re a hero for bringing them to us. The words thank you are clumsy. They’re too simple and don’t show just how grateful we are. But, everyone is truly happy.”

“Ah— Uh... Rudy.”

Isuzu’s tears dripped forth.

Her feelings were a maelstrom, and she couldn't speak.

Of course, she was happy to be wanted, and she felt that if she could be praised, it would become her speciality. But that was just a small part of the entirety.

The feelings of wanting to deny it were much greater.

She felt guilty for them being moved so much by the work of an amateur like her. Because of those feelings, she wasn't serious at all. Naturally, she loved music. She sang until her voice was hoarse, and strummed the lute until her arms gave in. But she didn't feel that it was even with the feelings of gratitude held by the people of the land.

She felt it was awful.

It was impossible to have only forty two songs from birth.

That kind of world was impossible.

If it was, then what could they do on lonely nights. Or when congratulating a friend. When they let loose happiness, or when they felt inferior.

Without songs, how could they keep living?

Isuzu was just having fun and playing concerts again and again. Playing songs people had never heard, songs that changed people's lives, that changed everything, she hadn't a single fragment of the resolve or mettle for those things.

"But I—"

She was lost for words.

With everything swelling and hardening in her chest, she didn't know what to say, her welling tears pushed at her back, and only that came out. Rundelhou calmly held her gaze.

"I'm a fake."

She didn't mean to.

Up until now she had had no idea the people of the land held those kind of feelings.

Isuzu let out a miserable sigh at not being able to speak.

She knew her fists were shaking awfully.

"My— no, the songs I sing are from my world. "

"But, we people of the land truly are happy."

Isuzu didn't mean to do that.

She didn't mean to gift such outrageous, exaggerated things.

They were just nostalgic, familiar songs from her father's collection that she sang.

Rudy was grateful to her father's things, not Isuzu.

In other words, Isuzu was just an amateur, a copy band.

The embarrassment and guilt didn't stop her tears. On the contrary, they flowed more and more. She understood that she'd deceived the crowds until now. She'd grown complacent on other's songs, and been flattered into making merry.

She'd not even imagined, but it was obvious. It was like she was stealing the songs and hard work of the singers she loved so much and looking like it was hers. To people that heard it for the first time it was like it was Isuzu's song and made them grateful.

And this world was blank like Isuzu never imagined.

A world that until now had only had forty two songs.

Her chest tightened and her lips quivered.

That was just a dirty thief's act.

Isuzu had vainly dirtied this pure white world of songs.

"But I'm... an amateur... a copy band... so it's not."

She cried pitifully until her sniffing nose began to hurt.

Her weak nose sniffing sounded.

She wanted to apologise, just earnestly apologise.

But she couldn't at all think of how to.

She had done something that couldn't be undone.

"Miss Isuzu."

"But, I didn't, I didn't mean to lie."

"Isuzu."

His strong tone surprised Isuzu and calmed her down as she raised her gaze.

In front of her was Rundelhous.

The light spilling from the windows illuminated his soft blond hair as it swayed in the night breeze.

His normal joking expression had subsided, and he looked at Isuzu. His thoughtful eyes looked straight at her. And in the will and compassion in them, Isuzu's body shone and time was still.

He was more awe-inspiring than ever to her.

Suddenly, Isuzu noticed something.

Rundelhous was a year older than her.

“People of the land sometimes gather in the Guild Hall in Akiba.”

“Heuh?”

Blocked by tears and snot, Isuzu could only respond miserably.

“The number of people of the land in Akiba has been gradually increasing. Luxury, security, with the wealth of things Akiba has, it's a place even the people of the land yearn for. Not just the singers from earlier, the blacksmiths, tailors, chefs, and even the assistants and maids come to Akiba. If they spend a few months in Akiba, they can learn things they couldn't learn even if they studied for their entire lives in other cities. And can become many things.”

“Like you, Rudy.”

“Yeah, that's right, I became an adventurer. There are many things they want to become.”

Rundelhous answered gently to Isuzu's question, hoarse from crying before continuing.

