Saving
80,000
Gold
in
Another
World
for My
Retirement
Story by
FUNA
Art by
Touzai
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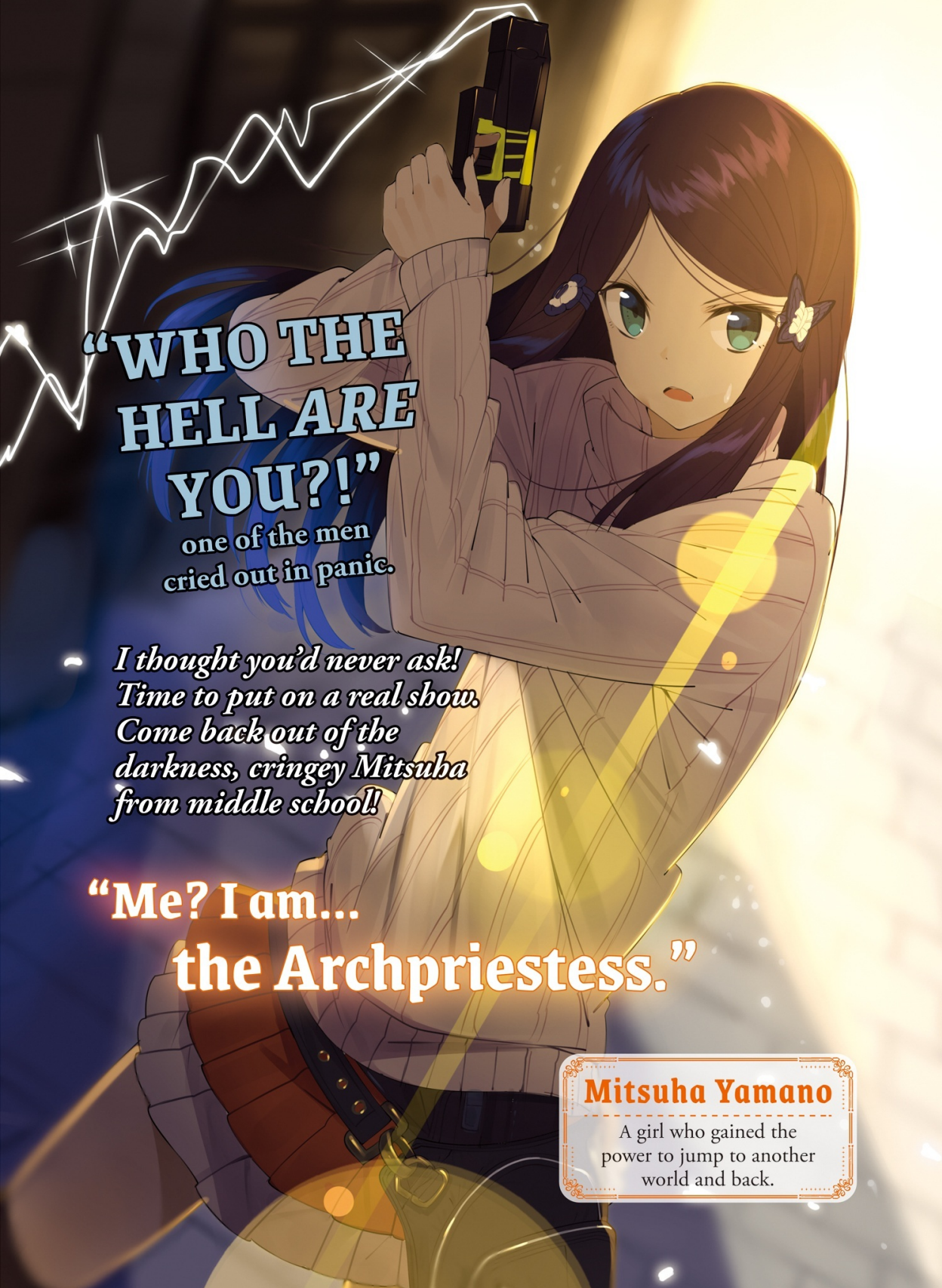
Colette
The girl who saved Mitsuha

"I'll save up those 80,000 gold coins and have a peaceful and happy retirement!"
Mitsuha Yamano
A girl who accidentally ends up in another world. She can jump between Earth and that world at will, and decides to use this power to become rich.

"It's everything you ordered. First up, the decorative short sword. The thing's new, not an antique. Antiques are fragile and blow a hole in your wallet. It comes with a sheath, so just tuck it in your belt. It won't be much good in a fight, but since you'll be usin' your guns, you ain't gonna need it."
Mm, looks about right for me. I shouldn't have a problem holding it, anyway.


"WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?!"
one of the men cried out in panic.
I thought you'd never ask! Time to put on a real show. Come back out of the darkness, cringey Mitsuha from middle school!
"Me? I am... the Archpriestess."
Mitsuha Yamano
A girl who gained the power to jump to another world and back.

"Gentlemen, it's time for war! There are twenty thousand of them and fifty-eight of us! No doubt, this is going to be a dangerous mission. Your rewards will be gold, honor, recognition, and the people's eternal gratitude.

"In war, each side claims to be the righteous one, but they're all the same. There's no justice. They fight over money and power, and the ones who suffer are always the little people. But not this time! Our mission is to defend the capital's innocents from an enemy that not only broke a treaty, but invaded the country with a horde of monsters!"

She paused. Her eyes swept across their faces before she continued.

"I say that in this fight, we ARE the true justice!"

“Mitsuha von Yamano, I bestow upon you the title of viscountess!”
SAY WHAAAAAT?!

Story by FUNA

Art by Touzai

Saving 80,000 Gold in Another World for My Retirement

1

KODANSHA

Saving 80,000 Gold in Another World for My Retirement 1

A VERTICAL Book

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KODANSHA

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Afterwords

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Chapter 1
Mitsuha Goes to Another World

The girl stood atop a steep cliff, her hands resting on the weathered wooden railing that separated her from the depths below. Her gaze was cast over the distant horizon. Oh, but don't worry─suicide was the last thing on her mind.

Her name was Mitsuha Yamano. Her straight, shoulder-length black hair framed a youthful face without a hint of makeup. Standing at merely four foot eleven, the eighteen-year-old was often mistaken for a child in middle school or, even more offensively, elementary school.

Six months ago, Mitsuha had lost her beloved family─her mother, father, and older brother─to a freak accident, leaving her without any close relatives. She had some distant ones, sure, but you could count the times they'd met on one hand, and it was likely they would never meet again.

Following the funeral and other relevant matters, Mitsuha had been left with a hefty sum of inheritance and insurance money, and along with it, no shortage of enemies. A particularly greedy uncle and his wife sought to wrest the money from her with cruel words and intimidation. A couple of undesirables from Mitsuha's school even loitered outside her home to try to squeeze out whatever they could. By the time Mitsuha was able to drive away everyone pursuing her wealth, the mental burden had led to her failing her college entrance exams.

Losing her entire family would have been bad enough on its own, but Mitsuha's brother─two years older than her─had been her idol, so she felt his

loss the most. The hurt, the stress that had come with handling the aftermath, and the profound dejection that followed had made it far too difficult for her to focus on her studies. By now, at least, she had mostly recovered from the pain of flunking her exams.

Craving a change of pace, she'd decided to visit a local tourist destination. Actually, to call it such might've been too generous─the "lookout," as it was known, was little more than the tip of a jagged coastline. A smattering of modest conveniences, such as wooden fences, coin-operated binoculars, and public toilets, decorated the area. But Mitsuha didn't need anything more. All she wanted was to stare out at the sea and enjoy its tranquility.

On such an unremarkable weekday afternoon, the only other visitors to the site were a college-aged couple, a pair of elderly spouses, and a trio of thick-headed hoodlums whose intelligence rivaled the rocks' below. Mitsuha, on the other hand, had the academic potential to enter any of countless colleges across the country. Unfortunately, only one was within commuting distance of the home her parents had left her, and its standards of entry were extremely high. Perhaps she could have met them if she'd been able to perform her best, but this feat had proved too much for her in her dire state.

Originally, Mitsuha had had nothing against attending a college away from home, but now that she was alone, she didn't want to leave her parents' house. They had built it from the ground up, and with the absence of her family members, the memories they'd left behind were too precious for her to let go. It was this attachment that influenced Mitsuha's choice to take only the entrance exams for her local college.

Oh, man… What do I do now? Mitsuha contemplated whether she should

give the exams a try again next year or focus on securing an income instead. The remaining mortgage on the Yamano home had been paid off when her father died, and her parents' life insurance payout had made her pretty wealthy. Four years' worth of college and living expenses, however, would tap heavily into this supply.

For this reason, Mitsuha weighed the option of entering the workforce right away. While she wouldn't make as high of a salary as she might with a college degree, there weren't any companies within commuting distance that were all that generous in the first place. Furthermore, a degree hardly guaranteed a well-paying job in this day and age.

Mitsuha also considered the possibility that she might marry and have children in the future. It would be hard enough to juggle a family and a full-time job; the debt from college would only make things worse. All things considered, college just didn't seem worth it when the other, more viable option was to start working and saving.

It's not like I have a dream job or anything, she thought, staring out at the beautiful sea.

"Well now, who do we have here? You skippin' school, little lady?" An oily voice from behind derailed her train of thought. Mitsuha turned and found herself cornered by three sinister grins. The delinquent who'd spoken had bleached hair and looked to be about twenty. "Wanna hang with us? We'll show you a good time, take you somewhere nice, getcha somethin' to eat…then see where it goes from there?"

Here we go again. They clearly think I'm some kid cutting class, Mitsuha thought, thoroughly unamused. While many women enjoyed appearing younger

than they were, Mitsuha was an adult, and thus found no joy in being treated like a middle schooler. Then again, revealing that she was actually eighteen would only make them more assertive, so she chose to keep this fact to herself.

But did it really matter? The men before her were trying to pick up a girl they assumed to be in middle school; maybe they wouldn't have cared one bit about her age. While Mitsuha's opinion of these skirt-chasers was low to begin with, she didn't want to accept an even more unsavory alternative: that they would actually go after an elementary schooler.

Regardless, they weren't people she wanted to deal with, but it would be a tough situation to escape. The three leering delinquents blocked her way forward, and only a plunge to her death awaited behind her. Trapped against the wooden fence, she had no advantage beyond her wits.

Putting on the youngest-sounding voice she could muster, she piped, "Sorry, mister… I can't go with you. Mommy and Daddy are coming to pick me up!"

Mitsuha hoped the act would convince them that she truly was just a child waiting for her parents─a target way outside the acceptable range of these hoodlums.

But instead, the blond scanned the perimeter to confirm the absence of her parents, then marched forward, grabbed her by the arm, and growled, "Just come with us!" His sidekicks also advanced, sending Mitsuha into a panic. She glanced around, desperate for one of the passersby to lend a hand, but they were all making a valiant effort to see nothing.

Go figure, no one wants to be a hero. Guess I've got no choice. I'll deal with them myself!

Despite her pint-sized frame and cherubic looks, Mitsuha's intelligence and physical strength were nothing to sneeze at. And above all else, Mitsuha had guts. It was this quality that had enabled her to protect her inheritance from those looking to seize it.

Her body moved before she could think, sending an upward kick directly into the blond guy's groin. Without so much as a peep, he fell to his knees, writhing in pain. Froth bubbled at the corners of his lips, and he quickly collapsed, lying immobile between his comrades.

"THE HELL'RE YOU DOIN', YOU BITCH?!" The textbook gangster line erupted from one of the remaining delinquents, and in his rage, he shoved Mitsuha backward with full force.

"Ah…!" she gasped as her back made contact with the wooden fence and an ominous crack reached her ears. Next thing she knew, she found herself in midair, at the mercy of gravity.

Huuuhhh?!

"AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Falling! I'm falling! I'M FALLING! I'M FAAALLLIIINNNG! I don't wanna die! I don't wanna die! I DON'T WANNA DIE!

Screaming at the top of her lungs, Mitsuha prayed from the bottom of her heart for someone to help her.

I DON'T WANNA DIE! I DON'T WANNA DIE!

"WAAAAAAAGHHH!"

Just as consciousness left her, Mitsuha heard a strange cracking sound, accompanied by a scream that wasn't hers.

“Where am I?” Mitsuha looked around.

Bark, leaves, grass, lots of trees… Yep, I’m in a forest. Hey, wait, hold on a sec! I totally just fell off a cliff! It was all waves and rocks at the bottom, right?! she thought, bewildered. But far be it from her to complain about this new development. *Waking up in some random forest ain’t great, sure. But it’s way better than turning into a red smear on some rocks!*

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With such thoughts in her mind, Mitsuha reflexively stood up and checked her condition. Yes, “reflexively.” Whether it was habit or some sort of adaptation, Mitsuha had been like this for as long as she could remember. In most situations, she prioritized action─thought would come later. She didn’t feel it was entirely normal, but cursory attempts to label the condition had not been fruitful.

Imagine, for a moment, that there was a ball flying toward you. You’d generally have two choices: dodge or catch. You wouldn’t waste time thinking, *Oh, look, there’s a ball coming. What should I do? Do I catch it? Or dodge it? To the left? Perhaps to the right?*

On the other hand, you would never *reflexively* make a purchase. The way Mitsuha saw it, time was a luxury that allowed careful thought and strategy. In a pinch, you could rely on nothing more than intuition to process the information available to you and choose the best course of action. In her own words, reflexes were the first aid of movement. Such reflexes were generally limited to basic physical movements, but in her case, they seemed to apply to a wider range of actions, though she hadn’t entirely figured out why.

A friend had once told Mitsuha, “You only think about why you do stuff after you do it, huh?” This led to our dear protagonist receiving the nickname “Spex,” short for “spinal reflex.”

Take away one letter and it sounds lewd, damn it!

If one truly considered it, snap decisions and those that were the product of critical thinking didn’t seem so different. Perhaps all humans had the capacity to think and make decisions in an instant but defaulted to more thorough thought processes to understand *why* they had made them.

Ah, but we've gone off on a tangent now. Let's rein it in and get back to what really matters, shall we?

Okay, I'm not hurt anywhere. Everything looks pretty much normal. Got my wallet, my house keys… But what about the student ID card I've carried for three years straight?! Oh, right. I graduated. Mitsuha also checked the large shoulder bag that had fallen along with her and found it still packed with her umbrella, tissues, and a plastic grocery bag. The latter, she felt, was a particularly undervalued item.

After ensuring she had all of her limbs and belongings, Mitsuha checked her surroundings. The forest was relatively dense, and the area she had landed in revealed no signs of human activity. She couldn't see any footpaths or detect people nearby.

Guess I'll walk, she thought, already walking.

Two hours passed, and Mitsuha was rapidly growing exhausted. A scant few rays of light trickled through the canopy overhead, barely enough to illuminate her path. With no idea where she was headed, all Mitsuha could do was walk onward, avoiding any trees and rocks in her way. She felt it entirely possible that she was walking in circles, so she began marking some of the objects she passed. When she didn't encounter them again, she interpreted it as a good sign.

I have to get out of here before it gets dark. Who knows what kind of predators live in these woods? I guess I could sleep in a tree if I had to, but I can totally picture myself rolling over and falling right out of it. I've also gotta find some water… Is there a stream or something nearby? Some fruit would work, too.

“Boy, am I tired.” Mitsuha had been walking for around four hours. That span of time wouldn’t have been so strenuous on a proper, man-made pathway, but she was trudging through the forest’s wild undergrowth. Her muscles strained to move forward and her feet throbbed. The sun was also beginning to set, so she decided to climb into the first acceptable tree she encountered and stay the night.

Sure, I probably won’t sleep very well, but walking out here overnight is suicide. My body won’t make it, I can’t see jack in the dark, and I’d be a sweet little treat for any nighttime hunters lurking around…

Mitsuha positively oozed fatigue. She had resumed her walk at sunrise, three hours earlier. Hadn’t slept a wink. Not only was she terrified of falling out of her chosen tree, but she’d possessed no blanket or anything even remotely helpful to pad out the hard, knotty branches.

“Ah!” She let out a sharp cry upon hearing an unpleasant sound from her left ankle. Her bodily fatigue and drowsiness had made her absentminded, so she’d taken a misstep and twisted her ankle on some roots.

Damn, that hurts.

She endured, however; she had no other choice. To remain in place wouldn’t improve her situation, and it wasn’t as though she would miraculously heal if she rested. No, she wanted to push herself to keep walking until she found either a settlement or, at the very least, a man-made trail. It wouldn’t be an ideal choice for her leg, but it was better than death.

A few more hours came and went. Mitsuha didn’t stumble upon any food or

water to ease her hunger or thirst, and the pain radiating from her left ankle only became more intense. She had spent so much time thinking about her situation that she'd gotten sick of it. She had all the time in the world, after all.

Yesterday, she'd only been unconscious for about twenty minutes, maybe half an hour. She had checked the time on her wristwatch the moment she'd woken up. What made this fact peculiar was that, from the cliff where Mitsuha had started, there was no forest of this size you could reasonably get to in such a short amount of time. Furthermore, Mitsuha had fallen off a cliff, so it was improbable for her to have come out unscathed. This led her to three possible conclusions:

One: I died, and this is the afterlife.

Two: I'm in a hospital somewhere, in a coma, and this is all a dream.

Three: I got abducted by aliens and taken far, far away… Hey, I'm into sci-fi too, y'know!

After a brief moment of contemplation, she thought, *I-I'd really like it to be the third one! I'm not a fan of the other two!*

Setting aside the mystery of her arrival, Mitsuha reaffirmed her desire to reach civilization. If she discovered she was still in Japan, she would seek out the police; if not, she would go to the nearest Japanese embassy.

By her third day in the forest, Mitsuha was very, very weary. She had awoken in the afternoon on the first day, and it was still morning, so only about a day and a half's worth of time had passed. Desperate and deprived of food and water, she had taken a gamble by eating some plant leaves. The hunger she could tolerate, but the thirst was defeating her. At this rate, she felt that death couldn't be far

behind.

Man, I've had to rest way more than I did yesterday. I'm staggering so bad I feel like I'm tripping on every other rock or root. My arms and legs are covered in bruises, and the pain in my ankle is driving me crazy. Feels like it's spread to the rest of my body. Despite it all, she mustered her willpower and kept moving. If she didn't, she would die.

Finally, when her sense of time had long since departed and her consciousness was growing dim, she came across a path. It was just wide enough for one person, so she almost doubted it had been tamped flat by human feet.

Please don't tell me it's an animal trail, I'm begging you… The discovery caused her to relax so quickly that, after three days of near-constant motion, her legs gave out at last. She collapsed to the ground and instantly fell unconscious.

"I don't recognize this ceiling," Mitsuha murmured. Despite her confusion, some small part of her was elated at being able to utter one of the top thirty lines she'd always wanted to say.

Let me think… If I'm not totally bonkers at this point, I just spent days wandering around a forest that should never have been there in the first place, and then passed out as soon as I found a path. Now I'm lying in a stranger's bed, looking at a ceiling I've never seen before.

After setting her thoughts─bizarre as they were─straight, she took in her surroundings. She was in the bedroom of a homely cabin decorated with shabby furniture. Humble as the room may have been, everything appeared to be clean and in order.

Did someone save me? she wondered. Her mind was still hazy, but she was

aware of her strongest and most immediate need─sustenance.

"Water! Can someone please give me food and waaater?"

Just after raising her voice, Mitsuha heard hasty footsteps approach from the other side of the door. It swung open, revealing a small girl. She appeared to be no older than ten, with bright blue eyes and a shimmering crop of silver hair. Her dress, while plain, did nothing to diminish her adorable countenance. She lit up with a smile, and shouted in a language Mitsuha couldn't understand.

Big Bro, I've got a feeling we're not in Japan anymore, Mitsuha thought. *Doesn't seem like I'm in the Anglosphere, either. So maybe I failed my college entrance exams, so what! I can still tell when somebody's speaking English, as well as a couple other languages.* As the girl chirped at her, Mitsuha quickly ruled out Japanese, English, Chinese, Korean, German, French, and Italian. The girl's exotic appearance was the only clue she had, and it merely told her she was nowhere in Asia.

First, however, there was a more pressing matter to attend to: Mitsuha was starving, and her throat was so dry she could hardly speak. She would take care of her needs first, and communication could come after. After motioning for the girl to stop speaking, she mimed out what she wanted. She cupped her hands, pretending to drink from them, then pointed to her mouth while rubbing her stomach.

There, that oughta do it. Even a monkey would get the message! Uh, maybe I shouldn't make that kinda comparison when this girl probably saved my life.

Still smiling, the girl spoke a few words in response, then turned around and left the room. *Yes! She understood me! I hope…*

But Mitsuha had no reason to worry. After a few minutes, the girl returned

with a woman Mitsuha presumed to be her mother, if their matching features were anything to go by. They brought with them a pitcher of water and two cups, one empty and the other full of some sort of porridge. With a hasty gesture of thanks, Mitsuha took the water and gulped it down.

"Phew! I feel alive again!" She sighed in relief, then turned to her hosts and bowed her head. "Thank you so much for saving me." While they might not have understood her words, Mitsuha felt her body language sufficient to convey her gratitude. The girl's mother appeared shocked for a moment, likely because of the foreign tongue, but her face then eased into a warm smile.

All right, got the thanks outta the way… Now it's chow time! Mitsuha reached for the food. It seemed to be chunks of bread immersed in boiled, diluted milk─bread porridge, so to speak. While the food was simple, it would be nutritious and easy to digest, which was precisely what Mitsuha needed. Going by its warmth and how quickly they'd brought it to her, it was clear they had it already prepared for when she woke up.

What a couple of good Samaritans! I'll have to thank them properly when I get back. They saved my life! Mitsuha decided while she ate.

Once she'd been fed, she felt drowsiness overtake her. Her earlier fainting spell and subsequent unconsciousness was far from actual rest. Nourished and relaxed, she closed her eyes once more and finally drifted off into the sleep she deserved.

"I *do* recognize this ceiling," Mitsuha murmured. Of course; it was the same grainy ceiling she'd seen last time she'd woken up. The biggest difference between then and now was that she felt refreshed.

Just gotta ignore the cuts I've got all over, my twisted ankle, and my overworked thighs and calves. No big deal. Now, how can I make sense of this situation? she pondered.

Mitsuha had found herself in a crude building adjacent to the massive forest she'd traversed. She had initially assumed it was some sort of mountain hut, but it seemed to be a pretty standard house for the area. This led her to conclude she was in a *very* rural village.

Seems like I've gotta get to a bigger town and contact the embassy. I sure hope they've got phones there.

As she mulled over her thoughts, the door opened, and in walked the silver-haired girl from before. *She probably came to check on me 'cause she felt me wake up. This little wood nymph's got some sharp senses!* Upon seeing that Mitsuha was awake, the girl beamed, charged at the bed, and leapt toward her. Her silver-topped head barreled straight into Mitsuha's stomach.

"GUHHH! I GIVE UP! UNCLE, UNCLE!" Mitsuha struggled to break free of the bear hug that followed, which grew dangerously close to snapping her small frame. "MY SPINE! YOU'RE GONNA BREAK MY SPIIINE!" After a few taps on the shoulder, the girl let Mitsuha free from her vise. As Mitsuha fell back into the bed and writhed in pain, her adorable assailant tilted her head in confusion.

So that was just an expression of affection—a local greeting, probably. And if it was this intense coming from a little munchkin, an adult would probably crush me! Mitsuha made a mental note to dodge if she sensed incoming danger.

After recovering from the near-lethal hug, she sat on the bed with the girl and the two began to communicate. Words proved fruitless, of course, but given

enough time, Mitsuha felt she could get the information she sought with mere gestures and expressions. It turned out that this girl was the one who had found Mitsuha after she fainted on the path, and had then called for her parents to take her in.

The girl showed Mitsuha around the house, which happened to be empty at present.

Her parents must be out working. Or maybe now that I've woken up, they went to tell someone about me…?

The pair had to go outside when Mitsuha expressed a desire to use the bathroom. *Outside, really? Damn, we really are in the boonies.* She had already deduced that much, but this was far beyond what she'd imagined. There was nothing in the area besides a few other cabins─houses, rather─made of barely processed wooden logs.

If I had to guess where the term "the sticks" came from, this would be it, she mused to herself. *Also, umm, where are all the street lights and utility poles? Oh, I get it, they're keeping the place looking scenic and homey by using underground cables, right? Ugh, as if!* It looked as though she had to find a way to the nearest town after all.

After they went back inside, Mitsuha resumed her attempts at communication. The "conversation" was slow and awkward, but she was surprised by how much she was able to learn. It was possible she was missing the mark on some details, but she hoped she wasn't too far off.

If she'd understood correctly, this girl─Colette was her name─was an only child who lived in this house with her parents. Their village was almost completely self-sufficient, surviving on simple industries like agriculture,

forestry, and hunting. And as she'd said before, Colette was the one who'd discovered Mitsuha unconscious on the trail and called for help. After that, Colette had looked after her, wiping away her sweat, keeping her hydrated, and—

Wait, so she's literally my savior! Mitsuha realized, and impulsively pulled the younger girl into a tight hug. Colette giggled a bit and reached out to hug her back. Sensing danger, however, Mitsuha reflexively pushed her away. She had always been quick on the uptake, especially when it was a matter of life and death. As she sat there, feeling somehow victorious, Colette's shocked face began to scrunch up with tears.

Oh, no! Mitsuha desperately tried to apologize and put her back in a good mood. Colette eventually forgave her, even if she looked a bit sulky as she did. *Good going, Mitsuha! You really messed up!* But by the time Colette's parents returned, she was back to normal. *Whew.*

Now that the parents were home, Mitsuha sought to communicate with them instead. After all, there was only so much one could learn from an eight-year-old girl. Yes, she had been mistaken about Colette's age; she'd thought the girl to be ten at first, but found out she was two years off. It came as a surprise to her, and she felt the girl was rather mature for someone her age. *That's my savior for you!*

Unfortunately, Mitsuha's attempts to pull additional information from Colette's parents resulted in disappointment. They had apparently been out working on their farm, not off telling someone about her. It wasn't as though they were villains keeping her captive; they simply hadn't even considered reporting her to the authorities.

Either way, Mitsuha was more than grateful for the food and hospitality

they had provided. In worse company, she could've been sold to human traffickers and handled like a slave. All things considered, she felt her hosts were good people, and they had treated her favorably. What really disappointed her, though, was that she didn't learn any more from them than she had from their daughter.

While there was the language barrier to consider, Mitsuha had advanced her method from gesturing to drawing pictures. Yet all she learned in the end was that the couple's intelligence was likely on the same level as Colette's. Was the girl some sort of prodigy, or were her parents a bit, well, unfortunate in that regard?

Mitsuha had drawn a simple world map and tried asking them to point out their location, but it appeared as though they couldn't even read the map. *I'm not that bad at drawing, am I?* She had then pretended to use a phone, but they'd only tilted their heads in confusion. Mitsuha assumed they were stuck in a more primitive era, one deprived of push-button devices, so she dialed back her impression to a rotary phone, funny sounds and all. She was certainly putting in her best effort. *Wait, what's with the applause?! I'm not a mime, damn it!*

And just like that, she gave up. Mitsuha decided to stay with Colette's family, helping out around the house until she was completely recovered. She would then pack some rations and set off for town. *I'll send them my thanks when I get back to Japan. I have no other options here!*

Chapter 2

The Beast Must Die

And so, a few years passed…

Well, actually, it was just three days! Through bouts of intense pantomiming, Mitsuha had somehow been able to get Colette's parents to understand what she wanted. At least, she hoped so. First, she'd asked them for permission to stay in exchange for helping around the house. She had also informed them of her plans to travel to the nearest town, and requested a supply of food and water for the journey. Lastly, in a flurry of motions, she'd asked for directions to get there.

Mitsuha had long since given up on learning their language. She couldn't learn a great deal in just a few days, anyway. Mitsuha felt that as long as the larger town had citizens who spoke Japanese─or at least English─she could get her hands on a phone to call the embassy or someone in Japan. Then she would have no problem getting home, and once she returned, she'd never be in another situation where this local language was useful. She would send thanks to her benefactors, of course, but only with the help of a translator.

Another thing Mitsuha grasped from her talks with the family was that they thought she was a child. It was utterly unsurprising, especially considering she appeared underage by Japanese standards. In their eyes, she was only ten years old, or twelve at best.

You know what? I'm fine with that. For the most part, anyway. It's convenient for me, so I'll play along! If Colette's eight, I don't mind being her

twelve-year-old friend.

As it turned out, it was a local custom for families to take in orphans or disowned children. It wasn't uncommon for these boys and girls to end up marrying the adoptive parents' real children once they grew up, and it would always be considered an auspicious occasion. "Now you are truly our child!" and whatnot. The majority married into other families, of course, but still treated their adopters as their real parents.

Then again, it was a small village, so everyone here was like family to begin with. The mentality behind this practice could be summed up as, "It's better to just look after orphans and lost children than hand them over to the authorities. Why waste time looking for parents who are either long gone or have abandoned their kids?" Now it made sense why Colette's parents were so kind to Mitsuha and didn't seem to consider her presence a big deal. Well, she would be leaving soon anyway, so it didn't matter all that much to her.

With that in mind, why did Colette spend half a day telling me all this? Waving her arms like crazy, drawing her family tree with some sticks… What's the big deal? A girl on some branch of the family tree had lost her parents and been taken in by a family that had a son. She eventually married him, and now they both took care of their elderly parents and… *Hold on, wh-why are you staring at me like that?!*

If you ignored the discomfiting pressure from Colette, Mitsuha's next few days had been pretty peaceful. She helped around the cabin in various ways, one of which was cooking. Even though the family had no spices or modern appliances, Mitsuha had learned to cook from her mother from the time she was in elementary school, and knew enough to get by. The resulting dishes were so

good that Erene, the lady of the house, was visibly irked.

Wood-splitting was an entirely different story. *Does it even count as housework? Isn't this something the dad's supposed to do by himself?* After muttering such complaints, Mitsuha quickly learned that preparing firewood was in fact Erene and Colette's job. As she struggled to help them out, Mitsuha found the hatchet heavy and hard to use; she often missed her target. Even when she didn't, the blade wedged itself snugly into the wood, and she failed to pull it free so she could finish the job.

Eventually, her skin began to peel, and her muscles started to ache. She was short of breath, and her legs wobbled beneath her. It didn't take long until she was instructed to do something else. *Why is Colette so good at this? Look at her go! Those logs are flying…*

The next day, Mitsuha and Colette went out to the woods to forage. They had each been given a basket, but Mitsuha ended up holding them both. Not because she was confident in her foraging skills, but because it made it easier for Colette to move around and work her "child of the wild" magic. An undoubtedly clever idea.

Wait, this is the forest I was wandering in, isn't it? Mitsuha realized. *So this is how Colette found me. I gotta make it up to her since I wasted her foraging session!* She fired herself up to gather as many plants as possible. Colette had shown her samples of what she had to look for, so there wouldn't be any problems…or so she thought. It turned out that they only grew in specific places, and you needed to know where to look. She had no luck finding any without Colette's assistance. *Oh well, it's not like I'm gonna make a career out of this.*

It's okay as long as I can help out a little.

When the baskets were about a third full, Colette suddenly stopped. Mitsuha looked at her. The younger girl had gone pale. She gestured to Mitsuha to put the baskets down, and she did just that, even though she had no idea why. Colette slowly backed up a step and whispered, "Kel kolore, maltoneis…"

Oh, that's one of the phrases they made sure I learned. While Mitsuha had determined she wouldn't learn the language, she had memorized a few words to make communication a bit easier. After all, it was nearly impossible to get by without the bare bones of "yes," "no," "water," "food," "hungry," "give me that," and so on. Colette's words had something to do with a dangerous beast being close, which meant—

Wait, WHAT?! But they told me beasts were rare around these parts! Colette literally drew me a picture to tell me that! Mitsuha felt herself panicking. *Oh, yeah, "rare" doesn't necessarily mean they won't ever show up. Silly me.* The two silently backed away, leaving the baskets behind. Mitsuha assumed they would come pick them up once the beast either left or was hunted down.

Shame there's no saving what we collected. The stuff won't dry properly under these conditions, so it'll all be ruined by the time we come back. Whatever. Life's way more important than a couple of plants. We just gotta sneak away, and… Wait, we're going upwind here! This is real bad!

But hold on a sec. As superhuman as she is, there's no way Colette could've noticed the beast before it noticed us, so there's no point in sneaking around. Then why isn't it coming after us? Is it not hungry? Is it chasing some other prey? Is it an herbivore? Yeah, right—we're dealing with a real primetime thriller here. What is it waiting for, then? Think… Think! Come on, brain,

you're a PC stuffed with random knowledge!

Done. I got three possibilities.

One: It's taking its time to make sure we don't escape. But it doesn't really need to do that for small, slow humans like us, right?

Two: It sees us as playthings and is toying with us just for fun. In that case, it'd have shown itself to try to scare us.

Three: It's using us as practice hunting targets for its young.

Two girls running on foot were relatively slow, so they would be unable to escape; additionally, the beast wouldn't have to worry about its young being hurt by some kind of counterattack. *Yep, human girls are just perfect for the babies' first hunt. Though one of us isn't really a "girl" anymore at this point, but let's keep that a secret.* It was just a guess on Mitsuha's part, but regardless, it was clear they were in danger.

Mitsuha racked her brain for the best way out. Should they buy time? She had no idea how late it would have to get for the villagers to come searching for them. Nightfall, maybe? Would they come then? Colette's parents obviously would, but others might find it too dangerous. Not to mention, the two of them probably wouldn't be able to hold out that long.

Mitsuha turned around and spotted a few creatures lurking between the trees. *One large wolf-like thing and a few smaller ones… I was right. They can't climb trees, can they?* she wondered, rapidly scanning the area for any trees with low branches. The wolves geared up to make a move, so she settled on the first one she saw instead.

"Colette!" she yelled, then grabbed the girl's hand and pulled her closer. The tree's limbs were out of reach, too difficult for beasts to climb, and despite

their thinness would be stable enough to support Colette. Mitsuha clutched her by the armpits, lifted her off the ground, and shoved her into the tree.

"Mitsuha!" Colette cried her name and babbled out some other words she couldn't understand. Ignoring her, Mitsuha moved her hands from the girl's armpits to her feet and pushed her up. Colette quickly understood what Mitsuha was doing and began climbing the tree on her own. Once she reached the first branch, she pulled herself onto it. "Mitsuha!" she called out again, and reached her small hand as far down as she could muster.

"Sorry." Mitsuha smiled and shook her head. "I'm not good at climbing trees, and that branch probably won't hold us both. Bye-bye, sweet pea!" The beasts slowly began to approach─with their prey staying in place, they may have thought it was giving up. Confirming what Mitsuha had glimpsed earlier, one adult beast emerged alongside three of its offspring. They were extremely wolf-like, so she chose to assume they were actual wolves.

She threw a stick at them as a distraction. It didn't hit, but they understood it was a sign of aggression, and their lips curled into a series of snarls. *Good. That raised me from "weak and easy prey" to "prey that resists." I got their aggro on me, so all I have to do now is lead them away!* She ran as fast as she could from where Colette sat wailing, "Mitsuha, Mitsuha, Mitsuhaaaaaaa!"

It didn't take long for her to start panting. *I always wake up early, since I have tons of things to do in the morning. And I run out of energy real quick, since there are tons of things I never did. Besides gym class, my only workouts were airsoft matches my brother dragged me into, so I'm as weak as I look. I have good reflexes, but I'd be awful in a marathon.*

The forest's terrain was unfriendly to a human sprinter, too, so the beast

easily caught up to her. It didn't appear to be trying very hard, either; Mitsuha figured it was just toying with her in preparation for the kill. *Only the big one's chasing me. Good thing, too, since the little ones definitely can't climb up Colette's tree.* It wasn't as though the larger one could, either, but Mitsuha wished she could've made sure by taking out one of its legs.

Gah, I'm already done for! I just need to make sure Colette gets away! she thought, but a moment later she took a wrong step, tripped, and crashed into a nearby tree. If the snarling wolf was out of the picture, it would have been right out of a slapstick comedy. *Ahh, I don't wanna die! Colette! Dad! Mom! Bro!* She panicked, shrinking back against the trunk. As the wolf's deadly fangs approached, various moments of her life flashed before her eyes.

Colette's smile, Mitsuha's parents, her big brother… He'd doted on her and taught her all sorts of things. She had loved him dearly and could always rely on him no matter how much of an…*eccentric* he was. It had always annoyed her how much he loved using one-liners he got from novels, and how smug he looked whenever he said the perfect line at the perfect time. But right now, in the face of death, she wondered what he'd say.

In the end, all that emerged from her lips was a loud, shrill "BRO-O-O-O-O-O!"

At that moment, Mitsuha vanished. The wolf, with its jaws still open, rammed its head into the tree. After writhing in pain for a bit, it stood up and whipped its head from side to side in utter confusion.

With a thud, Mitsuha fell onto a bed. She'd materialized out of nowhere about one foot above it, and the place she was in now left her dumbfounded. Not

because it was unknown to her─far from it. She instantly recognized that she was in her own house. Specifically, she was sitting in her brother Tsuyoshi's bedroom.

Before she could even think about why she'd ended up in his room and not her own, her body sprung off the bed. She knew her brother's room inside and out. Her legs walked her to the desk, and her hand made its way into the second drawer.

Huh? Umm, this is Tsuyoshi's room, right? Where's the wolf? Was it all a dream? What about Colette? she wondered, left far behind as her supreme reflexes took over. It was now "Spex," not Mitsuha, who was in control.

Whenever she couldn't spare time to think and every single second was critical, her body sprang into action. It ran along like a well-oiled machine as her thoughts inched their way to the present.

Um… I'm still wearing shoes, there's leaves on my clothes, and I'm a mess in general, so…it wasn't a dream? That means Colette is still… Mitsuha tried to steady her reeling mind; meanwhile, her fingers located a small nylon bag full of tiny pellets, tore it open, and poured the contents into her right pocket. The pellets were heavier than they looked, especially in these quantities.

Her arms wrested an object from one of the bookshelves, then thrust it into her belt. It was a Falcon II slingshot. Though it looked like a toy at first glance, it could deal as much damage as a .22 caliber pistol. Tsuyoshi had trained her to wield it, and she was a decent shot.

Next, she opened a glass case, took out a gorgeous piece of metal, and shoved it into her pocket. It was a knife─the Gerber Folding Sportsman II. As her eyes fell upon it, Mitsuha remembered her brother's words: "I heard there's

some country where every boy gets a folding knife from his dad on his tenth birthday. The elegant form! The glimmering metal! The threatening aura only real weapons have!" He'd made it sound like the best thing since sliced bread, but really, it was a pretty standard folding knife.

Mitsuha's legs carried her down the stairs and into the kitchen. Her hands took over once more, pulling a carving knife out of a drawer near the sink. Sashimi knives were sharper and longer, but they probably wouldn't have made it through wolf hide without breaking, so carving knives were the more reliable choice. After the blade was wrapped in a cloth for safety, it too went into her belt. Her trusty hands then grabbed a three-foot-long kitchen towel, folded it in half, and set it on the floor. After she had filled it with spices such as pepper, shichimi, and chili, she rolled it up and tucked it in her left pocket.

How'd I get here from the woods, anyway? No, forget it—right now I need to save Colette! But how? Wait, I was calling out for my brother and ended up in his room. Does that mean I can, like, wish myself places? In that case, I need to get something that can take out the wolves.

But it was too late—her body had already done the job. Before Mitsuha realized it, she'd finished preparing everything she thought she needed. After she checked to make sure her reflexes hadn't faltered or missed anything important, her thoughts were finally caught up. Mitsuha called this phase "Acknowledgment."

Can I really go back? Should *I go back? Will this stuff be enough against those wolves? I might die for real this time! I'm back in Japan now, safe and sound! Why should I go?! What reason do I have?!* Suddenly, Mitsuha recalled her brother again and wondered what he'd say about all of this.

She realized she'd made a mistake, but it was too late; his way-too-smug words were already resounding in her head. "Hmm? Dear sister, do you *really* need a reason to rescue a cutie in trouble?" *All right, all right, you've got a point! Jeez, Bro. Pipe down, you're such a pain in the ass… But I still love you, damn it!*

Mitsuha appeared in the forest again and immediately slammed her forehead into a tree─far from a smooth return. Looking around, she saw no sign of her canine assailant. It must've run back to Colette, so time was of the essence. There was also no wind, so she had to be careful not to make too much sound. *Colette's still fine, I'm sure of it. They can't climb that tree, right?*

She dashed back to where she had left Colette, ignoring the sharp brush scraping at her skin, but covering the distance took longer than it had during her initial diversion. Once she arrived, she hid behind a nearby tree. The four wolves were barking up at Colette. She looked terrified but otherwise unscathed. Mitsuha took the folding knife out of her pocket, unfolded the blade, and carefully slipped it into her belt. She then took the slingshot in her left hand and used her right to prepare some pellets.

These pellets were made of steel, which was a bit unusual considering lead was the standard for slingshot ammo. According to Tsuyoshi, "Those are cheap and easy to mass-produce, making them perfect for airsoft. And they're heavy, but not hard enough to bounce off─meaning they sting like hell. But these babies are made of steel! Fire one of these off up close and you'll pierce right through your target. It's the manliest ammo there is!"

Mitsuha did have lead pellets, but since she was up against thick hide, she

sided with her brother's fervent babbling. Loading one steel pellet in the slingshot, she thrust the frame forward and pulled back as far as she could. Mitsuha may have seemed weak on the outside, but that was only due to her size. She was strong enough to pull the tense rubber; her only real limit was reach. Of course, that meant her shots would be weaker than, say, Tsuyoshi's. She would probably have to hit a weak spot to one-shot the adult wolf, and could only hope its young weren't nearly as tough. Tsuyoshi also owned a crossbow, but she'd never used it before, and reloading it probably took a lot of time. So, she─or Spex, perhaps─had chosen not to take it.

Mitsuha did her best to aim carefully, but her hands were shaking so much she just chose to let go. She heard the whistle of the pellet flying through the air, then a shrill yelp as one of the smaller wolves collapsed.

D-Did I hit it in the head? There aren't any muscles there, so I guess it either pierced through the skull or at least gave it a concussion.

Her shot had actually been intended for the adult. After all, it was the greatest threat present, so she wanted to at least weaken it. Then again, taking one out was good enough. Much better than missing, anyway. The big wolf had no idea why its offspring had collapsed, so it just ran around it, thoroughly puzzled. *Yes, it's still my turn!*

She carefully prepared and fired a second pellet. This one hit the adult, but only on its right thigh. It didn't hurt the animal whatsoever, and of course the now-alert beast had its eyes on her. If looks could kill, its glare would've made her drop dead instantly. The young wolves noticed where the adult─most likely their mother─was looking, and dashed toward Mitsuha. Their mama looked bewildered for a second, then just stood in place, allowing her young to go in for

the kill. She still assumed Mitsuha was a helpless child.

Mitsuha quickly fired a third pellet. This one missed. *Can't expect to hit every time.* She clicked her tongue in frustration as she prepared the fourth shot─probably the last before they came too close. She felt herself beginning to panic, but the distance the wolves had closed made her last shot more accurate and powerful. *Smack!* One of the two remaining juveniles collapsed. She'd hit its throat─a true weak spot.

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Without even glancing at its fallen sibling, the last of the offspring sprung at her. She had already chucked aside the slingshot, yanked the carving knife out of her belt, and unwrapped the towel. Blessed with excellent dynamic vision and reflexes, Mitsuha had no problem dodging the inexperienced young wolf as it came at her. As she did, she swung the knife and slashed through its neck, sending it to the ground like the other two. And then…

"AWOOOOOO!"

A blood-curdling howl echoed through the forest. Her children had been killed, all three of them. Even if they were still breathing, the cruel wilderness showed no mercy for beasts with such grave wounds. Her dear children, given to her by that strong, rugged alpha. She'd worked so hard to raise them, and they were so close to adulthood, but now she had lost them to clawless, fangless, furless practice prey.

Hate. Hate. Hate. Hate. Kill. Kill. Kill. KILL, was all that went on in the mother wolf's mind as she charged toward Mitsuha.

Here it comes! Mitsuha braced herself. She'd somehow taken out the young, but that gave her a final boss scenario with the mother. The wolf children were inexperienced, but this one clearly wasn't. Tricking her wouldn't be easy, and Mitsuha was a soft-bodied human who wouldn't stand a chance against her in a one-on-one brawl, so there was only one thing she could do.

As the wolf charged, Mitsuha fixed her grip on the knife in her right hand and reached her left into her pocket. *Fifty feet… Thirty feet… Fifteen feet… Now!* She swung her left hand and jumped to the left. "GROAAAH!" The wolf wailed and writhed on the ground, surrounded by a cloud of spices. *With their super sharp senses, wild animals probably can't handle all that pepper and*

chili! Even Mitsuha was in rough shape, with fluid gushing from her eyes and nostrils.

But she had to use this chance if she wanted to win. Fighting against the pain in her eyes, nose, and throat, she raised the carving knife and launched herself at the wolf. Unfortunately, real wild animals were built to withstand human attacks. Even if it couldn't see or smell, a mature wolf wasn't weak enough to let its prey take it out without a fight. It gnashed its teeth and swiped with its claws.

Mitsuha didn't see a safe way to get close without it clawing or biting her, but she couldn't waste too much time, since the advantage she'd gained from her spice bomb was dwindling by the second.

What do I do? What would my br—oh, not now! She tried fighting the urge, but it was hopeless; she was already imagining what her brother would do.

As always, her brain selected just the right pieces from the "What Would Tsuyoshi Say?" archives. "A truly strong person is fiercely proud and has the guts to back it up," his voice rang in her head, followed by, "Did you know that wolves can't close their mouths if they've got something stuck in their throat?"

It seemed like such a pointless fact to know. *Until now, that is! You better not have been messing with me, Bro! If I lose my arm, it's all on you! Damn it, what am I thinking?!*

"Why worry about losing an arm or a leg? Haven't you seen any movies where people replace their limbs with chainsaws or submachine guns? It's totally metal!"