“But it's exceptionally difficult for people of the land to like in Akiba. You adventurers are kind, and aren't unreasonable. Looking at it impartially, we're like neighbours, but you can't deny there are differences. Lots of things differ, our worries and our troubles. To discuss those things, we gather.”

“So that's what it is.”

As if crying, Isuzu answered.

If he were to say that, there were many things she could understand. In a week, Rundelhous would go out once or twice in the afternoon. He wasn't going on adventures or shopping, she didn't know where he was going, but it was to talk with the people of the land.

“There's the official organisation that sent the counsellor from Watermaple Mansion. Even so, about ten people split off and just talked things over whilst eating. I live as an adventurer in Log Horizon's guild house so there's lots of things I can advise on. It's that kind of gathering, but don't you think there are lots of things after the discussion of worries?”

Isuzu shook her head like a child.

She felt like Rundelhous had gone far away, that she was forlorn and didn't know anything.

“This is amazing, wonderful! We talk about things like that.”

Rundelhous proclaimed strongly, with a proud smile.

Isuzu hadn't followed the conversation and Rundelhous continued talking like he was persuading.

“Do you know how you can double your money? Do you know how to gather lots of grain for flour? Did you know if you spray strong black rose tea on tomatoes then it drives away the insects? About the fishing road you don't have to bait, and stain resistant clothes? There are massive amounts of new things. It's a wonderful town. And the luxury isn't hidden by the adventurers. Of course, it's hard for people of the land to live there, but it's also lucky. Something happens every day. What wasn't possible yesterday might be today. Tomorrow is a different day from today. Those words mean exactly what they say in Akiba. And your songs are one of those shining things.”

Isuzu couldn't say anything.

She could just stare at Rundelhous' smile, tears continuing to roll down her cheeks. His words had greatly shaken her.

His encouraging gaze shook something inside that even she didn't notice. An unknown passionate strength of character was born inside her, confusing her.

Isuzu though Rundelhous was an amazing friend.

That was because he'd clearly said he wanted to become an adventurer. That friend, just a little older than Isuzu, on the boundary between boy and young man, she respected his surety of the future. It wasn't about results, she strongly felt to declare that. A country school girl wasn't complete, because he held that firmness of character.

Whilst reciting about puppies and walks, with that alone, Isuzu felt she couldn't compare. She knew that her carefree, optimistic friend was actually noble and proud.

But it wasn't just Rundelhous.

Probably all of the people of the land gathered in Akiba were the same.

They had something they wanted to become, Isuzu was completely different, it was a shining town that could grant concrete dreams. No, maybe even all that those that lived in this world, the people of the land dreamed and resolved for.

They were said to be so much weaker than adventurers, but their words, their hearts had overwhelmed her.

For them, to have an irresponsible school girl sing songs with no dream for the future, Isuzu felt deeply shameful.

Isuzu sang of dreams, hope and love. Of a bright tomorrow, anti-establishmentism, motorways and Snoopy. Songs with no deep thought. She noticed there was no serious thought or meaning behind the lyrics.

She was so ashamed she couldn't even say, she felt pathetic.

That realisation shocked her. She said she loved music but hadn't thought of those meanings. Even though she showed dreams to the people of the land.

She felt a strong inferiority and feelings of guilt.

It was the first time she'd felt she was so pathetic.

Large tears flowed endlessly like a child.

And within the sadness, the biggest thing was that she loved music. Even though she felt she'd just committed a horrible mistake, song reverberated inside her.

"Rudy."

"What is it, Miss Isuzu?"

"I... want to be alone."

"..."

He was speechless.

Isuzu's eyes, bright red from tears looked at him.

Certainly, if she hadn't said anything, he would stay with her. Giving words of comfort and encouragement. But, they weren't too sincere. Isuzu needed time alone, and it had to be here, tonight.

The inferiority, the guilt, the shame and the anguish, they were all Isuzu's. To Isuzu who had stolen music, that was a natural punishment, and she wanted to be alone with that pain.

Even if that weren't the case, Rundelhous had given her a lot.

"Go back to your room, I need to be alone."

"..."

Rundelhous anxiously looked at her.

She noticed but stubbornly refused to meet his gaze.

“I understand, Miss Isuzu.”

“Mm.”

Rundelhous stood there for a while, trying to say something, hesitating.

Her body stiffened in the night as she resolved to fight.

A resolution against herself, for the first serious fight in her life.

2

Tohya took a deep breath as he stepped quietly out into the morning mist, surveying his surroundings.

The whitish light of spring lit up the still cold town.

He could hear small calls from afar, the boats fishing. If he were to look around, and walk to towards the hill, there would be a group of people of the land, they were probably farming. Choushi was the same, people of the land fundamentally had extremely early mornings.

Having said that, the town certainly wasn't filled hustle and bustle.

To adventurers like Tohya it wasn't, but to people of the land, it was a chilling March morning. Just as they were using up the last reserves of fuel from the winter, people of the land closed their houses tight to try and preserve the heat inside and people moved quickly along the roads. Of course, that was because it was early, Once the temperature had risen slightly and the sun's rays invited them out, the streets would probably be overflowing with people, Safiel was a large town in the area.

Tohya laced his hands together by his head and started roaming aimlessly.

It seemed that Rundelhous was up late last night so was still asleep, and he couldn't hear a peep from the girls' room. He could have gone back to sleep, but he didn't really feel like it so stepped quietly outside to not wake anyone up.

Even in Akiba Tohya preferred spending his time outdoors rather than small rooms. On Earth he would have WebTV, mobile games, manga, a tablet and such, there was an abundance of indoor entertainment, but that wasn't so in Celdesia. As a reaction to wanting to go out in the past being selfish, he preferred being outside even more.

Tohya roamed along the main street.

The street was the highway they'd followed up to this point. Near the town the ancient asphalt remained so it was well made. It was about wide enough for two carts to pass.

In the original world, this area would have been an open urban area. The big town of Surugawan or something, he remembered Shiroe saying that. In Celdesia, it was a fairly large town of the people of the land. At the moment, the shops he was killing time by looking over were closed, but that was actually more convenient for Tohya, because he wanted to take a walk alone.

Leaving the town he greeted a person of the land and helped a little with moving their things.

He took out his sword and practised forms and swinging.

Tohya liked the town where time passed slowly. With Isuzu and everyone using up their energy in the concert, and Minori wanting to gather information, they planned to stay for at least another night.

There was plenty of time and Tohya enjoyed being alone after a while.

Having fun and being noisy with friends was good, but walking alone like this, as if to affirm his legs filled Tohya's heart with a sense of satisfaction. It wasn't a bad feeling.

Once noon passed, the area livened up, housewives putting up washing and children appeared in the main street. People of the land grilling fish at the roadside shared with him, and he looked care-freely around the town.

The main street was red clay, and continued further west.

Walking ten minutes west, the streets were broken up by fields, and finally a river appeared.

"Oh yeah, Choushi had a river too."

Tohya murmured faintly to himself.

While wondering why that was, he realised that by the river there was plenty of water, convenient for both living and farming. He'd learnt about depositional plains in classes, the flow of the river created the plains, then he clapped his hands together, realising that Safiel was a depositional plain.

He'd noticed several times while camping, but slopes were surprisingly inconvenient.

It made both camping and cooking difficult. It would probably be too much for farming. At any rate, the world had gravity, water wouldn't flow to high places, at least normally. So it was reasonable for a town to gather in the flat lands near a river.

He thought that far and murmured that classes were useful. He'd thought they were meaningless social studies, but it seemed not.

He arrived at the river bank and turned right, heading upstream.

Without any particular reason, his thoughts drifted to the memory of a woman from behind, with wheat coloured hair.

The river was quiet. Both because the sea was close, and the river was plenty wide enough, there were several small boats floating, with fishermen untying whitish bundles. It looked like netting, straining his eyes, he could see wet, jet black fish flopping around.

Tohya just walked up the path along the bank. There was a pine forest, and narrow streams like irrigation channels that were crossed with wooden bridges.

Upstream and to the right was Mount Fuji. In this world it was called Sacred Mountain Fuji.