GAH! You're really just livin' it up inside my head, aren't you?! Not even death stops you from being a pain in the ass! Whatever.

Mitsuha jumped at the wolf. Coming from behind had seemed like her best bet, but it noticed and bared its fangs at her. She swung the carving knife around and somehow avoided any damage, then tackled it. She was now on its back, holding on with all her might. It couldn't attack her with its limbs in this position, and it couldn't turn its head enough to bite─*Wait, it can?! I had no idea wolf necks could bend like that!*

Left with no other option, she made the gamble of a lifetime and shoved her left arm deep, deep into the wolf's mouth. "GEH!" the wolf gagged, raking its fangs over Mitsuha's arm as it frantically tried to clamp down its jaws. The human was clinging to a wolf, the wolf had the human on top of it, but their battle had only just begun.

As she gripped the wolf's body, Mitsuha lost her carving knife. But despite all the chaos, thanks to some miracle, she still had one weapon on her─the beautiful blade her late brother had cherished so dearly. "G-GERBER FOLDING SPORTSMAN TWOOOO!" She shouted the memento's name─she felt he would've liked that─as she took it in a backhand grip.

Stab! Stab! Stab! Stab!

It was a short knife in the hands of a weak girl. The blade didn't go deep, but it was of high enough quality to pierce the hide and deal decent damage. Mitsuha was far past her limits now, beyond any adrenaline rush. She was barely even conscious, and her sense of caution had long since left her. Her legs held the wolf in a crushing vise, and with her left arm in the beast's maw, she was pretty much fixed in that position.

Stab! Stab! Stab! Stab!

My arm hurts.

Stab! Stab! Stab! Stab!

I can't feel my hand.

Stab! Stab! Stab! Stab!

It's dark. When did the sun go down?

Stab! Stab! Stab! Stab!

Bro… Where are you?

The wolf thrashed and bucked, but just couldn't shake her off. Mitsuha's small stature and lightness worked in her favor. And her arm in its mouth made it hard for the wolf to breathe, let alone retaliate. It couldn't muster as much strength as before and felt something important leave its body. If the wolf had been capable of human thought, it would have been losing its mind to panic.

What is this thing on me? Prey? No! It's something else! Disgusting! Scary! What is this?! What's happening?! No, no, no! Help! Hel─

Suddenly, all was silent, and nothing moved. No, two of the young wolves were still twitching, but that was the extent of it. Eventually, there was the sound of one small girl slipping down a tree. She fearfully looked from side to side and noticed something that made her gasp.

It was a wolf and a girl, lying on the ground so close to one another it was like they were entwined. The blood on the beast and the girl's arm, which was lodged in the wolf's mouth, was enough to assume the fight had been fatal. The girl from the tree quickly ran up to them and checked the other girl for a pulse and any more injuries, and was relieved to find her condition stable. She then picked up a knife-like blade that was lying nearby, finished off the young wolves that were still breathing, and ran off to the village.

Cautious and merciless. How like Colette.

Chapter 3
The Kingdom of Ambition

"Such a blank ceiling," Mitsuha murmured. *And I'm drawing a blank trying to remember it.*

"Do you understand words, little one?"

Uh, I sure do, thank you very much. And don't call me little!

"Do you understand words, little one?"

Oh, so this is like one of those shitty games notorious for not letting you make any progress until you say "yes."

"Do you understand words, little one?"

"Y-Yeah, yeah, I do, okay?!"

"A single 'yeah' would have sufficed, little one."

Shut up! And stop calling me little! Mitsuha felt there'd be no point in replying to a disembodied voice if this was just a dream. However, it felt real enough, and after all she'd been through, she figured she might as well assume this *was* reality. *If this is a dream after all, then I've got nothin' to worry about. But if it's not, and I treat it like one? Whoopsie.*

"Umm, I'm Mitsuha Yamano. What about you? Are you God?"

"Hmm… You are curiously unsurprised. No matter. I am here before you to tell you something of great importance. But first, I am no god, and I have no name…"

The "thing" then revealed the story of how it had come to be. It knew only that it was an ancient, extremely rare lifeform. The "thing" theorized that its

ancestors were alien creatures that had evolved beyond physical form and become beings made of pure energy, or thoughts, or something of that nature. It had no body, did not know death, and had no desires or goals. *Honestly, its existence seems pretty pointless,* Mitsuha thought.

But after eons of aimless drifting, the being had made a remarkable discovery─it had the power to travel between worlds! Armed with its new ability, it had gained its first-ever desire: an interest in learning things it hadn't known before… A thirst for knowledge! Its consciousness had trembled in anticipation of having found the meaning of its existence─

"Yeah, yeah, get to the point," Mitsuha interrupted.

"Again, a single 'yeah' would have sufficed."

Anyhow… The "thing" traversed and observed countless worlds and came to know the concept of "fun." But one fateful day, as it floated above a certain world, it had suddenly been assaulted by an intense, unpleasant, and confusing sensation. Later, it realized that it might've endured what animals with physical bodies knew as "pain." The experience was altogether new, so it was intrigued, but it was also puzzled as to how a non-physical being *could* feel pain.

The "thing" had probed itself for an explanation and found that a piece of itself was missing. The unknown attacker had entered its area of influence─the equivalent of a body in normal lifeforms─and used powerful mental energy to tear away some portion of its essence. The assailant then traveled to another world, but the being's introduction to "pain" had left it confused and unable to track them. It continued to observe the world until it sensed the missing part nearby. When it felt the piece move to another world once more, the "thing" was finally able to follow.

“Huh? Was it me that did that?”

“Indeed, it appears so. But fear not… I will not fault you for this. It seems the event was accidental, and I have not been inconvenienced by it. In fact, I feel I should thank you for granting me knowledge of ‘pain.’ It was new to me.”

Phew, what a relief! I thought it was gonna ask me to pay its medical bills or something.

“So, what did you want to tell me?” she asked.

“Oh, yes… I have neglected to say it. It appears that your mind carries such strength and intensity that you have absorbed the fraction of my energy you tore away.”

“Huh?! I-Is that bad?”

“Worry not. This will do you no harm, mental or otherwise. However…”

“H-However?”

“You seem to have acquired the ability to travel between worlds.”

HUUUUUH?! Wait, so that’s what happened?!

Mitsuha had torn off a part of the “thing” and thereby gained the power to travel between worlds. And because of her strong wish to survive the fall, she had jumped to another world, taking the part along with her. Apparently, it was the last world the “thing” had visited prior to Earth. Additionally, the part had now merged with Mitsuha so thoroughly that trying to remove it would cause irreparable damage. *Yeah, I think I’ll stay like this, thanks!*

“Now, explaining the situation and telling you of your power was merely a way of expressing gratitude. If there is anything else you desire or simply wish to know, then by all means, speak. The part of me within you has the potential to give you more powers.”

Anything I want, huh? Well, I… Ah!

"Umm, could you teach me new languages?"

"Languages, you say? Truly an important thing when traveling between worlds… Very well. I shall make it possible for you to understand and copy the languages of those you converse with. Do bear in mind this is limited to language. I advise against seeking power to absorb knowledge beyond that. The amount you could acquire would be too much for your feeble mind. Besides, having the capacity to read absolutely anything would reduce the excitement."

HEY! My head's got plenty of room! I'm not stupid, damn it! The higher being had a point, though, so Mitsuha felt it best to listen.

"Let's just go with that, then. By the way, does moving between worlds use stamina or something? What're the costs and limits?"

"Costs? Well… The burden it places upon you is akin to moving between adjacent rooms. Repeating this motion a few hundred times would leave you quite fatigued and breathless."

Ohh. Well, it's true that moving between rooms a couple hundred times would be exhausti─Wait, THAT'S IT?!

"Any other inquiries or requests?"

"Hmm, I don't think so…"

"Such a lack of desire. There's still room for another power, so allow me to at least offer you a restorative function."

"Details, please."

"It would be weak, and therefore slow, but it would gradually heal any wounds you suffered. Given enough time, lost limbs will regrow, and scars

will vanish as if they were never there. Consider the wounds on your left arm. They would leave a mark, no?"

Whoa! That'd help a lot! It's actually amazing!

"I'll take one order of healing powers, then, please!"

"Certainly. I am well aware that a long life with physical impairments is difficult. This is no trouble at all, and will only take a moment."

"Hehehe!"

"It…feels as though your attitude toward me has changed."

The being exercised some unseen force upon her and then prepared itself to leave.

"I will come see you again after this planet has spun a few tens of thousands of times. Be in good health until then."

Those were its last words, and it took Mitsuha a few seconds to realize that it was talking about hundreds of years. *I'll be dead by then! Or did it mean around the sun? I'll be dead either way, though…* Her conversation with the "thing" had actually been some sort of direct interference in her brain, and once it had left, she automatically drifted off to sleep. As her consciousness faded, something finally dawned on her.

"Oh, so I'm not dead…"

I recognize this ceiling, Mitsuha mused in her usual fashion. *The bed too. And there's Colette, the sweet little girl sleeping on my legs. So, she got her parents to bring me here again, huh? I hope this doesn't become a trend. Oh, I'm covered in some kind of bandages. This must've cost them some money… I'm sorry.* However she felt, it was time for her to think about what would come

next.

What she had assumed to be a village in some developing country was really part of a totally different world─one that was way behind Earth in terms of technology and civilization. She had also gained the power to freely travel between this world and Earth.

YEAAAH, JACKPOT! Now I don't need to worry about work, or college, or anything! This world's gotta be full of gold and jewels and all kinds of stuff that'll rake in the money back home…and stuff from Earth could be worth a fortune over here. If I brought some over and sold it, I'd be rich!

Then again, if Mitsuha overdid it, she risked hurting the other world's development. *If I brought over something too advanced and made it popular, everything related to it would eventually crumble 'cause the foundation for it wouldn't be there. And if I brought over something really out there, I could collapse the economy or destroy some industries, which would cost people their jobs and drive them to suicide, or maybe they'd even form angry mobs!*

She also ruled out things that would depend on her so much that abandoning them would cause chaos. *Super influential stuff that's centered around my existence is a big no-no.* Another thing she had to keep in mind was that if she attracted too much attention, she could be targeted. *I've gotta keep things quiet until I have some backup.* Of course, she could always escape back to Earth, but that would be her last resort.

Although Mitsuha's thought patterns were a bit unusual, she'd always been a well-behaved, sincere young lady. This demeanor had gained her lots of friends who were still quite fond of her, even if they'd grown distant because of work or college. Because she had such a personality, Mitsuha decided to earn

money with her newfound powers without bothering anyone else.

Mitsuha was actually quite careful, though this quality had frequently surprised the friends who assumed she was a loose cannon. She wouldn't hesitate to make risky moves whenever it was necessary, but she never took such gambles when it wasn't. This was most likely thanks to a childhood spent looking up to her older brother.

Anyway, Mitsuha considered that her world-jumping ability might vanish one day. While she found it unlikely, she didn't think it was impossible, and so made her plans with this in mind. She would set up a base both in this world and on Earth and earn enough money to live comfortably on either side. She decided to make one billion yen in each world, for a total of two billion.

That sum, Mitsuha determined, could see her comfortably through her one-hundredth birthday, even if the economy became turbulent. She wouldn't be living in the lap of luxury, but a yearly income of twenty million yen was more than enough for her. Beyond that, her earnings wouldn't matter much. She could just sit back and do something she loved, like writing books or selling handmade crafts, even if it didn't make much money.

Now, I don't know if this is a kingdom, an empire, or a republic, but I'm gonna rack up two billion and become a WINNER AT LIFE! BWAHAHA! BWAAAHAHAHAHA!

This was the birth of her ambition.

Chapter 4
Preparation

Colette woke up shortly after Mitsuha, and chaos ensued. She let out a wail and launched herself at Mitsuha, too fast for the older girl to dodge her incoming bear hug. Mitsuha yelped, then began rapping Collete on the shoulder in a desperate attempt to signal her surrender. Colette's parents, hearing the ruckus, bolted into the room.

"Stop, stop! Ow, it hurts! You're breaking meee!" Mitsuha shouted, and Colette finally loosened her grip.

"M-Mitsuha! Y-Your words!" Colette replied in shock. Her parents looked equally dumbfounded. Thankfully, Mitsuha had already come up with an explanation.

"First of all, thanks for everything you've done for me, Colette. Actually, I learned your language back in my country. I couldn't speak it because I lost my memory. Just now, though, it all came flooding back to me."

"Really? I'm so happy, Mitsuha!" Crying loudly, she clung to Mitsuha again. Her parents nodded, their eyes brimming with tears. *They're such good people,* Mitsuha thought, all smiles. When Colette finally calmed down, Mitsuha decided it was time to gather information.

Because she was from another world, Mitsuha had to tread carefully when talking about herself. For this reason, she'd invented her own backstory: she hailed from a distant country, and for reasons that were conveniently glossed over, she'd crossed the sea and come to this continent. She purposefully chose to

say “this continent” over “this country”; for all she knew, their current region could’ve been landlocked. Mitsuha and her party had been separated during an attack by wild beasts, but otherwise she didn’t remember much─only that she’d found herself in Colette’s home the moment she woke up.

Mitsuha also didn’t know this world’s class system, so she avoided using the word “noble,” but still led them to believe she was a high-ranking member of society. Her choice to do so was a bit of a risk; commoner-nobility relations weren’t always good, to put it mildly, so it might’ve been upsetting for Colette and her family. Thankfully, they didn’t seem to care.

It makes sense, honestly, Mitsuha reflected. *The clothes they found me in weren’t farmer-like at all, so they probably figured it was something like that. If not, then maybe their beef with nobility is just local, and they don’t care about foreign blue bloods at all. Or they just don’t really get it, if y’know what I mean.*

After her story concluded, it was Mitsuha’s turn to ask about her situation. *I’m gonna get all the info I need and then some!* She found out she’d been out cold for a whopping five days. Nearly a week… She couldn’t blame Colette for worrying. Mitsuha had no idea if it was due to exhaustion and shock or if it had something to do with whatever the “thing” had done to her, but she didn’t really care either way. Also, they hadn’t forgotten to retrieve her possessions─knives, slingshot, and everything else. *How thoughtful.*

Anyway, the beasts they’d encountered were, in fact, wolves. The villagers had rounded up the corpses and reduced them to fangs, fur, and meat, not letting a single part go to waste. They’d split and eaten the meat, since it would’ve gone bad otherwise, but the fangs and fur were still unused. It turned out that they’d been reserved for Mitsuha, along with some money for the meat. *Aww, that’s so*

sweet it's gonna give me cavities! she thought. But considering they all believed she was penniless and wanted to do her a kindness, it would've been rude of her not to accept. *I'll have someone buy the fangs and fur off me, though.*

The villagers were extremely thankful that she'd gotten rid of the wolves before they could hurt someone. It made sense, especially considering the animals could've easily picked off one of the village wives or children. Colette, for one, wouldn't have stood a chance if she had been cornered alone. But Mitsuha wasn't entirely sure she'd killed off *all* the wolves. *I mean, they* are *pack animals, aren't they? And it was a mother wolf with her young, so there's gotta be a father, too, right?*

She wasn't convinced it was safe yet, but if the locals thought it was, she wasn't going to argue. The wolves here might be different than the ones she knew. Perhaps it was normal for local mother wolves to take their young on training trips, or maybe she'd had a messy divorce and was bringing the kids back to her parents' den. *Whatever,* she concluded. *It doesn't matter at this point.*

Once she was caught up, Mitsuha fired off all sorts of questions about the country they were in: the value of its currency, the nearest town, the capital, how developed it was─not directly, of course─and so on. Peasants didn't know much, obviously, but she was satisfied with getting about half the knowledge the farmers knew by heart. By the time she was finished, she had another question she really wanted to ask, but couldn't: *Why the heck does Colette know more than her parents?!*

On the third day after waking up, Mitsuha went against her little keeper's objections and took a walk by herself. According to the villagers, when they'd

brought her in from the woods, she was in such terrible shape that Colette had been completely frantic. But her seemingly grave wounds had healed since then, and now Mitsuha could barely feel so much as a bruise.

Still, persuading Colette to let her go alone had proved to be quite a challenge; she'd rattled off more reasons than you could imagine. This solitary trip was absolutely, positively necessary for her. Finally, Colette had relented and gone off to forage, though she'd glanced back at least a dozen times. After she disappeared, Mitsuha checked to see if she was really alone, then jumped back to her home on Earth.

Whoa, I've missed so many calls, she thought as she glanced through her phone. *Well, I didn't—I mean, couldn't—respond. Everyone's probably worried sick… Better reply to 'em all.*

After that, Mitsuha checked the mailbox. Her bills were all paid automatically, so there was no problem there. She also made her way to the local police station to let them know she was safe and sound. They'd helped her out a lot when she was dealing with her uncle and the delinquents who'd gone after her money. She wanted to quell any worries they may have had about her recent absence.

Next, she enjoyed her first bath in ages, changed into fresh clothing, and handled a few other assorted tasks. She couldn't wash the clothes she'd been wearing and risk appearing suspiciously clean, so she left them in their current condition. She'd don them again when she returned to the other world. There was also no point in going shopping, since she couldn't bring anything into Colette's house. All she'd had when Colette found her was a cheap shoulder bag containing a folding umbrella, tissues, and a disposable shopping bag. *Patience,*

Mitsuha… You'll get to take lots of stuff along once you leave the village.

She finished up her earthly business and returned to the village long before evening, but Colette still interrogated her about where she'd been and what she was up to. *What the heck, she came back way too fast! I guess she rushed it 'cause she was worried about me.*

Mitsuha was so occupied with her world-jumping and schemes to get rich that she'd completely forgotten about the men who'd approached her on the cliff. The moment they'd pushed Mitsuha off the edge, she'd screamed so loudly that the nearby couples had witnessed it in full. They'd wanted to avoid involvement when the delinquents were merely hitting on her, but they couldn't ignore a murder.

After Mitsuha fell, the girl from the young couple let out a shriek, her boyfriend snapped photos of the perpetrators, the old man called the police, and his wife took pictures of their car. It was some impressive teamwork. The thugs had panicked, shouting that it wasn't their fault and other such nonsense, then jumped into their car and peeled off. But with all the witnesses and photos, it didn't take long for them to get caught and arrested. Everyone thought this was an open-and-shut case.

It quickly hit a wall, however, because *they couldn't find the victim's body.* The police had even checked every local file for a missing person, but found no one who fit the description. This was partially because the victim was described as a child in either elementary or middle school, so Mitsuha was completely out of the investigators' range. They had multiple witnesses and the criminals' confessions, but the victim was a Jane Doe and her body was nowhere to be found. The police were at a loss.

On the other hand, the three men were getting what they deserved. Mitsuha would've died if it hadn't been for her strange and accidental collision with the ancient being. The fact that she'd survived changed nothing; they'd still committed an act of murder, so it was fair to punish them appropriately. If they were let off the hook, they'd surely go on to do similar things and harass other people, turning more innocents into victims.

After her family passed away, Mitsuha had ended their newspaper subscription. Cable TV and the internet were more than enough for her. The papers also piled up fast, and she couldn't be bothered to clean them up─not to mention that the mailman always crammed them into the mailbox like he was stuffing away his broken dreams, so people could tell whether or not Mitsuha was home at a glance. If some seedy types discovered she wasn't around as often, her property would've been in danger.

Mitsuha wasn't on Earth when the cliff incident was still new, and even during this last visit, she'd been too busy replying to all her missed messages to watch TV or browse the web. She hadn't had a chance to see the story, and by the time she returned again, all the news outlets had completely dropped it. Mitsuha never heard about the investigation or even recalled the men from the lookout.

Back in the other world, it was almost time for Mitsuha to move forward. Seven days had passed since her brief trip back home, and her wounds had healed so well she had to hide the fact that they didn't leave a single scar. Some villagers had gladly purchased the wolf fangs and fur. It seemed like they paid her a little too much, but the juveniles' hides were relatively undamaged, so apparently they

felt like they were getting a good deal. The buyers had also said something about refining the materials and selling them to the nearby town. *So you do have contact with a town*, she thought.

Endowed with her newly-acquired funds, Mitsuha could now tell everyone she wished to go on a journey. She planned to head to the town where the local lord resided, then make her way to the capital from there. From what she'd learned, the local lord's town wasn't all that impressive. Though not as rural as this village, it still fit the image pretty well. Nevertheless, it was the most developed town in the area, the starting point for capital-bound carriages, and most importantly, the place where the local lord lived.

After her encounter with the wolves, Mitsuha had befriended villagers other than Colette, which helped her learn much more. All of them had made sure to thank her, and the elders─thinking she couldn't move because of her wounds─sat around to converse with her. The villagers didn't know much individually, but once she put it all together, she had an impressive amount of information. In the end, she became more knowledgeable about the nearby town and the local lord's family than anyone else present.

I'll start by schmoozing the lord, Mitsuha decided.

According to the villagers, he was a surprisingly good person for a noble. He cherished his subjects, never hesitated to postpone taxes during bad harvests… Basically, the people had hit the jackpot with him. Not only that, but he was a count, meaning he also had a lot of influence in the capital. After all, if you ignored dukes, who had royal blood, the only ones above counts were marquises.

The town's about eighteen miles away, Mitsuha thought. *At least, that's my*

guess based on what the villagers told me. But if they walk at some crazy pace like twelve miles an hour, then that eighteen could easily be a hundred! Ugh, all right, enough of that. For now, I've gotta focus on wining and dining the count so I can get a carriage to the capital. I really need his support.

What? Wondering how I'll pay for the carriage and *get by in the capital? Sure, the money I got here won't be enough, but again, that's where the count comes in.*

Additionally, she had yet to take care of her biggest obstacle.

"NO, NO, NO, NO-O-O!" Colette yowled. "DON'T GO!" Mitsuha couldn't bring herself to blame the girl. The two had saved each other's lives, and there weren't many girls around her age in the village. If Colette wasn't out foraging, she was all over Mitsuha, especially after the latter had sustained some severe injuries.

"Sorry, but I have to," Mitsuha told her. "I wanted to do this from the start. Besides, my people and I had agreed to meet up in the capital if something went wrong."

"B-But, but…!" Colette simply would not give in. Not even her parents could calm her down.

"All right, then let's make a promise. After I get settled in the capital, I'll come back here and tell you all about it. And if you ever go there, I'll make sure to see you no matter what."

Colette whimpered, but was slowly calming down.

"You're a smart girl. You know you can't stop me, right? So, please…smile for me? I'll be thinking about you all the time until I see you again, and I don't want to remember you like this."

“Hic…” Colette let out one more sob, then forced her wobbly lips into a smile. Her father, Tobias, marveled at the sight. “This girl’s practically a master seducer!” he whispered.

Okay, now that’s just rude!

The next morning, the villagers saw Mitsuha off as she finally departed for the town. She had a bag filled with necessities: specifically, a gallon of water and four meals, two of which were light. The villagers had decided that, since the journey took a whole day for adults, it would take two days for Mitsuha. They’d stuffed her bag accordingly, without leaving so much as an inch for anything else.