Above halfway, it was capped in a pure white cape, it was certainly solemn looking. The surroundings weren't obstructed by other mountains, so it seemed even more beautiful.

In his sight was a boat shed, and Tohya stopped, seeing a woman's back on the pier, jutting out into the river. Tohya seemed to curse god. It was really too good.

He didn't intend to avoid it, or hide, but Tohya couldn't speak for a fairly long time.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, Tohya-san.”

As if she had noticed him as he approached the pier, Dariella turned back and smiled. Tohya greeted her, feeling uncomfortable.



He often felt like this when with this woman.

He didn't know what to talk about.

In the first place, in his life up until now, there weren't any beautiful women past twenty. Thinking back to a year ago, the only women around him were Minori, his mother, and his fifty-ish form teacher. Of course, there were classmates whose names he knew, but there weren't any of them he could say he knew.

Now, there was his sister Minori, Serara and Isuzu were a little older than him but were his friends. They formed a party around the same age, so that was obvious. He went to the West

Wind Brigade to practice fencing, and there were many girls there, and they were affectionate, but they just treated him like a child, so it was a little different.

Tetora was of course out of the question, and Akatsuki was out because she felt like an older sister. Of course, he couldn't say that to them/

If he was to go further, Maryelle and Henrietta might be close. They were a different type, but they were pretty women. But there wasn't anyone who bewildered him as Dariella did.

“Won't you sit?”

“Uhh, yeah.”

The pier was old, but it was solid and had several boxes on it.

The fishermen probably used them as seats. That was the best for fishing, but in the morning haze, Fevael River was a beautiful scene from there.

Dariella sat properly, with her knees together. Tohya stretched out his legs and sat down as if holding the edge of a box.

A faint, sweet smell was mixed in with the wind.

Tohya sat uncomfortably, not able to think of anything to talk about. He knew that this would happen if he sat next to her so he thought it was strange he still talked to her. It might be because he thought it was wrong to ignore someone you were travelling with, even if it was for a short time. But he didn't know if that was the only reason. He just found it hard to ignore her.

“You're up early, Tohya-san, are you out for a stroll?”

“Yeah. But I'm not always up early, I just happened to be today.”

“I see. The mornings are cold in this season, so futons must be heaven.”

Dariella smiled gently, giggling at her own words.

Her gently tied hair spilled over from her shoulder, swaying on her cape.

“Are you out for a morning stroll, Dariella...san?”

“I am, I naturally sleep lightly and I'm often out at this hour. If there's somewhere that allows it, that is.” Tohya grew uncomfortable and turned his gaze away but Dariella didn't seem to pay it any mind. Still smiling happily, she continued, “It's because I live on the road. I go everywhere learning and recording things. This time in the morning is precious at my destinations, I can observe many things without other people getting in the way.”

“Where do you normally live, Dariella-san?”

Tohya felt a slight discomfort at those words and questioned to interrupt them.

“If you say live, it should be around Ikoma I suppose.”

“Ikoma?”

“Further west from here. Past where you call Kyoto.”

“Ah.”

Inexperienced with geography, something came to his mind.

In his head, he had a recognition sort of like ‘Kyoto is up and to the right of Osaka?’

Tohya only knew that they were currently right between Kyoto and Osaka, on the Pacific coast. Past Kyoto would be roughly in the middle of them, at that rough estimate, Tohya felt surprised.

In the original world, Kyoto to Osaka would take around three hours. That was by bullet train. In this world it would probably take more than ten days. The Half Gaia Project may have shortened the distance, but travelling through the savage lands and countryside required a lot of effort.

But even so, what Tohya was surprised at was the proximity.

Coming on this journey, he felt that Osaka and Kyoto were closer than the original world, even with the twenty first century bullet train.

If he were to repeat the journey again, Tohya would understand the arrival. Just how to be able to arrive, how much effort it would need, Tohya understood that now. And he had the confidence he could do it.

Sitting on the bullet train for three hours and then no sense of arrival, now, Tohya could walk there on his own two feet.