Mitsuha hadn’t brought very much along with her in the first place, yet the villagers had attempted to load her up with blankets and other supplies. Had she brought them, she wouldn’t have been able to stand, let alone walk. Some people even offered to come with her, but she firmly refused. *That’d be seriously bad for me.*

Anyway, she more or less had to force her way out of the village. She’d been told it was rare for someone to go to town; it was a two-day journey there and back, three if you spent a night there. It was just too far for anyone to go there without having some serious business to attend to. Staying at one of the town’s inns was also a small luxury. The village was mostly self-sustaining, so the people here didn’t earn enough money to pay for a room, food, *and* wares.

The bottom line was that no one went to town without a very good reason. Anything they couldn’t acquire from within the village could often be bought from the traveling merchants who dropped by every now and again. They even

took requests, and would do their best to bring the items along on their next visit.

Mitsuha was well aware of the fact that she could choose *not* to go to town, and they'd be none the wiser. If some villagers decided to trek out that way in a few weeks or months, she doubted they would walk around asking about her. Even if they did, they wouldn't learn anything because she'd never have arrived in the first place. *It's not like I'm not planning to go to town,* she thought. *The schedule's just going to be pretty different.*

Mitsuha now had a full understanding of her cross-world movement—"world-jumping," as she liked to call it. The "thing" had installed this comprehension directly into her brain. According to the intangible manual, the first area she'd jumped to had been determined at random, but now she could go wherever she wished.

There was one caveat: she could only travel to a place she could picture, which in this case meant somewhere she'd visited before. She could jump between places in one world by using the other world as a stepping stone. For that, she first had to get there using normal methods, but once that was done, she could jump there whenever she desired. So for now, Mitsuha would go straight to town, then return to Earth to make some preparations. After all, getting close to the lord and securing a way to the capital wouldn't be easy.

Once she'd walked a good distance from the village, Mitsuha jumped home, hopped onto her trusted scooter, Scooty, then jumped back once more. The path between the village and the town was barely used, so witnesses weren't a problem. Even if she did cross paths with someone, she could just jump back to Earth. The terrain wasn't very smooth, so she couldn't travel at full speed, but she arrived at the outskirts of the town after just an hour of driving. She hadn't

met anyone on the way, so everything was going according to plan.

That's enough for today, Scooty. I'll walk the rest of the way when I get back. Now it's time to get busy!

Mitsuha returned home and changed into some casual clothes. She walked to the station and took a train to the nearest city with an American military base. Some Americans were along for the ride as well, most likely servicemen assigned to the base. *Looks like I don't have to wait till I get there for this part,* she thought.

"Excuse me." She directed her words to the most intelligent-looking man there. She simply asked if the train would stop at the city where the military base was located, thanked him when he responded, and walked to the neighboring car. She then exited at the next stop and traveled back to her starting point. With that, Mitsuha gained the ability to speak, write, and understand English.

Why had she chosen this man in particular, you ask? Well, her ability essentially "scanned" the brain of the person she was speaking with in order to copy their language. Normally, one would build up knowledge of a language slowly over time by talking with many different speakers, but since she was looking to get so much from just one person, it made sense to pick the smartest one available.

Once she returned home, Mitsuha got on the internet and began running some searches. The keywords, the results, the sites─all of them were in English, and she consumed page after page as part of her preparations.

Thousands of miles away, there stood the headquarters of a minor mercenary organization. The group had a relatively upstanding reputation. By mercenary

standards, that is.

“Captain. You got a visitor,” one of the mercs reported, opening the door to an ordinary-looking office.

“Pretty sure I didn’t have any appointments today,” replied the man in charge.

“It’s an unannounced visit. That okay?”

The captain took a moment to mull it over. They weren’t on any major missions, and the money from small jobs could pile up and help cover the squad’s operating costs. “I’ll be there in a sec… Take ’em to the reception room.”

“Roger that. Heheh, you’re in for a surprise.”

“Whazzat? Is it a hot chick or somethin’?”

“Hmm… You could say that.”

Yeah, right. There’s no way in hell a woman like that’d come here, of all the damn places, he thought in disbelief as he made his way to the reception room. When he opened the door and saw who waited inside, however, his jaw nearly dropped.

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My boy wasn't lyin' after all. Well, shit, I sure am surprised. He eyed the visitor. She was far from a "hot chick," but "pretty girl" seemed close enough.

"Nice to meet you," the girl began. "My name is Mitsuha, and I have a request for you…" His guest was an elementary schooler with silky black hair, mysterious dark eyes, and a well-proportioned, doll-like face. The captain listened to the entirety of her monologue before speaking up.

"So, you're tellin' me you wanna learn to use small arms, get some target practice, train in knife and short sword fightin', and for us to get *all* that gear for ya, huh…?" Child or not, she was a client. He was in charge here, so obviously he knew how to talk business even if he *was* weirded out by the whole situation.

The girl nodded in response. "Handguns are the most immediate matter. In particular, I'd like a small one I could carry with me at all times for self-defense, a powerful, high-capacity pistol I could use as my main weapon, a light revolver I'd switch to if the others jammed, a set of holsters for all three, and training in how to use them. Everything else is secondary. The knife and sword training might not be too useful…so feel free to gloss over them. Assume it's just for intimidation."

"…Says here ya also wanna learn to use machine guns, assault rifles, sniper rifles, and grenades, plus rocket 'n' grenade launchers… Li'l lady, what the hell kinda megacorp ya goin' after?!" He couldn't help but raise his voice. *Crap, I lost my cool.*

"I'm planning no such thing…! This is merely for self-defense. My country is currently in a state of unrest, you see… Oh, and of course I will be paying in advance."

Where the hell're ya from?! Do yer hoodlums have tanks or somethin'?!

“Ah, I currently have a lot of Japanese yen lying around,” she remarked. “Would it trouble you if that’s what I paid with?”

“Well, yen’s a whole lot better’n yuan or won, at least,” the mercenary replied. “There’ll be a fee when we turn it into dollars, though… Yer gonna cover that, right?”

“Oh, but of course. I don’t mind at all. Ah, but I *may* switch to using gold coins. Would you accept those as well?”

Gold coins? Seriously, who the hell are ya? If he could’ve raised an eyebrow any further, he would have. “Got nothin’ against it, but what kind we talkin’? Krugerrands? Maple leaves?”

“No. They would be nameless coins from a nameless country. Just think of the value of the actual gold in them. I’ll bring you a sample sooner than later, so you can have it appraised. But…”

“But?”

“Keep in mind you may eventually have to convert these coins by the hundred─no, by the thousand.”

After they came to an agreement, the girl left. *She was hella shady… No… Hella weird. But I had to take that job. Somebody’s gotta cover these squad costs, damn it!* The captain was fairly sure he’d made the right choice, but for some reason, the hand holding his cigarette still trembled. He’d ordered one of his subordinates to follow her. *Now I just gotta wait till he comes back.*

“I’m back, Cap’n,” the man in question said as he came in.

Uhh, okay, that felt a little too fast.

“How’d it go?”

"Sorry, but…I lost her."

What? She shook off this *guy?*

"I saw her turn the corner on her way outta the base, but when I went after her, she was gone. I looked around the place, but I couldn't find her anywhere."

"What kinda bullshit is that?! There ain't no more turns for miles!"

His subordinate had no reply. He had nothing else to say, either. *Man, I guess I really do need to get the guns,* he thought as he stared at the objects on his desk. There was a thick roll of yen and a piece of paper with the girl's─Mitsuha's─measurements on it. They needed her sizes to know what kind of holsters to get her.

An A cup, huh…

Man, that was sooo stressful! Mitsuha thought.

Her conversation with the captain had been the first time she'd spoken with someone in English outside of her classes. On top of that, his being a foreigner *and* a mercenary didn't help settle her nerves at all.

Keeping up the act of some high-class lady was really hard! I was totally drenched in sweat! After her business was done, she vanished from the mercenary base. They might have sent someone to tail her, but it didn't matter. She simply walked out the front gate, turned right, and jumped.

She'd chosen that particular group after hours of online research. It had surprised her to see how varied mercenary groups were. Some were enormous, some small, some were upstanding, some the scum of the earth, and so on… Then again, perhaps it was strange to call any mercs "upstanding." Still, she'd gone for the group that seemed to have the best reputation.

If she'd felt she was making a mistake, all she had to do was make herself scarce. *Staying off their radar seems easy enough. And if they tried to capture or violate me, I'd just crush them.* If their armory was suddenly emptied, or their funds and documents went missing along with their safes, the mercs would have their hands too full to concern themselves with some runaway girl. *As a world-jumper, I'd make a great thief, assassin, or terrorist… But that isn't my style! Teehee!* She only hoped this new relationship wouldn't turn sour.

As for how she got to another country so easily… She'd essentially had an epiphany. She had initially been under the impression that, because she needed a concrete mental image of any place she wanted to go, she had to have been there at least once. But it had occurred to her to try a little experiment. She'd absorbed TV shows, movies, and newscasts that showed a specific place, then checked a satellite photo of the location. This had given her a mental image as good as─no, even better than─the one she'd have if she saw it in person.

The result? A complete success. Mitsuha could now jump to many different spots outside of Japan. However, she could only use this tactic on Earth. There weren't any photos or satellites in the other world, after all, meaning that she had to actually travel to her destinations at least once. What a bummer.

I'm basically burning through Mom and Dad's money… But this here is like any initial investment. A necessary expense.

Her thoughts were directed toward a necklace on the table. It was a real luxury item. The necklace was adorned with pearls a third of an inch thick and had cost her over a million yen. This was actually her greatest weapon, so she couldn't have settled for something cheap.

Right beside it was a Gerber folding knife. Not the one Tsuyoshi had left behind, but a new one she had just purchased. There was also a Swiss Army Knife and a Randall hunting knife. On a nearby clothes hanger, there was an expensive-looking─and actually quite expensive─dress, partnered with a pair of heels. Besides that, there were some spare sets of clothes, as well as a couple accessories. Mitsuha carefully put everything in a large backpack, got dressed, and equipped whatever she could.

All right! Moving out!

Soon she was standing in front of a large door. Taking deep breaths, she prepared herself. It was finally time for the next step in her plan. She grabbed the knocker and rapped it on the door, creating loud thunks. Though no one could hear her, she shouted from within her thoughts.

Hellooo!

Chapter 5

If Pearls Are a Weapon, Mitsuha Is a WMD!

"Master Bozes, you have a visitor," the butler announced.

"What? I was sure I had no such arrangements today," replied Count Bozes, his curiosity piqued. Stefan was a reliable butler who had served the Bozes family for two generations. He wasn't one to make absurd mistakes, and it wasn't like him to announce the arrival of any unappointed, untrustworthy visitors.

Did he perhaps deem the guest worthy of an audience? the count wondered. *Then I shall trust his judgment.*

"Very well. Let them into the reception hall as soon as I'm ready," he ordered, yet Stefan lingered.

"What of the lady and your children?" he inquired. *What? Is he saying my family should join?! What is he thinking?*

"Call them, then."

"As you wish." *I chose to trust his judgment, and I will do so until the end.*

Soon the count was in the reception hall, accompanied by the entire Bozes family: his wife, Iris; his firstborn, Alexis; his second son, Theodore; and his daughter, Beatrice. Their reception hall paled in comparison to the grandeur of royal throne rooms; all that furnished the room was a large, rather plain table surrounded by chairs.

Summoning the family to meet a guest who came with no prior notice was unheard of. Count Bozes's wife and children looked fittingly bewildered and

uneasy. He hadn't told them anything, for he himself had been caught unawares. But that was something he simply couldn't give voice to. *I hope this isn't a mistake, Stefan.*

At last, the butler led the guest inside. "This is Lady Mitsuha von Yamano. She hails from the land of Japan. The lady claims to have come to greet Count Bozes."

The girl surprised him immensely. She had silky, well-groomed black hair, a face like that of a doll's, and clothing unlike any he'd seen before. The garb looked comfortable and had numerous pockets, while the belt she was wearing supported knives and other curious tools. He had never heard of her country, but he wondered how a noble lady─a girl barely older than ten, at that─ended up traveling without a retinue. He was livid. Not with the girl, but with her parents and everyone else around her.

Why didn't they stop her? How could they allow this?!

"A pleasure to meet you. I am Mitsuha von Yamano," she said. "As I come from a distant land, I felt I should acquaint myself with the ruler here─so I implored your butler for an audience with you. My apologies for such a brash decision."

Such refined speech at such a young age, the count marveled. *I can understand why Stefan allowed her in.*

"I see. The long journey here must have been exhausting," he replied. "Feel free to rest here as long as you need to. Now, if I may ask… Why, if you came from such a faraway place, did you choose to call upon us rather than those at the capital?" It was standard for foreigners to head straight for the capital. He couldn't think of a single reason for them to stop by a town like this.

“Yes, I can see why that might be curious. On my way to the capital, I was attacked by wild beasts, and the people of this region saved my life. I came to inform you of their deeds and express my immense gratitude.”

“What? Is this true?!” he uttered in surprise.

How delightful! Rather than looting or killing, my people went out of their way to help a stranger who now comes to express her thanks. And my children are here to see it, as well. What a glorious day! The count basked in bliss as Lady Mitsuha took something out of her pocket.

“Though it may be a meager offering, there is something I would like you to have,” she said. “It comes from my country. Please accept it as a token of my gratitude.” Stefan took the item from her and brought it to the count.

“Wh-What is this…?” he wondered aloud. Its profound weight made it apparent that it was metallic, but it had a brilliant color and an elegant feel to it. It was an elaborate object he’d never seen before. He couldn’t imagine what it was used for, but somehow understood that it was the work of a master craftsman.

“That is a foldable, multi-purpose knife,” the girl said.

“A knife?! This?!” he exclaimed. It was detailed and looked to be worth a small fortune, but he couldn’t imagine how something so hard to grasp was a knife, let alone a foldable one.

“Yes. Though it isn’t the sort you use in battle,” she explained. “It is more of a tool than a weapon. There are several small tools hidden within: a blade, scissors, and a file, among others. You will understand it if you pinch the side between your nails and pull.” The count did as he was told and managed to pull out the tools.

“S-Such fine detail,” he said, dumbfounded by the object. He was not alone; his children surrounded him, staring at it with great curiosity. “This is truly remarkable. I feel I must give something in return. Lady Mitsuha, what do you intend to do next?”

“I intend to make my way to the capital from here.”

“You mustn’t!” He stood abruptly, raising his voice. “It will be dark soon! Not to mention that a child like you should never go on such long journeys alone! I cannot allow that!” He’d dropped his noble, overly polite tone and shouted, but that was the least of his concerns. “Wait three days,” he added. “A capital-bound carriage will arrive. You can take that.”

“Umm, this is quite embarrassing, so please forgive me, but…I don’t believe I have enough money to pay for the carriage…”

Huh? Lady Mitsuha’s unexpected response rendered him speechless. *A girl in such fine garments, who just thanked me with a tool worth dozens of gold coins, can’t afford a simple carriage? Oh, of course… She and her party were separated, and they were the ones holding the funds. That makes sense; no noble girl with a group ever pays for things by herself.*

“Tonight, you may stay here,” the count declared. “And later you can tell me the whole story.”

He wanted her to rest before joining them for dinner, so he ordered Stefan to lead her to the guest room. Right after they left, he put his elbows on the table and his hands on his head.

“Dear,” his wife spoke up.

“Sorry, but allow me to gather my thoughts,” he said, cutting her off and furrowing his brow. Iris smiled faintly and led the children out of the room. Left

all by himself, Count Bozes wondered, “Just who *is* that girl?”

The Bozeses’ butler saw Mitsuha to the guest room. Though she wore an unassuming expression, she was grinning on the inside, thinking, *Victory!* Once she was alone, Mitsuha began taking things out of her backpack. The carefully-packed dress, the heels protected by packing material, the folding knife stored in its case, and the luxurious pearl necklace─today’s eye-catcher. The preparations were going swimmingly.

I’m a new Mitsuha now, she thought. *Not Mitsuha Yamano, but Mitsuha von Yamano… A high-class girl from a faraway land! I’ll play the role of a brave heroine─one who hides her true identity to live as a commoner in this country! Wait, no, I won’t “play the role”… I’ll become just that!* She convinced herself with such thoughts as she looked in a mirror.

Mitsuha had given up on trying to play a normal commoner from day one. She couldn’t have acted like a farmer if she’d wanted to; they’d have suspected her the moment they saw her clean, unblemished hands.

A few hours later, Stefan came to escort Mitsuha to the dining hall. Upon seeing her, he was so flabbergasted that he accidentally let out a gasp. It was perhaps the greatest blunder the iron-willed butler had ever made.

“Master Bozes, I’ve brought Lady Mitsuha,” Stefan announced.

“Excellent. Show her in.” Unlike Mitsuha’s previous audience with them, this was an informal and unofficial family dinner with a guest. There was no need for embellished language.

The moment Mitsuha entered the hall, the entire Bozes family briefly forgot how to breathe. A shining, pure white dress, sparkling enamel shoes, and a pearl

necklace of unimaginable value. However, all these were merely side-actors working to emphasize the girl's beauty. All was silent, and it felt like time had stopped.

Suddenly, a sound broke the spell. Stefan had taken a particularly loud step, bringing the count back to reality. The others soon followed, albeit awkwardly. Iris, especially, couldn't take her eyes off the necklace.

"Thank you all very much for having me," Mitsuha said as she lifted the hem of her skirt and lowered herself in a simple curtsy. She then took a seat in the chair Stefan presented.

"B-By all means, make yourself at home," said the count, whose full name was Klaus Bozes. "Once again, welcome to the Bozes mansion. This is a family gathering. No need to concern yourself with manners and whatnot, and feel free to dine at your leisure. If you are too tense, the food will not taste nearly as good."

Mitsuha merely responded with a smile.

As they ate, they talked about only the most inoffensive matters. Klaus apologized for not introducing his family during the first meeting, and proceeded to do so. Better late than never, of course. They moved on to a discussion of the county's specialties, places that sold the best food, et cetera. It was fun, but not exactly fruitful. But after dinner, with only tea, alcohol, and snacks left on the table, it was finally time to address the elephant in the room. Everyone was tense, Mitsuha included.

"Now, Lady Mitsuha," Klaus spoke up.

"Y-Yes?!" she piped.

"Oh, no need for such a reaction. Relax, it's nothing serious."

“A-All right,” she replied, still tense. Relaxing wasn’t exactly easy in this situation.

“Now, might you tell me who you really are? If possible, I’d like the most honest answer.”

There it is! Mitsuha thought.

“It’s true that I came here from a distant country,” she began. “I introduced myself using my family name to gain audience with you, but now that I’m in a foreign land, the social status I had in my homeland is almost meaningless.” None of that was a lie. She did indeed come from a *very* distant country and had used her family name to meet the count, regardless of whether the name was real or not. But from this point on, the floodgates for her lies were wide open.

Mitsuha laid out her polished story: “As for why I left my country, well… There was an issue regarding who would be the heir. My father passed away from illness, and it was obvious that my wise and gentle younger brother would take his place. However, some fools insisted that *I* was the better candidate. Before they could make me the successor and commit any wrongdoings, I left a hastily written letter and my home behind.

“I believe they intended to make me the heir so they could force me to marry one of their sons and eventually usurp the family name. If I’d stayed nearby, I would’ve risked capture, so I sailed to this continent. I brought with me only a few personal effects, including this necklace─a memento from my mother.”

Oh, I think I can understand those who pushed for her to be the heir, Klaus thought. *They must be quite distraught that she ran away because of them*… He pitied the non-existent vassals.

“Anyway, I can’t go back, so I’ve resolved to try to live in this country,” Mitsuha continued. “If I sell my mother’s memento, I should be able to raise the funds I need to─”

“YOU…YOU’RE SELLING THAAAT?!” Iris screeched. “D-Do you have any idea what sort of necklace that is?!”

“Ah, yes. These are real pearls, so I imagine it would be quite valuable. Are you suggesting these are fakes?”

“Huh…?! You truly don’t understand!” Iris was so agitated that she started banging the table. “Listen, girl─pearls are priced in a very wide range. The value varies depending on color, shape, size, nacre thickness, and more. Now, consider your necklace! The pearls are among the greatest in size, and almost perfectly spherical! The profound color tells me everything about the nacre thickness! And to chance upon an entire set?! One or two pearls are more than enough! You can make beautiful rings, earrings, hairpins, or brooches with just that. But a whole necklace, made entirely of such high-quality pearls?! What nonsense is this?! Do you have any idea how many shells you have to go through to find one pearl?! And how many of those pearls, do you think, would be fit for accessories?! A necklace of the very best, most vivid pearls you could ever get?! Impossible! This simply shouldn’t exist!” She banged the table again.

Seeing their gentle mother turn so menacing frightened the children.

“Umm, Lady Iris, would you like to have it…?” asked Mitsuha.

Her explosive offer turned Iris to stone. She slowly and rigidly looked at Klaus. The tectonic shifts in her neck were practically audible.

Klaus turned pale and asked, “I-Iris, what would be the market price for this?”

“Market price? Absurd. Again, this is something that shouldn’t exist. It’s an invaluable, one-of-a-kind treasure, a status symbol you could boast about anywhere in the world, and no one could ever hope to match you. It’s a dream of a treasure, and history would remember you for merely possessing it. Do you truly believe any affluent king or merchant would be averse to parting with their wealth for this?

“Oh, and bear in mind, you mustn’t bring it to auction. People would try to take it by force and wouldn’t hesitate to kill for it. And the one who presented it─you─would be kidnapped on the very same day, then violently interrogated about where you got it.”

EEEEK! IT’S A WAY BIGGER DEAL THAN I THOUGHT! Mitsuha shivered at the lady’s words. She’d bought the necklace under the assumption that cultivated pearls didn’t exist here and therefore would sell for a good price, but this was beyond what she could’ve imagined. She was aware that a cheap accessory in one world could be a real treasure in the other, but had no idea a cultivated pearl necklace would cause this much of a commotion…

I should’ve gone for the necklaces in the 300,000 to 500,000 range, not the 1.3-million-yen luxury. Or maybe I should’ve gone with artificial gems… Mitsuha had tried to keep in mind that certain kinds of jewelry could mess with the market, and she might be hunted down for the source. That was why she’d brought it straight to the Bozeses’ mansion─to keep it off the market entirely.

This trade was my make-or-break gamble, she thought. *I was sure I’d come out of this with enough money and allies to get my own place. That’s why I went for the most expensive one I could find, and… Aha!*

“Lady Iris… What if I break it up and sell the─EEP!” Mitsuha was

immediately gunned down by Iris's glare.

"BREAK IT UP?! IT'S A DIVINE TREASURE FIT FOR A GODDESS! DO YOU WISH TO INCUR HEAVENLY WRATH?!"

What am I supposed to do now?!

After a brief silence, she decided to try selling it once more. She had no other choice.

"But what am I to do if I cannot sell it? I have no money, and there's no one I can rely on in this country. I'll be at a dead end. No matter how pretty, this necklace is useless to me. I'd rather have the means to support myself!"

"But is that not a memento from your mother?" the count asked.

"Mother would never want me to cling to it so strongly that I starve to death. She'd prefer I sell it and live a happy life."

"H-Hmm, I suppose that is true…" The count was doing his best to prevent any sale of the item, but her argument made him fall silent.

"That's why I would like Lady Iris to have it. No one would press a countess into telling them where it came from, and it won't appear on the market, so there will be no upheaval."

"B-But, the price…" The count grew stiff. It was time for her to go in for the kill.

"I need only enough funds to start a shop in the capital. I can handle the rest myself!"

"But Mitsuha, you…" Lady Iris looked completely taken aback, but Mitsuha couldn't stop now. She already had a plan.

"It's fine. Also," she said, looking up at the older woman, "I really want

you to have it. If I ever need to remember my mother, you could hug me while wearing it and…" She fell silent and cast her gaze downward. Lady Iris shook as tears filled her eyes.

"Oh, Mitsuha!" She rushed over, her chair collapsing as she gave Mitsuha a tight hug.

"Lady Iris…"

Yes! It's working! Mitsuha thought. These nobles had no TVs whatsoever, few books they could read for fun, and barely any other forms of entertainment. Their only access to stories was through plays─rare events even for the elites─and bedtime stories from their mothers or nurses. They had next to no resistance to basic, tear-jerking sob stories, so they'd quickly latched onto hers.

Of course, the Bozeses were no fools; in fact, they were really quite capable. But just as Mitsuha had been told, everyone in the family was a kind, generous person. Perhaps Mitsuha would have chosen a different path if this one had any downsides, but there were none. The situation at present was advantageous to all involved.

After everyone calmed down and the hall became peaceful again, the three children, who hadn't been able to get a word in edgewise up to that point, finally joined the conversation. They were dying to talk to Mitsuha.

"Mitsuha, your beautiful black hair, those mystifying dark eyes…" said the eldest. "They must be gifts from a goddess, bestowed to you alon─"

"Ah, most of the people in my country look like this."

Alexis, the firstborn, was shot down within seconds at the tender age of seventeen. Say a prayer for him, if you would.

"Mitsuha, that multi-purpose knife you gave Father is simply incredible.

Did you bring anything else from your country?" asked Theodore. He was the second son, fifteen years old. You could tell he was prudent just by looking at his face. In an RPG, he'd be the mage, no doubt about it.

"Oh, I also have a regular folding knife," Mitsuha said before lifting her dress, taking the knife out of a thigh belt, and placing it on the table. "Here it is."

"M-Mitsuha!" Beatrice cried, while Alexis and Theodore flushed red as beets. *Huh? Did I do something?*

"It's sharp, so please be careful." Mitsuha unfolded the knife and handed it to Theodore.

"Wow," he gasped. The blade's sharpness and beauty, the detail on the handle, the portability and security stemming from its foldability… All of it came together and left him awestruck.

"Would you like to have it?" Mitsuha asked him.

"Huh?"

"I keep it for self-defense, but I have another one. Care to buy it for one gold coin?"

"Y-Yes please!" He didn't hesitate one bit. The conversations during dinner had given Mitsuha a pretty decent grasp of the local currency's value. She had spoken to the villagers about this as well, but didn't feel entirely confident in their fiscal sensibilities. No offense intended, of course.

Anyway, she estimated that one gold coin was worth about 100,000 Japanese yen. *I just sold that knife for a little under ten times its original value, so I'd say I'm being pretty generous here,* she mused in satisfaction. *At least by my store's standards. I'm sure a gold coin isn't much for a noble boy, anyway. Consider it a first-customer discount, kiddo.*

Wait a sec, I brought a weapon to a noble family's dinner! Did I mess up? She quickly scanned her company. *Oh, well, they don't look all that bothered.* Although Mitsuha didn't think much of it, you could objectively say it was a really bad move. Her saving grace was that it happened in this particular household. Everyone here thought of Mitsuha as a pretty yet frail little girl. Surely someone like her needed a weapon for self-defense, right? That was the Bozeses' consensus, but if other nobles had been around, they wouldn't have been so lenient.

The gleam in his brother's eyes must've made Alexis jealous. He closed in on Mitsuha and pressed, "Hey, anything else?! Do you have more stuff?!"

"Hrmm…" Nothing came to mind at first. "I really can't sell the other one, since I need it for self-defense on my journey. If there's anything else from my country that I can get rid of, it would have to be my spare underwear!"

"SOLD!" he shouted reflexively. He was immediately met with several ice-cold glares.

"Alexis…" said Lady Iris, staring down at him.

"Dear Brother…" Beatrice joined in.

The chill of their combined disappointment had frozen Alexis in place. It might be worth noting that Count Bozes had opened his mouth and nearly said the exact same thing as his eldest child, but was now sighing in relief that he hadn't. *There are lines you can't cross, Count!* Mitsuha thought upon looking at him. *Anyway…*

"That will be five silver coins, please."

"You're actually selling them?!" the Bozeses exclaimed in unison. Theodore was the lone exception. "I'd pay one small gold coin," he said, upping

the bid as though it were an auction.

Well, that sure came out of left field, Mitsuha thought. Due to Lady Iris's intervention, however, the sale never occurred and she didn't receive her small gold coin. *That would've been about 10,000 yen… What a shame. Hey, I'll have you know the underwear were unused!*

"By the way, you said you'd open a shop in the capital. What kind of shop?" asked Beatrice. At age thirteen, she was the youngest child and only daughter. Her golden hair and azure eyes gave her the look of an exemplary noble girl, but instead of being a "thorny rose" type, she was actually quite lovable.

She seems to think I'm younger than her, and I really can't blame her. She's about as tall as me, maybe a little taller, and she's already at least a C cup… Mitsuha was crying so much on the inside that she had to stop herself from tearing up. *It's my race, okay?! She's white, I'm Asian! You don't compare chihuahuas and golden retrievers, do you?! Same thing! There's just no point! Got it?!* Her thoughts were so intense that she actually began panting. *C-Calm down, Mitsuha! Deep breaths! In…and out! In…and out!*

"I'm thinking of opening a general store," she said.

"A general store?" Beatrice looked puzzled.

"Yes. I'd sell trinkets, make-up, cute accessories… Mostly fun things for girls with a few practical goods thrown in, too. Also, I'd like to have an advice corner where I would share knowledge from my country."

"Wow, that sounds great! But what do you mean by 'advice corner'?"

"From what I can tell, this country is quite different from mine. So, if people here have a serious problem that has already been solved in my country, I

figured I could help by giving them the solution."

"Now that is certainly intriguing," Count Bozes said.

Oh? Do I smell a networking opportunity? Mitsuha thought, before asking, "Is there something troubling you, Count?"

"Hmm, I would say so, yes," he replied, seemingly lost in thought. After a moment, he forced a taut smile. "For no discernible reason, the last couple of harvests in our region have yielded less wheat than before. I doubt something can be done about it, however."

"Huh? Isn't that just repeated cultivation damage and a lack of fertilizer?"

"What?" He stared at her, stunned.

Mitsuha explained that growing the same crops over and over used up the same nutrients and wore down the soil. He would have to use a few other crops and rotate between them, as well as fertilize the fields by using them as pastures, or covering them in a layer of compost or humus. She didn't name any crops and left out a lot of details─that information came at a price.

The count paid without a second thought and asked question after question. All the talking dried Mitsuha's throat, so she began drinking. Their conversation went off on a tangent and they branched into other subjects.

"You need to develop a special product! You have two options here: you either make something that can only be made in your county, or something that's way better than the competition! You gotta turn your name into a brand!

"Raise tariffs and you get less tax money! That's common sense! Expand domestic demand! Increase purchasing power! And attract the merchants! MERCHANTS!

"Inventions! Invent something and make lots of it! Let's think of something

right now!" The end of the conversation was nowhere in sight, and Mitsuha's voice seemed to be growing louder.

There's something off about her, thought Iris, who soon realized that Mitsuha was not holding a glass of tea or juice, but wine instead. Unable to deny the worth of the girl's words, however, she feigned ignorance. She was a noble's wife to the core.

"Mitsuha, you're digging a hole for yourself here!" cried Count Bozes, who was also slightly drunk.

"Oh, come on, Father! Ah…" Mitsuha froze.

Why did I say that? Did my tongue slip? I was having so much fun, it was like I was fooling around with my family again. I didn't cry when it happened… I could hold it in just fine. During the funeral, too. And now, I…

Before she knew it, Mitsuha was shedding tears.

"It's all right, I don't mind if you call me 'Father,'" said Klaus as he gently embraced her. Mitsuha clung to his large, manly chest and cried like a baby until it exhausted her to the point of sleep.

I don't recognize this ceiling, Mitsuha thought. *That joke is gettin' old, huh?* She was now alone in the guest room, buried under her bedsheets. If they didn't know better, someone peeking in might've assumed she was a shut-in. And she was, in a way, considering she'd sequestered herself in her room out of sheer embarrassment.

I actually cried! Wails, waterworks, and all! I'm now an adult woman who actually cried into a man's chest! Well, sure, the count's a softie and a good guy all around… And everyone seems to have officially decided that I'm twelve

years old, so maybe this isn't so bad.

The carriage heading for the capital would arrive in two more days, so she simply planned on waiting it out. This situation was too tricky for her to jump back to Earth. She had the time, but couldn't risk them finding out she'd vanished into thin air. Either way, she had everything she needed with her, so she didn't feel there was much of a problem.

Let's see, two knives, one short sword, three handguns with spare magazines… Hm? Wondering why I've got two knives when I told Alexis I only had one? Well, I was just talking about the folding knives I'd hidden on me for self-defense. The "one" I mentioned was the Randall hunting knife I had tucked in my belt for all to see.

Huh? You think I got too many weapons? Come on, I need this many in case I get attacked by bandits or monsters along the way! The revolver's for when the other guns get jammed, and the hidden weapons will come in handy if I get attacked while changing. The hunting knife is for emergencies, but it has other uses too, like slicing off goblin ears and stuff… What? We don't have quests like that here? Alrighty, then!

The short sword was really just for show. The people of this world probably wouldn't see the handguns as weapons, so Mitsuha couldn't be sure she wouldn't be targeted by, say, human traffickers who saw her as easy prey. The blade therefore served as a sort of "Hands Off!" sign. *And yes, I'm fully trained with it!*

Let us turn back the clock to a few days prior, when Mitsuha had returned to the captain's room of the private mercenary organization Wolf Fang.

“There y’are, li’l lady,” the captain said upon her entry. Quite the greeting.

“I’m here, Captain,” she replied. Her words made him sigh and hang his head. This was a mercenary group, but he was just “Captain.” No one actually called him by name. *It’s probably not a good thing for mercs’ real names to get out there,* Mitsuha reflected. *Maybe they’re happy as long as their group gets famous? No clue.*

“Prep’s all done. Follow me,” he said, and led her to the shooting range.

“Whoa!” she blurted. Seeing the weapons on the long table made Mitsuha so excited she couldn’t contain herself.

“It’s everything you ordered,” the captain told her. “First up, the decorative short sword. This thing’s new, not an antique. Antiques are fragile and blow a hole in your wallet. It comes with a sheath, so just tuck it in your belt. It won’t be much good in a fight, but since you’ll be usin’ your guns, you ain’t gonna need it.”

Mm, looks about right for me. I shouldn’t have a problem holding it, anyway, she thought.

“Next up, the self-defense gun─a Walther PPS. It’s small and weighs just over a pound. It uses 9mm bullets and can fit eight of ’em. Nine if you count the one in the chamber. It gets the job done in most emergencies. If you want something even lighter, there are .22 caliber guns, but they don’t pack much of a punch. This one’s popular among women lookin’ to defend themselves.”

Yep, looks fine to me.

“Now for your main weapon─a Beretta 93R. At two and a half pounds, this thing’s heavier, but it uses fifteen- and twenty-round magazines, plus the bullet in the chamber. This guy’s a 9mm, too, but its biggest draw is the three-round

burst mode. You can switch between single-fire and burst like *this.*" He gave a small demonstration.

"Go apeshit and you'll run outta ammo in a second, but it'll work wonders when you need to take someone out the moment a scrap starts. Keep it on burst mode, and switch to single-fire when you need to."

Oho. Yeah, it's kinda heavy, but I like the burst mode. Great choice, Captain!

"And that over there's the revolver. It's .38 cal," he said, and not a word more.

Huh? That's it? You hate revolvers or something?

"You can use your spare magazines to play around with different bullets. There's armor-piercing bullets, which can get through bulletproof vests; hollow-points can incapacitate the target even if you miss critical spots; if you're using a rifle, there's FMJs; and machine guns have tracers and incendiary armor-piercing bullets." *Y-Yeah*…

"Now, try gettin' it in yer holster and make it fit. Then it's time for handling instructions and shooting practice. I'll tell ya how to care for 'em and give ya a few things to keep in mind. We'll do the maintenance on these for ya, though. Bring 'em here after you've used 'em a lot or when you feel it's time."

So, in other words, Mitsuha couldn't have been more prepared for the journey. *Ah! I should've brought some grenades, too! I messed up!*

Huh? You're wondering if I could actually kill people with these? Of course I could. What reason would I have not to? I wouldn't kill regular people, of course. That's obvious. But if someone tried to kill me, why would I spare them?

Would you expect me to respect their life and let myself die instead? What a joke!

Or what, you think I could just tie 'em up and give 'em a stern talking-to? They'd just attack me again the moment they got free. And if not, they'd go after someone else. Just how many good and honest people would get hurt? Anything that'd happen to them would basically be my fault. If innocent people got killed, I'd be their murderer. Scumbags who took the wrong path in life are barely human anymore—they're beasts that are better off put down.

Oh, and killing enemy soldiers is fine by me, even if they aren't scumbags. They could be good husbands and fathers just looking out for their families, but if they chose that line of work and approached someone with the intent to kill them, they couldn't really complain if they were the ones who got killed. Sure, some fight because they got drafted or something, and I feel for them, but in the end, my life is important and I don't want to die, so I don't really have a choice.

I've seen movies where the main character hesitated to kill the enemy. What the hell was that all about? Was he okay in the head? Did he have a bad case of stupid? It was even worse when their hesitation caused their friend or lover to die, leading to even more misery, regret, and, uh… Basically, they should've saved the thinking for after they killed the enemy, right?

What? No? Okay…

"Mitsuha! It's lunchtime!" A girl's voice jerked Mitsuha from her swirling escapism and plopped her back into reality. The one calling out to her wasn't the butler; perhaps he was apprehensive about waking a girl who'd cried herself to sleep. If so, he certainly excelled at his job.

That's Sebastian for you, Mitsuha thought. *Oh? His name is Stefan? My bad.*

The lunch was an uncomfortable experience. Not to worry─everyone was still very kind to Mitsuha. They didn't even mention yesterday's events… But their consideration somehow made it even more painful. She was so mortified, she couldn't even look at the count. In an attempt to make her feel more at home, he brought up all sorts of talking points.

Huh? Inventions? Salt production? Dessert research? Whoa, whoa, whoa, what kinda stuff did yesterday's me tell you?! Please pretend you didn't hear anything! Huh? Which one do I like more? Out of what? Oh, your sons… Okay. I'm not interested in either right now. Please call me again when they still haven't tied the knot and you're worried the well might dry up.

What? Why the long faces, you two? Oh, by the way, I don't mind taking little Beatrice. Huh? You don't wanna be called "little"? Y'know I'd be your older sister if I married one of your brothers, right? What? You'll stop that no matter what? Well, do your best. I'll cheer you on.

After lunch, there was a scramble. For what, you ask? Well, for Mitsuha, actually. The count wanted to talk about agriculture, forestry, taxes, and special products. Lady Iris wanted to play dress-up with her using Beatrice's old clothes. Alexis invited her for a long, scenic trail ride, but she'd never been on a horse.

As for the younger children: Theodore wanted to hear more about knives. Mitsuha did know about a few things, like forging, alloying, carbon percentages, and tempering. But she couldn't help but wonder, *What kind of guy insists on talking to a girl about blades?* Beatrice, on the other hand, simply wanted to have girl talk. That was understandable, as there likely weren't any other noble

girls her age in the county.

All right, time to try and sell those (unused) underwear again. Small gold coin, here I come!

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This and that happened, and it was finally time for Mitsuha to head out to the capital. Oh, in case you're curious, they'd talked it out and decided that they would share her. She'd spent some time with one, then another, until everyone had had their turn. She'd barely been able to catch a breath.

Also, why the heck did Stefan join the sharing discussion? He's a butler, right?

Anyway, as we've established, miscellaneous events had occurred, and it was now time for her to leave.

"Take care of yourself, Mitsuha. And try not to get involved with suspicious men," said Lady Iris. *Oh, don't worry, I had tons of practice with Alexis.*

"We'll be going to the capital, too. Be sure to wait for me," said the suspicious man in question. The ballroom season, a time when the nobles gathered in the capital for various parties and occasions, was approaching.

I'm sure glad it's not right now, Alexis…

"Tell me more about your country next time," said Theodore. He had a keen interest in technology.

Too bad I can't tell him anything big. Not yet, anyway. Patience is a virtue, kid!

"When I come to the capital, let me show you around to all the good food stalls!" said Beatrice. The girl seemed to have quite an appetite.

Last, but definitely not least, was the count. "Be careful on the road," he said. "I gave your retinue an official letter instructing that you be given whatever money you need. There is a limit, of course, but you should be able to buy anything short of a luxurious palace."

I can't thank you enough, Mitsuha thought. She now had enough money for the trip and anything else she might need right away. She also had gold coins she could give to the captain. She was dying to know how much they were worth back on Earth.

"Have a safe journey." Stefan saw her off with a bow, and she walked to the carriage alongside her retinue.

Yeah… My retinue.

The Bozeses simply hadn't allowed her to travel by herself. She'd argued that she would be with several other passengers inside the carriage, but they'd still refused. With the ballroom season so close, they'd also wanted to send two of their servants as an advance party and figured they might as well go with her. One was a maid in her mid-twenties and the other a bodyguard who looked about thirty. The journey was a week long, so at least Mitsuha would have someone to talk to.

The carriage wasn't the usual decorative sort used by nobles, but a covered wagon that could fit a good number of people. It was drawn by two horses and resembled one of those prairie schooners you might see in westerns. Besides the two coachmen who took turns driving it, there were seven passengers: Mitsuha's party of three; a rather chubby, middle-aged merchant; a young mother with her daughter; and a young man dressed like an adventurer.

Adventurer?! That's not a real job, damn it! Mitsuha quickly scolded herself for her fantasy as she realized he was probably a bodyguard. *Could easily be just a passenger, though.* Either way, it would be a long journey. Mitsuha hoped to chat with them to gather information, so she figured she'd find out sooner or later.

A few hours passed. Mitsuha had come to realize that her group─herself, a maid, and a bodyguard─clearly looked like a noble girl and her retinue. She could tell the other passengers were puzzled as to why she didn't use her own carriage; she saw it in their eyes. Even worse, they actively avoided her or pretended she wasn't there at all. *Ugh, come on, damn it!*

Seven days later, they arrived at the capital. *And guess what? Nothing bad happened! We weren't attacked by any bandits or starving monsters at all! It makes sense, really. If bandit attacks happened all the time, no one would ever travel or trade. Yup! I knew that!* It wasn't as though racking up protection had been meaningless, however. She was certain it'd be useful sooner or later.

The carriage had picked up and dropped off many people along the way. As Mitsuha chatted with the maid and bodyguard, the others had realized she was harmless and quite like a commoner, so they'd broken the ice, too. She was able to learn a great deal from the merchant. She even felt like doing him a couple of favors once she became rich. He, too, had been bound for the capital.

Once they left the carriage, Mitsuha's attendants tagged along with her instead of going straight to the Bozeses' capital mansion─count's orders. They couldn't leave her side until she got to the inn. *What a helicopter dad,* Mitsuha thought. He'd first insisted she stay at their capital mansion and wouldn't take no for an answer. Getting him to let her go where she liked had been grueling work. She'd had to utter such banal lines as, "I can't become independent that way! I want to live as a commoner, not a noble!"

Why did he act like he had any power over me, anyway? I just stayed at his place for a couple days and sold him a necklace. For cheap, too! Hmph!

Though… Yeah, I did wanna make sure I locked down his support. But wait, he's the one who recommended the inn. It's not some fancy noble joint that costs an arm and a leg, right?

To Mitsuha's surprise, it was a pretty normal inn aimed at commoners. As it turned out, the lady in charge of the place was from the Bozeses' county and acquainted with the count. To him, this was just a cheap, reliable inn. The maid and bodyguard waited until she checked in, passed the letter to the owner, and departed for the mansion.

All right, I can now jump back to Earth as much as I want! Time to get serious… Let's find a place where I can make my fortune!

Chapter 6
A Place to Call My Own

The inn was as standard as they come. The hostess was a lively lady married to the silent chef, who excelled at his job. They had a seven-year-old daughter who noticeably lacked cat ears, and what a shame that was. The girl reminded Mitsuha of Colette. It was still too soon to visit her, sadly—the timing would've been awkward.

Nothing's stopping me from having fun with this cutie, though! Oh, she's too busy helping? Okay…

Mitsuha went to her room, gathered her things, jumped back to Earth to drop them off, then returned to the inn with some new supplies in tow. The dress and shoes had served their purpose, so she left them at home in favor of spare underwear and daily necessities. Reputable or not, Mitsuha felt that the inn couldn't be completely thief-proof.

I wouldn't be set back too much if my soap or underwear got pinched, but that dress is another story. It cost me a whole lotta money!

Mitsuha changed into some plain clothing and wandered around town. *Strategy 101: gain an advantage by getting familiar with the land!*

She guessed the main roads would be safe during the day, but wore a handgun in her shoulder holster and a knife in her thigh belt just in case. *I'll probably have to be more careful once I start to stand out.*

The place really did give Mitsuha the impression of a capital. Even though this world was still developing, she found the buildings impressive. She found

the meat skewers to be pretty delicious, too, though she chose not to think about what was in them. She steered clear of dark alleys and slums─Mitsuha had no need of any cliché, life-threatening encounters.

Once the sun began to set, she headed back to the inn. The dinner was… commendable, perhaps? A lot of effort had gone into it, but with spices being such a luxury, the meal tasted bland. It wasn't bad, per se, but she still found it lacking. *Ah. I can just bring some spices from home,* Mitsuha thought as she cleaned her plate. She then returned to her room, jumped back to Japan, and had the most refreshing shower.

After lunch the next day, she wasted no time going to the realtor. While it might've been early, she had woken up so late she'd nearly missed breakfast, so she was fairly sure the place would be open. She had to ask for directions a few times, but eventually found the right place. It came with the count's recommendation, so surely she had nothing to worry about. Regardless, she meekly walked inside. She could've barged in as though she owned the place, but it was like a habit by now.

"Good day to you!" said the young man behind the counter. Obviously, those weren't the words that came out of his mouth, but that was how Mitsuha's brain processed them. "Welcome to our establishment. How may I be of assistance?"

Wow, he's treating me like a customer even though I look like a kid, Mitsuha thought. *He's good at this. I knew I could count on you, Count Bozes!* Slightly impressed, she handed him an envelope.