“But, I live alone in a cabin in the mountains, it’s not a place many people visit, so when I want to experience the atmosphere of a town, I take a journey like this.”

“Isn’t it dangerous?”

“I’m used to it, besides, thanks to Plant Hwayden’s guarding, the roads are fairly safe now.”

That was a name he’d heard often recently, a huge, consolidated guild in western Japan. He’d heard it was similar to the Round Table Conference, an organisation that had gathered many adventurers and had Osaka as its stronghold.

“That’s a guild in Minami, right?”

“It is indeed, they’re a knight order which uses Minami as a base and protects Yamato’s peace.”

“A knight order?”

“I heard they appeared as a new knight order to maintain public order now that the Izumo Knights from the Ancients aren’t here. It’s a sign of the change from the era of the Ancients to the era of Adventurers. In fact, Plant Hwayden’s achievements are huge.”

Tohya could see how it would seem so to a person of the land and agreed, asking.

“What are their achievements?”

“First, after all is said and done, they restored public order. They lessened the victims of monsters to the west drastically. And with new machines and flood control, we’re expecting that agriculture will become much easier.”

Tohya thought it was like Roderick Firm and 8th Shopping District.

“And since then, employment has increased. Beginning in Minami, there are lots more jobs that people of the land can earn decent wages in, and they’re happy. There’s many jobs involving looking after the adventurers. It’s a wealthy, beautiful town.”

Tohya asked if that was the case.

With a soft smile, Dariella asked.

“Tohya-san, are you perhaps uninterested?”

“That’s... not it.”

Tohya said.

He felt he’d like to see a town like that. Tohya had deeply understood that Akiba wasn’t all the world had from coming on this journey. The travelling had agreed with him more than he thought it would. He’d thought it might be more boring, or harder but the trip was fun. He wanted to go with his friends.

That was literally curiosity and interest.

He didn’t mean to go right now, and he didn’t intend to go with this woman.

“Than, when you get the chance, come to my house please.”

Dariella softly stroked Tohya’s averted head.

Her white, slender fingers passed through his hair and tickled, Tohya frowned.

“If you do, I’ll guide you and we can go out on a trip.”

Tohya replied with a shrug.

“You haven’t been looking at me for a while now.”

“That’s not true.”

Tohya sullenly answered Dariella’s teasing tone. The moment he answered, he felt like he’d been lured in. That his childish stubbornness was seen through. Knowing that, he felt his frown deepen.

“Do you hate me, Tohya-san?”

“I hate that.”

It was like words had a tail, he thought.

The tail tied words together and he had to check before he spoke. If he didn’t he’d speak about things he didn’t mean to. He’d learnt that in his wheelchair, but it was like he gave into temptation.

Tohya felt the tail drag his next words out of him.”

“Because you’re always smiling.”

Dariella’s expression clouded.

Tohya regretted saying things he shouldn’t to someone he had just met, and would soon part from.

“And that is?”

He hated Dariella’s smile she used to keep up appearances.

He hated the ghost-like black eyes she smiled with.

He hated the attitude she had as she softly touched his hair.

“Even if you didn’t smile, you wouldn’t look strange.”

So Tohya himself was taken aback at the hurtful words. He was irritated more than he thought at the flaxen haired woman. He felt the outline of his own emotions in his words.

Her expression faded as if it had lost its heat, and her eyes were as he though, as if she had abandoned anything and everything. Her mouth was in a smiling crescent but no one would think her expression a smile.

Tohya saw the same expression that had stared him back in the mirror, ages ago.

It was dreadful, but much better than her expression like she was going out in her best from before.

It was better, because that was Dariella's true expression.

"That's better."

"Why would you say such a thing?"

Tohya looked away.

He hadn't meant to say it. So even he didn't know why he had. It was probably fate, or chance, he thought of those worthless reasons. It just didn't sit well with him.

Dariella's clenched fists showed a glimpse inside, that he'd gone to far.

"It's not—"

What Tohya was about to say was lost.

For in the northern sky, small but clear, he saw an ominous black silhouette.

This was the first omen of the trial approaching Safiel.