"Umm, I would like a shop with living quarters attached, please. Here, I've got a letter of referral." The employee took it and glanced at the name on the

back. Immediately, his face went pale. He asked Mitsuha to wait for a moment, then hurried through the door behind him.

Wow, look at him go… A count's word sure is effective, she thought.

Moments later, he was replaced by a much older man. This gentleman was also a bit panicky, but kept his composure as he said, "My apologies for the delay. I am Lutz Zoltan, the owner. Welcome to my humble establishment. How may I be of service?"

The big cheese himself, huh? Mitsuha thought. *Makes sense. That letter proves I've got ties to a pretty powerful noble.*

"Pleased to meet you, sir," she replied courteously. "I'd like to start up a shop."

"Yes, it said so in the letter. We have several properties that might suit your needs. Shall we discuss the details?" He led her to a sitting room further inside the building. Normal customers were most likely dealt with at the counter, so this was surely the VIP treatment.

Maybe they'll give me some free sweets?

They did, and Mitsuha found them overwhelmingly…so-so. She figured they were good by this world's standards, but they couldn't even compare to Japanese desserts. Her face might have given away her lack of enthusiasm, but Mr. Zoltan didn't seem upset. He most likely assumed she ate better sweets daily. Or he could have been too tense to pay it any mind.

"Here's what we have available," he said as he presented and explained her options.

All right, anything in the noble district's out, Mitsuha decided. *Sure, it's probably peaceful, and the clientele'd be good, but these prices are insane, and I*

don't wanna deal with nobles all the time. There wouldn't be many commoners around, either. Well, it's not like I don't like nobles. I know there are good and bad people in all classes—from royalty to slaves. But I feel like I'd get bored and tired pretty quickly if I had to deal with nobles all day. It's not a real store without the patronage of the occasional lowbrow simpleton.

She wasn't recommended anything close to the slums, so excluding the noble district left her with properties in the commoner district. She could either choose to be closer to the center or closer to the nobles.

Hmmm… Pretty sure I'll need noble money flowing in if I want to make a fortune, she thought. *There's some good food around there, too. And no, that's* not *why I walked around town yesterday! Honest!*

"Umm, may I take a look at this one, this one, and this one?" she asked.

"Certainly," said Mr. Zoltan. "Would you like to go right away?"

"Yes, please," she replied, and the two prepared to leave. Not before Mitsuha stuffed the rest of the sweets into her pocket, however.

Huh? Why does the serving girl look so sad? W-Wait! Were the rest gonna go to her? Using the same sweets twice might not be ideal for the establishment's reputation, so it wasn't unusual to think they'd give away leftovers to staff members or children. *Boy, did I screw up… Sorry! I'll make it up to you with some Japanese sweets, I promise!*

Not long after, Mitsuha and Mr. Zoltan arrived at the first building she'd chosen. *It's in a good location,* Mitsuha observed. *Being next to the main road means I'd have a good stream of customers, but it looks so cramped. Plus, I don't want* too *many customers. It'd wear me down. I'd be satisfied with a modest clientele who only know about me thanks to good ol' word of mouth. My*

business model's gonna be "Big Profits, Slow Returns"…! Okay, doesn't sound great.

Immediately upon seeing the second property, Mitsuha thought, *Does Mr. Zoltan think I'm some multi-millionaire? What would I even do with something this huge?! What, does he think I'm gonna turn it into an orphanage and have the children work for me? Does he take me for some philanthropic saint? Nope, that ain't me! I'll pass! Next!*

Mr. Zoltan brought her to the third building, which was a little off the main road. There weren't tons of people passing by, and the area had clearly seen better days. The place was a three-story brick building that had once housed an inn and restaurant. Like any such establishment, it also had a backyard, complete with a well. The room that used to be the dining hall would be a good place for Mitsuha to display her wares, while the kitchen had a drain, meaning she could install a bath. All in all, it seemed perfectly suited to her needs. First too small, then too big, and then just right. That was a basic and reliable sales technique. Mr. Zoltan really knew how it was done.

"I'll take it!" she gushed, like a whimsical little girl buying some cheap candy. Not the most fitting tone, since it probably cost hundreds of gold coins.

Ah, that reminds me… I completely forgot to ask the price!

"Welcome back, Milady!" a crowd of servants cried out in perfect unison.

"H-Hello…" Mitsuha replied, a little taken aback. Mr. Zoltan, on the other hand, was frozen still. She'd asked him to come with her to discuss the payment in Count Bozes's capital mansion, and upon their arrival they'd been greeted by the entourage of attendants.

Mr. Zoltan was sweating so profusely that Mitsuha felt a pang of guilt. *He might actually think I'm the count's daughter or something.* A maid led them to the reception room, where they met a man with a refined aura.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance. I am Rufus, a butler here," he said, though his introduction was only directed toward Mr. Zoltan. Mitsuha wasn't sure why he'd excluded her, but chose to shrug it off. The butler then faced her and asked, "Milady, who is this man, if I may ask?"

"Oh, this is Mr. Lutz Zoltan, a realtor. I'm buying one of his properties for my shop."

"I see. Master Lutz, thank you for conducting business with our Lady Mitsuha."

"P-Please, there's no need for that!" Mr. Zoltan humbled himself.

During his one-on-one time with Mitsuha, Stefan had told her that the butlers of influential nobles were powerful enough to make short work of your everyday salesmen. He'd also told her about Rufus, saying, "Though quite young, he's not bad at all." However, he emphasized that Rufus should never hear word of his compliments. Mitsuha didn't know why she'd been sworn to secrecy, but her guess was that it was a high form of praise among butlers.

"Oh, dear. Milady, your hair appears a bit unkempt," Rufus noted. "Bertha, see to it that she looks her best!"

"Understood!" barked the maid in question.

H-Huuuh? But we were about to make a deal here, Mitsuha thought, but the maid dragged her out by the hand and sat her in a dressing room before she could protest. After enduring a good bout of combing, she was finally allowed to return to the reception room. *Huh? Uhh, why does Mr. Zoltan look like he's*

about to die? Is he even breathing?

"Ohh, Milady, welcome back. I see they did a wonderful job with your hair. You look marvelous. Now, where were we… The price, yes? What will you be charging, Mr. Zoltan?"

The salesman still looked deprived of most of his hit points. With desperation in his voice, he uttered, "T-Two hundred and eighty gold coins!"

Huh? That's so cheap! What a steal! Mitsuha cheered internally. It was agreed that the Bozes household would pay Mr. Zoltan's company directly. When Mitsuha requested money for renovations, she was granted twenty gold coins, raising the total expenses to three hundred. *What a nice number!*

Mitsuha saw Mr. Zoltan off in front of the mansion. He informed her that he'd write up the paperwork and send it at a later date, then gave her the key to the building. She was now free to enter and leave it as she pleased. Normally, she would've been wary of signing a contract without checking the documents first, but since Rufus and a great deal of other servants had witnessed the signing, she wasn't worried in the least. It didn't take a professional salesman to know what would happen if he broke the terms.

Boy, it's great having a sponsor!

"Hellooo!" Mitsuha called out. The response came almost immediately.

A moody, sinewy man─who could've been either middle-aged or elderly─poked out from behind a corner. "Yeh? Whaddya want?" he asked curtly.

Mitsuha had set foot in a carpenter's workshop. After parting ways with Mr. Zoltan, she'd tried to think of someone she could contract to do her

renovations. Then, it had occurred to her: *Oh yeah, Mr. Zoltan's bound to know someone! We just split up, but I'm sure he won't mind if I bother him some more. I don't know too many people just yet, so I gotta use the little network I have!*

With that, she'd gone back to Japan, bought some high-quality Western sweets, and headed to Lutz Real Estate. The sweets, of course, were a souvenir for the girl. The offering had caught her off guard, but Mitsuha somehow persuaded her to accept it and call for Mr. Zoltan.

"Could you please point me to someone who's good at what they do, takes pride in their work, and is open-minded enough to try new things?" she'd asked him. He'd hesitated to help her, though she didn't know why. However, she hadn't backed down, and he'd eventually given in, though on the condition that she listened to one request.

"Erm, if I put you in contact with someone, might I ask you not to haggle over the rate?"

"Huh? I would never. Trying to lower the cost of a craftsman's services is an insult to their craft. Good craftsmanship deserves proper compensation," she'd said, adding that she'd pay directly this time. After that, Mr. Zoltan had finally relaxed and pointed her to a reliable workman.

What was that all about, anyway? Mitsuha wondered. *Did haggling bring up bad memories or something?*

"I'd like you to build these for me, please!" she said, spreading out some documents on the table.

Kunz, the carpenter, looked at them in awe. "Wha… What inna world…?" The first source of his shock was the paper itself. It was thin, smooth, and durable at the same time─surely a rarity in this country.

“W-Wait, this─!” His jaw dropped further when he saw the crisp detail of the images (which were photos) and foreign writing. The final blow was the furniture displayed in the pictures. Every piece was as novel as it was beautiful.

“This thing’s a table?! And that’s a…chest? And this here’s…”

“Ah, I don’t need that one,” Mitsuha cut in, then gestured to the other items. “I need this, these shelves, and these display things. I’d also like defenses on my doors and windows. Like this, see? I’ll provide the metal parts myself. I’ll also need these stands for water tanks. You can see how they look in this phot─I mean, picture. See how big they are? I’d also like a bathroom installed near my kitchen. I’ll handle the water flow myself, so I just need you to divide the room. I’ll tell you more when we’re there, and─”

“…I’ll do it,” Kunz mumbled. His eyes were fixed on the dozens of sheets Mitsuha had printed off of her computer. He grasped them so tightly she thought he’d tear them.

“But we haven’t even discussed the paymen─”

“I said, I’ll do it. I’M TAKIN’ THIS JOB!”

Well, whatever. He’s motivated, and that’s good enough for me, Mitsuha thought.

“This paper’s stayin’ with me, though, ya hear?”

Huh? That’s what you wanted?

“Sure thing,” she agreed. “These are just samples, though. I’ll bring you something more detailed later. And if you want, I can even get you blueprints for furniture and stuff that’s got nothing to do with my order.” She felt she could allow him that much. Basic designs weren’t some futuristic alien technology. She’d leave the methods and durability completely in their hands, though.

"I'm gonna do it," the craftsman declared. "I'll catch up to these geniuses if it's the last thing I do!"

Wow, he's really fired up, huh?

Hey, remember when I said I wouldn't bring anything along that might affect this world's future? Well, I LIED! Just kiddin', I wouldn't sell anything like that, but no harm done if it's just for me, right? There's no problem with me using anything that doesn't depend on me. Even if people stumbled upon the tech I have in mind, they couldn't analyze it, let alone reverse engineer it. Plus, I really don't wanna cut corners with security.

I also have to be careful about what I do end up putting on the market. It's gotta be something that wouldn't create problems if I suddenly vanished. Small luxuries, handy little tools… That sort of thing. People might be sad to see 'em go along with me, but it wouldn't cause any real trouble. Oh, and I don't wanna attract too much attention from powerful people. That'd make things complicated, especially if those "powerful people" included any big-shot merchants.

Oh, well. Whatever happens, happens. If things go sour, I can just try this again in a different country or do a really big sale and then dip outta here. Not that it's ideal. If possible, I want to make a fortune at a comfortable pace, having fun with everyone involved. Huh? It'll never be that smooth? Okay…

At any rate, it was time for Mitsuha to gather some things and put the next phase of her plan in action. Where from, you ask? Her home back on Earth. Normally, she would've been glad to return, but the whole ordeal was draining. *Huh. I just*

realized you can't spell "draining" without "raining," she mused. *That's kinda ironic.* Nonsense aside, her family's car had passed on along with them, and so the Yamanos' parking space was always open. Mitsuha was now using it for deliveries, and it was being occupied by a steady stream of shipments from home improvement stores, emporiums, online retailers, et cetera.

Mitsuha had contracted a fuel salesman for six large propane tanks. She split them up into three groups of two, hooking some up to dummy pipes outside her home to make it seem like they were in use. Six propane tanks were a bit too much for the average home, but she'd convinced the salesman she needed them to power her through her new stay-at-home job. She'd known him for a long time, though, so he was probably being a bit lenient with her.

She would use propane for the oven, stove, and bath in her store, but had a different reason for using two tanks of this size at a time─electricity. It was the backbone of modern life, and a propane generator was the best method for her to get it in the other world. In reality, the extra propane tanks were spares for her to bring to the capital whenever one ran out.

Gasoline and diesel generators had lots of problems: they were loud, hard to refill, bad for the environment, used dangerous fuel, and could cause some concern if they ran for too long. They couldn't even compare to propane generators.

Of course, Mitsuha didn't neglect to install solar panels and a big battery, as well as an electrical energy control system. The latter was basically a switchboard to help her manage her multiple methods of generating and storing electricity.

She'd had the solar panels installed on the rooftop so they wouldn't stand

out. The flat, open rooftop─as opposed to a regular peaked roof─was another good thing about the brick building she'd bought. The previous owners had used it to hang their laundry.

Mitsuha also brought along an LED TV that didn't require too much power and a multitrack recorder, as well as several game consoles. *I mean, I'm gonna be spending a lot of my time in the other world, so I'll need this stuff to catch up on my shows and play video games. A girl's gotta have a way to unwind on slow days.*

She took metal window bars, along with some other security equipment, and jump-carried─or just "transferred"─them to the other world. The wares she'd be selling would stay at home for a while longer. She'd gone shopping at discount stores and loaded up on all kinds of cheap, useful items. A whole bunch of them would go for several silver coins─thousands of yen─each. Others were probably worth a small gold coin apiece. It was a real pile of treasure.

Mitsuha also crafted hiding spots to stash her earnings: one at home and one in the shop. She called them "deep pockets." Since the area around the shop wasn't all that peaceful, and because she was often away from home, she needed safe places to keep her money.

Making them was a breeze. First, she acquired a large plastic container and a twenty-foot-long PVC pipe. Next, she opened up the floor and jumped between worlds, all the while picturing the dirt below in the shape of a twenty-foot-deep hole with an open space at the bottom. In the other world, she appeared alongside a chunk of dirt with a very tall dirt cylinder sticking out of it. Then, she jumped back with the container and the pipe, making sure they appeared in the hole she'd created─with the container at the bottom, of course─and voilà.

Success!

She'd thought of it while running through the internal "instruction manual" given to her by the formless being alongside her healing powers. While her power couldn't be used to transfer *just* an object, she could bring things with her if she concentrated on them. She didn't even have to touch them directly, which made sense. If she *did* have to touch everything she wanted to transfer, she'd be showing up at the end of a jump in just her underwear and shirt, leaving any coats, skirts, shoes, and items in her pockets behind. What a tragedy that would be. At this point, she'd experimented with her powers enough to understand the process.

When these safes get pretty full, I'm gonna really savor the sound the coins make as I toss them down the pipe! she thought happily.

Stealing her stock of gold would require knowledge of the "deep pockets," digging a twenty-foot hole without anyone noticing, then lifting up the gold from that depth without using any heavy machinery─it wouldn't fit inside the house, after all. The noise, the handling of the unearthed dirt, the danger of people walking by, time limits… It was impossible for anyone but Mitsuha, really. She could simply transfer it out.

Even if someone did discover the pipes, they'd have no idea they were twenty feet deep and housed a trove of gold at the bottom. And if Mitsuha somehow lost her world-jumping ability, she could just hire some people to dig it up for her. If she didn't have to hide the work or do it within a time limit, she'd be reunited with her coins in a couple of days. Both worlds were advanced enough to have well-digging, at least.

She also attended driving school, since she only had a scooter license.

Obviously she didn't need a license or registration to use a car in the other world, but they'd be required to buy one on Earth, as well as for maintenance and oil changes. All in all, it was a worthwhile investment. As things were, Mitsuha had no plans to drive Scooty or a car in the other world. They'd make her stand out too much. She planned to use them mostly for shopping trips in Japan, though she was open to making an exception if the situation called for it.

The renovators ran into problems every now and again, but they were making decent progress. While they were occupied, Mitsuha took the opportunity to transfer her wares to the second floor. She planned to set up security systems for this level later on. She chose the third floor for her personal quarters, a move that prioritized security over convenience.

She stored a rope ladder and other evacuation tools on the rooftop and planned to store a backpack full of emergency supplies elsewhere. These were all preparations in case she hired any employees. If the place experienced a raid or similar assault and she couldn't jump because of them, she'd need a reliable alternative. Mitsuha was a cautious, cowardly worrywart to the core. She'd take that claim to her grave, even if her peers unanimously disagreed.

"Hello, Captain! So, did you check the value?"

After her shop preparations, Mitsuha jumped to the mercenary base and hurried off to ask the captain what she'd been dying to know.

"Man, it always feels like you just pop outta nowhere… Yeah, we had it appraised. The purity's ninety percent. Each one's worth about two hundred an' eight dollars on today's market, includin' fees."

208 dollars… That's about 25,000 yen, Mitsuha thought. *That's way less*

than I expected. Plus, it messes up my calculations. From the prices of food and board, Mitsuha had estimated a coin's worth to be at least 100,000 yen. *Ah, wait. I wasn't wrong—it's just that the people on Earth put different values on things. Earthlings have lots of expenses—taxes, rent, electricity, gas, water, cars, entertainment, clothing, food, education, neighborhood associations, and so on.*

The people from the other world have way less. People with homes pay taxes, then there's food, clothes, firewood, and…booze, maybe? Anyway, they don't have to pay for nearly as much stuff as people on Earth. Though they do have smaller incomes… If the monthly income for a family of four is two gold coins, then yes, one gold coin would be worth 100,000 yen. But the exchange rate between that and Earth's money is 25,000 yen. That's all there is to it.

To compare commodity prices between the worlds was foolish. In the other world, crops were way cheaper, while things like clothes, tableware, rare ingredients, and luxury goods were absurdly expensive. The standards varied wildly depending on what you compared. In the end, such comparisons were meaningless, and Mitsuha could only really say how much she would need to live on one side and how much on the other.

So, since I'd need one billion yen to live in Japan till I'm a hundred, that'd be 40,000 gold coins. As for the other world… If I want a life of eating good food, wearing comfortable clothes, staying up late, and buying the newest household goods—a standard life in Japan, but livin' large over there—I'd also need 40,000 gold coins, for a total of 80,000. That's my final goal… I'll save up those 80,000 gold coins and have a peaceful and happy retirement!

~The End~

Please keep an eye out for the next series featuring Miss Mitsuha!

…YEAH, RIGHT!

Anyway, I'll assume that in the other world, a gold coin is worth 100,000 yen, a small gold coin is about 10,000, a silver coin is a thousand, and a small silver coin is a hundred. And since one gold is worth 25,000 yen on Earth, I have to draw a line between how I think about money here and there.

I'll have to set my prices pretty high, but I don't really have a choice. If my stuff's too cheap, it'll just fly off the shelves and I won't get a second to breathe. Not to mention how much that would affect the world. But I also don't want my goods to cost an arm and a leg. I'm sure I'd still get people willing to pay for them, so it'd be a quick and easy way to strike it rich, but Mitsuha's General Store isn't about that!

If I wanted to do something along those lines, I'd go around the world selling pearls and artificial gems at insane prices. Then I could put on a disguise, change my name, hire some people, and quickly rack up enough money to live a comfortable life. I won't do that, though. You wanna know why?

That'd be way too boring! Life isn't all about making money. You just need enough to make it fun. Not having enough is hard, so "enough" is all I need. But what would be the point if I didn't have fun getting there? The real gold is the friends you make along the way…or something. Anyway, if I can, I want to get the money at a leisurely pace. And luckily, my power makes that real easy. I'm gonna share its blessings and have a good time doing it! But if that makes me some enemies, I'll just have to crush them. I can't let anyone threaten that

happiness.

"Ya done?" the captain asked abruptly.

"Huh? With what?" Mitsuha was jerked back to the present.

"Daydreamin'. It really dragged on this time, too."

Oops… Sorry!

"Anyway, let's go."

"Comiiing!"

Today was assault rifle practice. Mitsuha had long since given up on grenades, by the way. Her throws had always somehow brought them closer, not farther away, so the people training her banned her from touching them. *I'll have to make do with RPGs or something.*

Please keep an eye out for Miss Mitsuha's next series, *RPG-22*!

Stop! That joke's a dud!

Chapter 7
Mitsuha's General Store

At last, it was time for Mitsuha to open for business. The renovations had gone off without a hitch. The store's interior had everything she needed, including shelves, curtains, and lighting. Her wares were all in place, priced, and described in detail. During business hours, her security system would be set to "off." Mitsuha's living space was ready for occupancy, too.

The propane generator chugged along, helping to provide the place with electricity. The solar energy company had insisted on installing the panels themselves, but Mitsuha claimed she'd be using them on a faraway island and needed only to know how to install them herself. With the help of Kunz and his workers, setting them up had been a breeze.

The bathroom had also been surprisingly easy to build. The kitchen already had a drain, so it was just a matter of building a wooden divider and putting the bathtub in place. Even setting up a steady supply of hot water had proved to be quick work for the carpenters. Mitsuha was truly impressed. *This stuff is basically alien to them, but with a blueprint and a little explanation, they got it all done perfectly. Craftsmen are awesome!*

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Once all that was finished, Mitsuha had gone around handing out free towel sets to both her next-door neighbors and the three households on the opposite side of the road. They'd found such a young girl running a shop just as impressive as the fluffiness of the towels. Always keen to make a sale, Mitsuha hadn't forgotten to mention they'd be available at her store.

She'd also gone home and printed several dozen flyers off her computer. When she returned, she'd hung them outside her favorite restaurants, Mr. Zoltan's office, and a few other places. She'd written the letters by hand using her mouse. The result was messy, but a little endearing. Anyway, all was in order, and the day of the grand opening had arrived.

Giddy with enthusiasm, she sat behind the counter, where she could keep an eye on the entire sales floor. She'd open at Japan's equivalent of ten o'clock, and close up at four. There'd be no breaks for lunch, so she planned her meals: she would eat a filling brunch before opening each day, then enjoy a lavish dinner shortly after closing. *Late dinners make you gain weight more quickly,* she thought. *Though maybe I need some more meat on me… Especially in certain places… Wait, no, shut up!* Mitsuha was also the sole staff member, so if nature called, she'd have to wait until there were no customers to hang up a "Be back soon!" sign. If there was no end to them, however, she'd just have to hold it.

All right, everyone! she announced in her mind. *Mitsuha's General Store is now open for business!*

…Eleven o'clock. Not a single customer so far… *Well, it's only day one, so word probably hasn't gotten around yet. And besides, these are work hours. Maybe I'll get some people in when it's time for lunch?*

One o’clock, still no customers.

Three o’clock, still no customers.

Four o’clock, still no customers…and it was time to close. Mitsuha collapsed on the counter. *Well, a-again, it’s just day one! And it’s not like I’m running a supermarket with all the newspaper ads and opening promos and whatnot!*

The pattern only repeated itself the second day.

Eleven o’clock, still no customers.

One o’clock, still no customers.

Three o’clock, still no customers.

Four o’clock, still no customers…and it was time to close. Mitsuha collapsed on the counter again. *Do I have to extend my opening hours so I catch everyone on their way home from work? No, that’s unacceptable! I mean, I’d have to work even more! That simply can’t happen! But what else can I do? Hrm… I just started and I’m already in a pickle… I’ll think of a new strategy if the same thing happens tomorrow.*

Day three.

Eleven o’clock, still no customers.

One o’clock, still no customers.

Three o’clock, still no customers.

Lord Almighty, please help me!

Ding-a-ling!

FINALLY! Mitsuha thought in relief.

"WELCOME!" She gleefully greeted her first customers: a trio of girls in plain yet well-maintained clothes.

"This place is new, isn't it?" one of them asked.

"Yes, ma'am! Opened just two days ago! Look around! Take your time!" *Keep it cool, Mitsuha! They'll leave if you're too pushy,* she thought, making an effort to calm herself. On the outside, at least; her heart drummed wildly as she watched them walk around. They wandered over to a section for handy household tools.

"Huh, what's this? A 'fish scaler'?" said one of the girls, looking perplexed.

"Absolutely! It turns scale removal into a real cakewalk. Preparing a fish dinner has never been easier!" Mitsuha tried to seize the opportunity to make a sale, but…

"F-Fish?"

"You take off the scales?"

They sounded even more puzzled. *Huh? What's so weird about it?* she wondered. But the girls paid no mind to her confusion, and merely exchanged glances before browsing another shelf. Cooking utensils, flashlights, clocks, writing supplies… A lot of things seemed to interest them, but Mitsuha could tell they had no intention of buying any. As they made their way over to the cute accessory corner, Mitsuha prayed, *Don't fail me now… Damn it! It did! Next, there's the…*

Just as Mitsuha was clenching her teeth, the girls stopped.

"'Shampoo'…?" A member of the trio tilted her head.

All right, now we're in business!

“Yes!” Mitsuha jumped at the chance. “That’s a magical liquid that cleans, repairs, and moisturizes your hair! A must-have for every girl!” This world did have bars of soap, but they were primitive, ineffective, lacked a pleasant aroma, and cost so much that only nobles and other wealthy people could afford them. Melting the bars down was all they could do to wash their hair, and that was too much of a luxury for your typical commoner. *That’s where my one-of-a-kind, limited-edition product comes in: a big ol’ pump bottle of liquid shampoo!*

“But eight silver is too much,” murmured one of the girls.

Mitsuha agreed, to some extent. After all, this was a world where a one-night stay at the average inn, meals included, cost four or five silver. But the shampoo before them was leagues ahead of any soap on the market, so there had to be a fair price. When Mitsuha was staying with the Bozeses, Beatrice had complained about how her soap was flimsy and ran out too quickly. *Ooh, I should give her some of this as a gift,* she thought, then addressed the girl who seemed most interested.

“I highly recommend you get it, miss. A single bottle can be used dozens of times! Considering how beautiful and silky your hair will become, it’s quite a steal.”

“D-Dozens of times?!”

If I had to guess, I’d say they’re servants or something like that. They must not have much time for personal grooming, but they’re not allowed to look bad, either. None of them have long hair, probably to make care and styling quick and easy. That means they’d get even more uses out of the bottle. Plus, they wouldn’t have to waste time melting down soap.

“Yes! I’ll stake my store’s reputation on it!” Mitsuha declared. The girls

chatted amongst themselves for a moment, and then the girl with the bottle in hand reached to put it back on the… *OH NO!*

"P-Please wait! Would you like a demonstration? I'll show you what it can do! For free!"

The girls looked at one another. "What d'you think?" one of them asked.

"I'm curious, but it's getting late…"

"Yeah, we don't get many half days. We said we'd go get some good food this time."

Meanwhile, Mitsuha was screaming on the inside. *I waited all this time for my first customers, and now they're slipping away from me! I'm at my wits' end… I feel like I'm gonna be ruined if I let them go. I've gotta do everything I can to keep them here!*

"W-Wait!" she called out to them. "I'll also cook you up a meal. I guarantee it'll be delicious! Nothing else in this town will compare. And it'll be free! So please, try my products!" The girls probably pitied her a little upon seeing her sheer desperation. You could see in their expressions that they found it hard to refuse. Finally, one of them spoke up. "Okay… I'll try it."

Yay! Mitsuha cheered. *Looking like a kid was useful for once!*

"Right this way, please!"

She put a sign out front to deter any walk-ins, locked the door, and led the girls through the kitchen. After instructing her volunteer to strip, Mitsuha undressed to her underwear, activated the hot water system, turned on the shower, and made sure it was just the right temperature.

"Huh? Wh-What's that?! Thin streams of…hot water? What's going on?!" The now nude girl, Anke, couldn't withhold her surprise.

The other two were peeking inside, eyes wide.

"Please sit right here," Mitsuha told her.

Still in shock, she sat down on the bathroom chair.

"Eep!" she exclaimed as the water hit her head, but her alarm soon melted into enjoyment. Baths were a luxury for this world's commoners. At best, their hygiene routine consisted of scrubbing themselves with towels soaked in wash bowls, then wringing the towels and wiping their hair with them. This poor cleansing process was the cause of most commoners' oily sheen.

Showering under a flow of warm water like this was rare even for noble girls. *Time for the baptism,* Mitsuha thought. The shampoo also functioned as a conditioner. Mitsuha used a 2-in-1 herself and couldn't be bothered to buy separate products. The entire Yamano family had always used the same 2-in-1 women's shampoo. Getting her own had seemed like a waste of time and money. Her father and Tsuyoshi thought the same, so all four Yamanos had lathered up from a single bottle.

Now, back to the matter at hand. Mitsuha stopped the shower, dispensed some shampoo, and prepared to wash Anke's hair. Not wasting any time, she began rubbing the girl's head. *Uh-oh, she's so dirty that it's not foaming up.* Mitsuha rinsed her again, then got back to rubbing. *Agh! Still no foam! Third time's the charm.* She rinsed once more, rubbed, and… *Eureka!*

"I'm sorry," she said. "Usually, just one use does the trick, but you were so dirty that I had to do it three times." Mitsuha's bluntness caused Anke's eyes to well up with tears.

"Oops! I-I'm so sorry!" Mitsuha cried hastily. "Let me make it up to you with a free trial of body wash!" She rinsed the girl again, then scrambled off to

fetch it. Mitsuha had no plans to turn her general store into some sort of foamy massage parlor, however, so she simply put some into Anke's hands and told her to wash herself.

"Wh-Whoa! Mmm, it smells so nice!"

Once the demonstration was over, Mitsuha handed a bath towel to the volunteer. She lightly dabbed herself off before taking out a blow-dryer. As Anke gushed over how soft the towel was, Mitsuha flicked the dryer on from behind her.

"AAAHHH!" She first let out a scream, then relaxed as she found it not only harmless, but extremely soothing.

"Seriously, what is this place? It's amazing…" mumbled one of the other two, who were still watching. Their names were Britta and Carla, and they looked utterly flabbergasted.

Soon after, the three of them stood in front of Mitsuha's wares, clearly at a loss. They all coveted the shampoo, but didn't want to pass on the body wash, either. Both were priced at eight silver, but the girls had only twelve, nine, and ten, respectively. Even the wealthiest among them could only buy one product.

Perceptive as ever, Mitsuha saw their dilemma and proposed a solution. "How about you all throw in eight silver apiece, buy one of each, and then share them among yourselves?"

"Huh? But that's eight silver too much." Britta raised an eyebrow.

Mitsuha beamed and presented them with a velvet box a little under a foot long on each side. Inside, there were shiny rings, bracelets, necklaces, brooches, and other trinkets.

“Each of these is eight silver, too!” Their eyes glittered. *Now this is how you do business*, Mitsuha thought.

“Please wait here,” she said, guiding them to a dining table in the corner of the kitchen. She then moved to a large pot on the stove. Mitsuha had prepared the table to welcome future guests, but the opportunity had come much sooner than she’d expected. The renovations had really spruced up the once-plain kitchen, setting the mood for a pleasant meal. She’d turned on the gas range before the shampoo affair, so the water had been boiling for some time.

Once Mitsuha moved away from the group, the three girls started whispering among themselves.

“What’s that? Fire?” asked Anke.

“Anke, you’ve been saying nothing but ‘what’s this,’ ‘what’s that,’ ever since she started washing you,” Carla said.

“Well, what else am I supposed to say?”

“Look at your hair, though… Ugh, I messed up! I should’ve volunteered instead.”

“You’ll get to use it too, Carla.”

“Oh, look! That girl’s hair is really smooth, too. I should’ve known this ‘shampoo’ stuff was good when I saw that shine.”

“Yeah. We had this in one of our lessons,” Britta joined in. “‘Noble servants must make quick judgments based off what they observe from their surroundings.’”

“Wow, Britta. You remember that?”

“You’re probably the only one who doesn’t.”

As they chatted away, Mitsuha brought the first dish. She’d been obscenely

fast─only a few minutes had passed since she'd walked to the stove.

"Our first course is a soup called 'minestrone.'"

"Huh? You made soup that fast?" said Anke. They were surprised and somewhat hesitant to eat it, but their hunger and curiosity got the better of them.

"It's delicious!"

The praise could've easily come from any one of them. The soup's taste was so strong and profound that they couldn't believe some little girl had whipped it up in just a few minutes. It was even better than the meals they had in the mansion where they worked. Their amazement did nothing to deter their hunger, however, and by the time they'd voraciously cleaned their plates, a new dish was being placed in front of them.

How is she so fast? She only just decided she'd make food for us! they wondered as Mitsuha laid down the plates.

"Boiled white radish and amberjack─a fish from the sea," she declared.

"Huh?! F-FISH?!"

"Yes, what about it?"

"N-Nothing! Nothing at all!" Britta waved her hands.

Mitsuha wasn't sure what to make of their reaction. *Doesn't seem like nothing… What's with these girls and fish? Is it a taboo or something? Did I mess up? Well, they're eating, so it's probably fine.* She felt her worries dissipate as she watched them dig in. *Good to see they liked the canned soup and boil-in-the-bag amberjack. Let's move on to the next dish!*

Mitsuha brought out one course after another. "This is roast beef. Dip it in that sauce before eating." *That one was supposed to be for me. Sure, it's just a cheap TV dinner, but I really like it! Hnngh…* She lamented the sacrifice, but

figured her job was more important.

“Here’s another beef dish for you,” she said, “but this time, it’s boiled.”

The beef was nicely spiced and came in tin cans. Mitsuha had needed to open six of them, as a single serving wasn’t nearly enough.

“Please give this risotto a try!” The risotto was also a boil-in-the-bag product. She’d cooked and assembled two of them for the girls.

When Mitsuha went back to prepare more food, Carla whispered, “Hey, is it just me, or is all the food coming from that…cauldron?”

“AHHH! Don’t say that! I was trying to ignore it!” said Britta, looking a bit pale.

“It’s okay, she’s a good witch. She has to be,” Anke mumbled to herself.

Mitsuha’s culinary assault was going full steam ahead.

“This is beef stew.” Just one more boil-in-the-bag from the discount store.

“And last but not least, your dessert: ice cream.”

It was a Châteraisé popsicle six-pack, to be precise. The dessert brand was known for its high quality and low price, so it was perfect for her needs. Mitsuha had taken them out of the fridge, removed the sticks, put them in glasses, and served them with spoons. A single bite was enough for the girls to lose it.

“What is this?! It’s so cold! So sweet! So good!”

“I-It’s…unbelievable!”

The third girl was so dumbfounded she didn’t say a word.

“We’ll top it off with a little amazake,” she said. “A warm drink is perfect after a cold dessert.” It was a freeze-dried sweet sake you could prepare by simply adding hot water. Easy, delicious, cheap, long-lasting, and maybe even good for you. It was one of Mitsuha’s favorites.

“Did you enjoy the food?” she asked, all smiles. Their lunch had finally come to an end.

The three girls nodded. “Y-Yes. You weren’t lying… That was the best meal I’ve ever had.”

“Umm, i-is that cauldron a─OUCH!” Carla’s question was cut short by Anke and Britta discreetly stomping on her feet.

“Thank you for everything,” said Anke as they prepared to leave.

“Ah, please wait a moment.” Mitsuha held them back. “Here’s a little something to share with your coworkers, friends, or family! Just make sure to take off the wrappers before eating!” She handed them a thin, see-through, and strangely lightweight jar full of what looked like silver and gold eggs.

“O-Okay…” Britta replied meekly. With that, the three left, cradling their purchases and the plastic container of foil-wrapped chocolate almonds.

Mitsuha celebrated immediately after their departure. *Yes! I got my first customers and made my first sale! It cost me a few of my ready-made meals, but that sale made it totally worth it. It kinda worried me that I didn’t have much variety and kept giving them beef, but the flavors were so different that they didn’t even care. I did have to use multiples of each, though… Not a single pack or can had enough. Now, if they’d go and spread the word, my store could explode in popularity!*

Ah, but I’m not sure I want too *much business. If I’m too busy, I won’t have time to go to the bathroom! Teehee!*

“Well?” Anke asked not long after they’d left.

“Well…” said Carla.

“What if these have some weird bugs inside them? When you eat them, they crawl into your brain and take control of your—”

“DON’T SAY THAAAT!” Britta cried.

“Well?” Anke asked again.

“Well…”

“I feel like if we don’t do as she said, something bad’s going to happen.”

“What d’you mean, Britta?”

“Let’s hand them out, like she told us.”

“B-But then everyone else will—”

“It should be fine as long as we follow her instructions. We’ll hand these over to Marcel, put on our most serious faces, and tell him they came from a stranger. We wouldn’t be lying, but we also wouldn’t be going against what she told us to do. That’s ‘sharing it with a coworker,’ right? Besides, Marcel is our head chef! He’ll know if there’s something weird about them!”

Anke with her silky hair, Britta with a shiny new brooch on her chest, and Carla, holding the chocolate almonds, nodded in agreement. They put their faith in Marcel as they returned to the mansion.

“Whoa!” Marcel exclaimed. Of course, anyone would’ve done the same if approached by three women making such frightening faces. *Did I do something wrong?!*

“We got this from a stranger!” one of them said, pushing something foreign his way. “She said you’ve got to take off the wrappers and eat them.”

So it’s food, is it? Marcel wasn’t brave enough to refuse them or flee the scene. He opened the container, fearfully reached inside, and took out one of the

objects. Then, after glaring at it for a while, he removed the wrapper.

"It's brown," he said. "Smells rich and sweet…" The scent was new to him. Intrigued, he sniffed it, then stared at it from all sides. He'd never seen anything like it before. Eventually, he gave it a lick.

"EEK!" the girls screamed in unison.

"Why are you all screaming?!" he snapped, then leaned in to take a bite.

"AHH! He ate it! He actually ate it!"

"What's wrong with you three? Wait, what is this?! Bitter? Sweet? This texture, the smell, the taste… It's one of a kind! Where did you get th─"

Marcel was interrupted by a voice from behind. "You're all so noisy. What's this about?"

"M-Madam…"

A short while later, the group was seated around a table in the lounge. Now present were the owners of the mansion, Viscount Matheus von Ryner and his wife, Amalia. Besides these two, there was the Ryners' head chef─Marcel─and the three girls, making a total of six.

The Ryners were new to nobility, having only reached their status in the last generation. Because of this, there wasn't much of a social barrier between them and their servants, and they had nothing against conversing as equals. They didn't even mind when the staff got carried away and their proper etiquette went out the window.

"So, you're saying she gave this to you?" the lady asked.

"Y-Yes…"

"What do you think, dear?"

Viscount Ryner cocked his head at his wife's question. "Hmm… And you think this girl was a witch?"

"She's a good witch! She has to be!" Anke blurted. "At least, I think so." She was undoubtedly pleased with her smooth hair.

"Are you sure that was fresh fish she gave you? Not dried, smoked, or pickled?" asked Marcel, still doubtful.

"Yes," said Britta. "When I was a little girl, I went to a seaside village and had some fresh fish. Hers tasted just like it. The other food was delicious, too!"

Carla nodded in agreement. Marcel somehow felt they'd just snubbed his cooking, and his shoulders drooped a little.

Matheus shook his head. "I can't say I believe that. The closest fishing village is a ten-day journey by wagon. Even a stagecoach would take at least a week. Let's say you had a sturdy, lightweight cart, took a small load, and constantly swapped out the horse and driver. If it didn't make a single stop, it'd still take at least three days. Not to mention that this method would make fish into a true luxury. Think dozens of silver each. And it would only work in winter, when you have snow and ice to keep it cold. It's impossible at this time of year! Boiling the fish and keeping it hot on the way is out of the question, too. It'd take too much time, and you'd overcook it. It wouldn't even be edible."

Marcel nodded. Of course a chef would know these sorts of things.

"Though I suppose there's no point in overthinking it…"

As the conversation reached a dead end, Amalia changed the subject. "By the way, Anke. Your hair is silky and you smell nice because…?"

"Oh, yes! It's all thanks to those magic mixtures we told you about."

"Magic, you say? Let me use them."

“Huh?” The three girls gaped at her. Amalia had long hair, so she’d use up quite a bit of their precious products.

“I’ll pay for them! Sixteen silver is nothing to me! I’ll even give them back to you after one use!” she cried, and the girls had nothing against those conditions. Although, being her servants, they couldn’t refuse even if they wanted to.

“And Britta, about that brooch…?”

“Oh, it’s what I bought with my eight silver.”

“That’s far too cheap for something of that quality!”

“She said it’s because it’s man-made.”

“Of course it’s man-made. It’s a brooch! Are you saying God made all the others?”

“That’s not what I meant. This gem-like thing here isn’t real; it was made by people.”

“A fake? This?!” Amalia couldn’t believe it, but she also wondered why the so-called witch would admit to selling fake goods. There was no merit in doing so—quite the opposite, in fact.

“Well, it doesn’t cost anything to make it with magic…” Carla muttered under her breath.

“Master Ryner.” Marcel faced the viscount. “With a power like this, acquiring rare ingredients and recipes would be simple!”

“Indeed. It might be wise to ask her for help. I leave it to you, Marcel.”

“Understood, sir!” The chef bowed his head and left.

Chapter 8

Debutante

On the fourth day of business, at a quarter after ten in the morning, Mitsuha's bell rang.

Ding-a-ling!

Yay! A customer right after opening!

She greeted her guest with a smile. "Welcome!"

The man who'd entered gave a curt nod, then walked around the store. He was chubby and looked to be in his thirties. *For someone so young, his belly's pretty massive,* Mitsuha thought. *He's either a big shot or a big eater who ain't too "big" on exercise.*

After getting a grasp of the store's layout, the man headed to the kitchenware section. He examined a fish scaler with a curious expression but put it back immediately afterwards. When he saw the next object of interest─a kitchen knife─his eyes widened. The price, however, caused him to deflate a little.

That knife's one of the best things I've got for sale. I shelled out a whole 58,000 yen for it, and here I am only selling it for two gold and five small gold… Knowing the cross-world exchange rates, I'll barely make any money.

Well, it's less of a product and more of a statement, anyway. "Look! We know fancy! We have high-quality goods!" and all that. I wouldn't care if I broke even with that one. I saw a show once on how they're made. Each one is painstakingly forged by hand. It was some great TV… Really moved me!

Mitsuha watched as he took the knife and moved on to another product. *Wait, huh? He's buying it?! Nice! He's got an eye for quality! That makes me kinda happy, even if I won't get much from it.*

Before long, the man brought a pile of merchandise to the counter. "Pardon me," he said. "I have a few questions."

Oh? Not checking out yet, are we?

"Ask away! And feel free to use that shopping basket."

Likely never having seen such a thing, he placed his items into the topmost basket with a bewildered expression.

"First, I want to ask about that scale remover. Why are you selling it?"

Huh? Is there a problem with that?

"Uhh, because it's useful?" she said, puzzled. "It turns scale removal into a real cakewalk, so it's a great gift for housewives…"

The shock on his face was clear. "Little lady, do you have any idea how far we are from the sea? All the fish here is either dried, pickled, or smoked. None of them need the scales removed!"

Oh no! I messed up! It doesn't belong here! So that's why the girls were so weirded out…

"I'd also like to know how to use these other things," he said, pointing to the contents of the basket.

Oh, so he's not actually buying yet. What a shame. And hey, there's almost nothing but cooking supplies in there… He's gotta be a chef or something.

"Certainly," she began. "This here's a peeler—the name says it all. You use it like this. It makes peeling so easy, even a child can do it! Frankly, it's unfair to the experienced cooks."

Stupefied, the man could only listen.

“This is an hourglass. When you turn it upside-down, sand falls to the bottom. Always takes the same amount of time to run out. It helps when you need to know how long you’ve been boiling something. I have them in several sizes, including three, five, and ten minutes.

“Ah, this one’s a can opener. It opens ‘cans,’ which are storage containers that preserve food for years. You can eat right out of them, too. You’ll find some canned foods over there.”

Most cans these days didn’t need an opener, but the discount store Mitsuha had bought hers from mostly supplied those that did. She’d also felt that opener-dependent cans were the first logical step in introducing them to this world.

The more she explained, the more a flush spread across his face. At last, the man spoke up. “Please tell me about this. Why is it so expensive?”

He placed the knife on the counter.

“Ah, because it’s not some child’s toy,” she said, sensing an opportunity to upsell. “It wasn’t made by just pouring molten iron into a mold.”

“What?” The man gave a disgruntled look, perhaps feeling a little challenged by her tone.

“It’s a masterpiece crafted over countless days by several men─no, demons─who spent decades perfecting the art of forging kitchen knives! It’s both an instrument and a work of art! It’s the ultimate achievement of the ‘Steel Demons’!”

“S-Steel Demons…” he gulped.

“See here? It was folded over and over. The union between soft and hard steel made it bind with such perfection. This miraculous feat gave birth to a

knife that's both sharp and sturdy!"

His hands, which held the blade, were shaking.

Mitsuha continued, "Honestly, I won't gain any profit by selling it, but it's our duty as merchants to pass on such masterpieces from the craftsmen to the chefs. If it's too cheap, the makers can't earn a living, but if it's too expensive, the chefs won't be able to afford it. This is a case where we should sacrifice ourselves for the greater good. Don't you agree?"

"I-I'LL TAKE IT!" the man shouted, tears flowing from his eyes.

Thank you very much!

After recovering his composure, he spoke up again. "By the way, I'd like to speak with the shopkeeper. May I?"

"Uh, sure, go ahead," she said.

"Then…could you call them for me?"

"Uh, like I said, go ahead. Let's talk."

"O-Ohh, I see. Young as you might be, you're the only one at the counter, so I guess that makes you the shopkeeper. But that's not what I meant. I wish to talk to the owner of this place. The manager, not an employee."

Well, I can't really blame him for that, she thought with a shrug.

"Sir, this store *is* mine. I bought it, remodeled it, and stocked the shelves. I'm both the owner and shopkeeper!" She was, essentially, the retail version of a restaurateur.

After taking the time to process her answer, he said, "Very well, then… Do you sell fresh fish?"

So that's why he's here. Do the three girls have something to do with this?

"What gave you that idea?"

“Because Anke’s trio told us.”

“Who’s that?”

“The three girls who were here yesterday.”

Ah, so it was *them. I totally blanked on their names. But man, they actually advertised me! A-thank youuu! Anyway…*

“Oh, those three? They were my first customers, so I pampered them a bit. It put me in the red, haha…”

“I see. They really raved about your wares and the food,” the man said.

Uh huh, of course they did! Keep it up, girls! Also, notice how I said it was a special case? Now I’ve made it clear that kinda service is usually more expensive. I’m so good at this!

“So, why the interest in fish? From what you’ve told me, it’s not a hot commodity here…”

The man then began telling her about his circumstances. His name was Marcel. He was the head chef for Viscount Ryner, the same man who employed Anke and her crew. At just thirty-six years old, Marcel was a bit young for his role, but had the skills and confidence he needed to succeed.

Until recently, he’d worked as sous chef to an aging chef. His superior had suddenly become ill, so he’d retired and moved to a countryside town to live with his daughter’s family. It had been an abrupt change, though not entirely unsurprising. As a result, Marcel had been promoted to head chef─an enviable position for someone his age.

Soon after, however, they were faced with a major obstacle: the coming-of-age of the Ryners’ daughter, Lady Adelaide. When noble ladies turned fifteen, they had to make a public debut into high society. This event also doubled as a

birthday party and would be held by each noble family during the first ballroom season after their girl's birthday.

The debutante balls greatly influenced the girls' futures and positions in high society, so families spared no expense on them. From the dress to the food, everything had to be perfect. The money spent could easily reach twice the wealth of one commoner family, all for a single night.

If the previous head chef were still in charge, everything would have gone smoothly. The man was a veteran who'd worked in noble kitchens his entire life. But he was retired now, and though Marcel was skilled─likely one of the best in his cohort─he had almost no experience with such parties.

During the Ryners' previous, smaller affairs, Marcel had stuck to following the head chef's orders, so he hadn't had a chance to learn proper menu composition, timing, or improvisation. The old man had planned to teach him these things during Adelaide's debut, but his sudden illness made it impossible.

Pre-debut birthday parties were never too fancy, so this would be the biggest party at the Ryner mansion since the current viscount's wedding. And since the Ryners were relatively "new money," they were already scorned by the other families. Failure wasn't an option, as it would only make things worse. Adelaide would be a laughingstock, and the family name would be disgraced forever.

"But I don't know if I can do this," he continued. "I know I'm better than your average chef, but compared to the veterans in the grand noble houses or the talents in the royal palace, I'm little more than a beginner! I can't help but think I'll bring shame to Viscount Ryner and his daughter. It's pathetic, I know, but it scares me…"

He hung his head. It managed to make him look smaller.

"So, you figured you'd try to floor them with something you can't get around here─fish," Mitsuha said.

"Yes, precisely."

She took a moment to think. *Hrmm… I could just sell him the fish and leave it at that. I'd make some good money and help him out─everyone'd be happy. But…what's this strange feeling in my heart?*

Oh, I know what this is… It's excitement. This could be lots of fun!

Mitsuha had a personal policy that didn't allow her to ignore things like this. "One moment, please," she said, then locked the door, closed the curtains, and put up a sign that read, "Closed Due to Special Contract."

Who would've thought that sign would come in handy so soon?

Less than an hour after opening, there she was closing up shop. She went back to the counter and took out another sign, this one only partially complete.

"I'm also gonna start this service right now," Mitsuha said as she showed it to him.

It read, "From falling in love to running your land, Mitsuha's General Store will tell you how it's done! For a fee, of course."

After explaining her plan, Mitsuha told Marcel, "We'll have a food and drink tasting tonight. Come over and bring three other people, including someone who has the power to make the final call. Oh, and make sure you bring your appetite." He promptly left, taking his new knife and other purchases along with him.

According to Marcel, the star of the party was the debutante herself, but

after her introduction as a potential spouse, the focus would shift to exchanges between the nobles. The youths would chat among themselves while the adults would discuss…adult things. Because of this, they had no performances or ceremonies planned, so the party's quality would be based mostly on the food. Lady Adelaide and her dress would come next, then everything else. Mitsuha could see why Marcel was so worried─he was responsible for the most important part.

As soon as he'd left, Mitsuha jumped back to Japan, changed clothes, and walked outside. There was a girl she'd been friends with since kindergarten, who she called "Micchan." Micchan went to college in the city, and Mitsuha was headed in that direction, but it wasn't to meet with her childhood friend.

Eventually, Mitsuha arrived at the entrance of Micchan's home─also a liquor store─and shouted "Hellooo!" without any restraint. She'd been doing this since kindergarten, so both Micchan's family and their neighbors were used to it.

As usual, she was greeted by Micchan's dad. "Michiko's not here," he said.

Yeah, I know.

"I came to see you, actually."

"Well, that's a pleasant surprise. What's up?"

"Sell me some booze."

"Huh?!"

Persuading him to help her proved to be hard work, but Mitsuha managed it in the end. Micchan's father agreed to send the alcohol to her house once the order was filled.

Wondering how I convinced him? I told him that I got the chance to help cater a foreigner's party, so I had to bring some food and drink samples for

them to try. It was basically the truth, right? I mean, Micchan's old man is sharp, so he'd see through any cheap lies. I also told him I'd buy lots more if they liked it. That must've been what swayed him. And it's not like I'm gonna drink any myself. Really.

After taking care of the drinks, Mitsuha bought some food with a long shelf life: boil-in-the-bags, canned goods, fruit, and so on. She also got ice cream and stored it in the freezer. As for fresh, ready-made side dishes, she'd worry about them closer to evening.

She placed an order for some high-quality fish at the nearby sushi shop, then called in some takeout soup and other meals from her favorite French food place. With all that done, she loafed around at home until it was time to buy the remaining sides and pick up her orders.

That evening, Mitsuha greeted her guests. "Welcome!"

Just as she'd asked, Marcel had brought three people with him. Two of them were obviously the viscount and his wife, while the third was a woman in her late twenties. Marcel told Mitsuha she was his sous chef. As far as she knew, female chefs were a rarity. *If she climbed up to that rank in a noble's kitchen, she must be really good.*

She led them to the table in the kitchen and introduced herself. "Please make yourselves at home. I'm Mitsuha Yamano, the store's owner."

They stayed quiet. So far, this was nothing but Marcel taking his friends out to dinner at a place he liked. The family's problems were out of the picture for now. *We'll only talk about them if we clear the first stage,* Mitsuha thought.

"Today, I'll be bringing you a variety of foods to sample. Because of this,

there won't be any specific course order. I'll bring things out as they're ready. The portions are small, but there will be a lot of food going on just a few trays. Take from them at your own pace. Focus on tasting. Don't force yourselves to eat it all or you won't have room for the other dishes."

The four of them nodded.

Let's get to it.

"First up, consommé," she said as she set the bowls on the table. For this course, at least, each guest got their own dish. It had come from Sucre, the French restaurant.

Thanks for your hard work, Chef Kanai!

The group had been stone-faced from the moment they entered the store, but just a single whiff of the soup made them soften up. And the taste? It was richer than the nobles themselves. They didn't say a word, as they were far too busy emptying their bowls.

"I'll bring out the rest. Try whatever catches your eye!"

And so Mitsuha began bringing the dishes.

There was cuisine from all over Earth─French, Chinese, Japanese, fusion, et cetera. Some meals were from proper restaurants, while others were simple side dishes, boil-in-the-bags, and canned goods from the supermarket. Of course, Mitsuha didn't forget to plate the sushi and other fish dishes.

Then there was the alcohol. Beer, wine, whiskey, brandy, and sake, among others. There was no shochu or bottled cocktails, of course. And she made sure to give them a fair warning about the stronger liquors.

She'd expected to be barraged with questions, but everyone just ate and drank without saying anything.

This is kinda freaking me out…

As her company ate, they slowed down and finally began to pose questions. “All this is from a foreign country, isn’t it?” asked the viscount.

Whoa! Straightforward, aren’t we?!

“Yes, it’s all from my country and its neighbors,” she answered.

“Who prepared it?”

Already with the second one!

“Some of my countrymen.” It wasn’t a lie in the slightest.

“Where are they now?”

“They’ve retired and are now living peacefully in this country. Convincing them to give me these samples was hard work! I had to promise never to ask for such a favor again.”

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“I see…”

“B-But then how will we learn to make any of this?!” Marcel joined in.

Yeah, this’d be pointless if he couldn’t.

“I can get you the recipes. You can use them to practice until you get it right. We’re having this dinner so you can memorize the taste.”

Marcel and his sous chef grimaced.

“What about the ingredients?” asked the viscount. “Can you tell us how you brought them here?”

Oh, well…

“Just leave it to me. It’s my job, after all! From love advice to land advice, Mitsuha’s General Store has got you covered! This time, I’m not selling you my help. I’m giving you a consultation! Of course, you’ll have to cover the costs.”

“Pfft… Hahaha… HAHAHAHA!” The viscount burst out laughing. “Lady Mitsuha, please allow me to engage your services. I need you to provide the ingredients and teach us to prepare the food.”

Looks like I passed. I mean, of course I did. I’m pretty sure I had it in the bag with the soup. I can make some good money if I accept, but…

“I REFUSE!”

The viscount’s face froze mid-smile.

“Oh, don’t worry─I’ll definitely help with the cooking,” Mitsuha added. “But just that would be pretty boring.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want you to let me handle the dress and the performance, as well. They didn’t call me ‘The Plumber of the Opera’ in elementary school for nothing!”

“Performance?”

He completely ignored the "elementary school" and "Plumber of the Opera" parts. Well, it's not like I want him to ask about it.

The group then got to talking for a long while. The viscount eventually agreed to leave most of the party in Mitsuha's hands, but only under certain conditions, like requiring her to give frequent progress reports, provide detailed descriptions, and lead the rehearsals.

I guess it's only fair for him to be so strict. This event is way too important for him to take a laissez-faire approach and just leave it in the hands of some stranger. If he'd been stupid enough to do that, I wouldn't have taken the job in the first place.

Marcel and his sous chef begged to take home the leftovers, so Mitsuha jumped back home and got some plastic bags for them.

Eat up while it's good, she thought, handing them out. *If you want, I'll think of a reason to get you some more.*

They don't have to be so desperate, though. It's not like they have to learn to make all of this stuff. They'll still have their usual, local dishes, and I'll bring all the desserts. They were just supposed to pick whatever packed the greatest punch… They were pretty fired up, though, so I guess it went in one ear and out the other.

The viscount took all the remaining alcohol and requested much, much more. Mitsuha made a mental note to bring the good news to Micchan's dad. A noble ball wouldn't be proper without enough food and drink, so the hosts tended to get way more than they actually needed. He was in for a whole lot of business.

I'll have to tell him to increase Micchan's allowance! she thought

cheerfully.

Just when Mitsuha thought the meeting was over, the viscountess grabbed her shoulder and gave her an intense glare. Thankfully, she only wanted some shampoo and body wash. Mitsuha brought her some of the luxury products aimed at nobles and even sold the shampoo and conditioner separately.

Honestly, I'm pretty much ripping her off.

Naturally, her profit margins on daily necessities aimed at commoner girls were much slimmer. Because of the exchange rates between the worlds, Mitsuha had to at least quadruple the original value when pricing her goods. For example, if something cost her a thousand yen in Japan, she had to make the price in this world four silver to break even—this world's equivalent of four thousand yen. Making up for that by inflating the prices on items for nobles was perfectly fair, thank you very much. The blue bloods probably enjoyed having their own luxury items, anyway. Everybody won.

Huh? You're wondering why I sold shampoo to commoners for a whopping eight silver? Oh, come now, this is a "Big Profits, Slow Returns" business! Going for ten, even twenty times the original price is standard, so doubling or tripling it ain't a big deal. What? Now you're worried I'm gonna run soap makers out of business? Well, I'm not selling soap—just shampoo and body wash. People will still buy the stuff to do laundry or wash their hands and faces.

Also, the happiness of girls around the world is obviously more important than the fate of some industry. Think about it!

The next day, Mitsuha headed back to Japan and got to work. First, she went to a dressmaker—the same one Mitsuha had commissioned for a dress to stun the

Bozes family. The modiste was a mildly degenerate woman who was crazy about cosplay. She was a bit too old for the hobby herself, so she instead lived vicariously through her female clients by playing dress-up with them. All for her job, of course. She was actually quite skilled at her craft, so much so that she'd opened her own establishment. While it was hard to tell whether her focus was business or pleasure, the money was flowing in.

After Mitsuha entered the shop, she made sure to butter up the owner, detailing how the dress had been very useful and played a huge role in her securing a sponsorship. The older woman was overjoyed to hear it. Mitsuha then started a new order for Adelaide. Upon hearing that she'd get to work her magic on a foreign noble lady's debutante dress, the seamstress gave Mitsuha a huge, sudden squeeze.

"Wh-Wh-What an honor! What bliss!" she cried.

Mitsuha even promised to bring back some photos of the event, which earned her a discount. The dressmaker asked for Adelaide's measurements and, if possible, to meet her, saying something about how it would help her conceive the girl's perfect dress.

That's all there is to it, right? She won't do anything weird to her, will she? Mitsuha wondered. *You can never tell with this lady.*

She also wanted to see examples of dresses from Adelaide's country; standards were important, after all. Mitsuha decided to deal with that part later. After some back-and-forth, the two agreed that she'd make three dresses. They also discussed ideas for a grand performance. One of her suggestions in particular piqued Mitsuha's interest.

I guess now I'm paying for a fake sword, too.

Once her business with the modiste was done, Mitsuha made her way to an electronics store. She couldn't find what she was looking for on the shelves, but she soon discovered she could have them special ordered.

Let's see… I'll need LED bulbs, cables, and everything else… I'll get the batteries some other day… Movie cameras, wireless speakers, spotlights…

Think I'm taking this too far? No way! I can't mess up, so I'm just being as thorough as humanly possible! It's the same as going overkill on the food and drinks… I'm just takin' a page from the nobles. This is blowing a hole in my wallet, but once this thing is over, I'll make it all back and then some!

For now, though, I'm not gonna use my deep pockets. Instead, I'll have the captain exchange my yen into dollars and store the money in a foreign bank account. I'll go back to the holes when I make back what I'm losing in this investment.

"I'm borrowing the lady, if you don't mind," Mitsuha said as she led Adelaide into a carriage.

Attended by two bodyguards, their destination was her base, Mitsuha's General Store. It was close to the noble district, so they arrived in no time. The coachman stopped right in front and waited while they went inside. Mitsuha had the bodyguards take a seat on the first floor. The men tried to argue, but they couldn't say a word when Mitsuha mentioned that she'd be undressing Adelaide to measure her. She assured them they wouldn't be leaving the building, either, so it was really a trivial matter.

She placated them further with some drinks, then brought Adelaide up to

the second floor. Before entering the room, Mitsuha blindfolded her. The girl was caught off guard at first, but relaxed when Mitsuha told her the next step would require just a little bit of magic.

As she opened the door, Mitsuha jumped to Earth with Adelaide in tow.

"Hello-o-o!" she called out.

She had, of course, entered the shop of the aforementioned dressmaking zealot.

"Wow, wow, WOW!" came a voice from behind the counter.

Annnd there's the zany manager! Mitsuha thought, taking off Adelaide's blindfold.

"NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL A BABE!"

Jeez, slow your roll, lady…

Adelaide was under the impression this was just another room in Mitsuha's General Store, so her startled expression was due to this…creature.

"Just measure her, please," Mitsuha said flatly. "You wouldn't want to make a wrong move with a noble foreigner's daughter. They'd have your head. Like, literally…"

The seamstress gulped, then took out her measuring tape. As she worked, she and Adelaide chatted with one another with Mitsuha as the interpreter. Adelaide spent the entire time bewildered, while the older woman was in high spirits. Both parties ended up satisfied in the end.

Before they parted ways, Mitsuha gave the dressmaker a memory card. It contained photos of dresses from all across the capital─Adelaide's, Amalia's, the ones on display in noble boutiques, as well as those worn by Adelaide's friends who'd already had their debuts. They'd gladly shown them off when

Mitsuha praised their clothes, so she'd gone ahead and snapped a few photos. Some of the girls even insisted on putting them on, and those photos made the dressmaker lose it completely.

The two girls left the same way they'd entered. Once they returned to the first floor, Adelaide asked for a tour of the store. She loved it so much that Mitsuha felt pretty much forced to give her a little accessory to take home.

Whatever, thought Mitsuha. *I'll just tack that onto the Ryners' tab.*

She also treated Adelaide to a shortcake from the fridge. The noble girl found it delicious, obviously, but the fridge itself had her curious. Mitsuha merely said it was a magic box and told her not to tell anyone about it. All the while, the bodyguards stared.

I really don't blame them. I was hoping to earn a few more coins by tempting them with this shortcake, but I'm not totally sure that worked.

Mitsuha had been spending all day every day at Viscount Ryner's mansion for a while now. However, she spent most of her time in the kitchen. She'd given out recipes, but seeing as she was the only one who could read them, she'd had to involve herself further. Mitsuha would read the recipes aloud, and the kitchen staff would take notes.

Y'know, I may not look it, but I'm actually a pretty good cook, she'd reflected. *I know how to make most dishes in your average cookbook, I've got the basics down, and I know how to make adjustments. Makes sense that I'm the boss of this operation.*

Marcel had picked several Earth dishes he found tasty, impactful, and easy to prepare in large quantities. He and his crew were now training to make them.

Currently, they were practicing with just a couple of servings per recipe. If they wanted a hundred times more, however, it wouldn't be as simple as just using a hundred times more ingredients. The culinary world demanded more tact. It was important to factor in things like the spread of the flames, the balance of the mix, and the relationships between ingredients. In many cases, just following a recipe wasn't enough. You had to develop a feel for it.

Man, if that ain't a pain, Mitsuha thought. Her tune changed when she realized that Marcel and everyone else in the kitchen had started calling her "Master."

"Master"…? O-Oh man, is it bad that I really like the sound of that?!

Here it is! The big day!

What? You think this is sudden? Believe me, I thought it was really far away twenty days ago, but time just flew by and now here we are. Besides all the ordering I had to do, there was the cooking lessons, party hall management, rehearsals… Things got so hectic it was all a blur.

Ah, damn! I haven't opened the store in days! Oh, well. The Ryners and their people were my only customers anyway.

…Wow, what a sad thought. Well, I'll get my name out there with this job. Yep.

During the past few weeks, Mitsuha had also obtained her driver's license. For manual transmission cars, at that. She assumed she'd use a car in this world someday, and since there were no proper roads, manual would be a better choice than automatic. That was something to save for a later date, however. She'd already purchased her first car, a Japanese subcompact with an automatic

transmission and lots of trunk space. She had merely bought it for trips to and from nearby stores, rather than any long journeys.

Additionally, no matter how much she'd tried adjusting the seat, she just couldn't reach the pedals on larger cars. Driving was possible, but she could hardly see over the steering wheel. If she'd gone out on the road, it would've caused an accident in a matter of minutes.

For the party hall preparations, she'd called upon Kunz to help out. He already had a decent grasp of what her requests were like, and was a skilled workman in general. And of course he'd done an excellent job on the renovations. He'd even done them at a low rate, insisting that he wasn't there for the money. The challenging project had excited him, and above all he felt the most fulfillment when his clients were satisfied with his work.

Out of respect for his mentality, Mitsuha had decided to give him an extra reward: interior design and construction books she'd gotten from a secondhand bookstore. They looked so old, they could've been written in cuneiform, and had been extremely cheap.

Kunz had loved them so much he'd called her a goddess.

Yes, praise me more! she'd thought.

And so, the party was ready. All that remained was to wait for the guests to trickle in.

Among the attendees was a count named Albert von Bader. Like the other guests, he'd been invited to the mansion to witness Adelaide's debut celebration. He was one of the few who didn't look down on the Ryners as unwelcome nouveaux riches.

Viscount Ryner's father had worked to bring their family into prosperity. The long-standing noble families merely suckled respect earned from the feats of their ancestors. In a sense, this made Viscount Ryner more worthy of his nobility than the complacent old nobles. Additionally, it was even more difficult for a commoner to become a noble these days than it had been in the past. In spite of this, his father had climbed straight to viscount, skipping the rank of baron altogether.

I can only imagine how brilliant he was, thought Albert von Bader.

Rumor had it that the current Viscount Ryner was an excellent person, too, and that he had a beautiful daughter.

Maybe it's wise to build a relationship with them. Perhaps this line of thinking is inappropriate… But if something were to happen to their only son, their daughter might seek out a husband to bring into the family. I should consider pushing my third or fourth son into the role.

While considering the possibilities, Count Bader followed the servants and entered the Ryners' main hall.

Oh? There doesn't seem to be much food on the tables, he thought. *I'm well aware they'll be replenished as they begin to empty, but this amount seems small regardless. Was this intentional?*

Though he found it curious, he decided not to think much of it. He merely took some wine when offered, relieved his dry throat, and went off to mingle with some of his noble acquaintances.

A short time later, the host began his introduction. Viscount Ryner stood on the small stage in front of the hall, thanked his guests for coming, and introduced his daughter, Adelaide…though she was noticeably absent. Having said his part,

Viscount Ryner retired from the stage.

What is happening here? Count Bader wondered, certainly not alone.

Not a moment later, the place where the viscount had stood flooded with smoke.

The guests closest to it were alarmed at first, believing it to be some sort of fire, but quickly noticed that the smoke was spreading in a strange way; it seemed to be pouring in from the sides of the stage. The servants were unfazed, on the other hand, meaning this was part of the show. Though some guests voiced their confusion, there was no real panic.

With the exception of those who sought spouses for their sons, most nobles considered these sorts of parties little more than dull gatherings to attend out of boredom, courtesy, or habit. Seeing something so new intrigued everyone, Albert von Bader included.

The smoke thinned as it flowed over the stage, creating a layer across the floor. Tendrils of it reached the nobles, who found it peculiar that breathing it in didn't choke them, and it didn't smell like smoke at all. On the other hand, it did make them feel a little chilly.

A voice rang out.

"Good evening! Thank you all very much for coming. Without further ado, I give you the Ryner family treasure, the charming flower fairy─Lady Adelaide! Feast your eyes on her lovable form!"

It was a girl's voice, and seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once. She wasn't shouting, but her words were strangely loud─enough so to resound throughout the hall.

"Watch as our lady makes her debut!"

Suddenly, scenery appeared on the white wall ahead.

What?! Count Bader's jaw flopped open.

The other guests were equally astonished. It was a bizarre sight to behold—the wall was now some sort of illuminated painting, showing a beautiful garden full of dancing fairies. Mixed with the milky smoke, the scene was nothing if not fantastical.

Then, a girl revealed herself from behind the curtains.

"WHOAAA!" The crowd's collective cry of amazement reached all corners of the room.

The flower fairy, clad in a white dress, danced lightly across the stage, filling young and old alike with wonder. The girl's beauty and charm were dazzling enough, but the dress she wore was in a class of its own. The silk was of the highest quality, and the design was novel, striking, and immaculately detailed. The audience had never seen anything like it. Some parts of it sparkled as she moved, and they could only assume it was bedazzled with gems.

The girl stopped in the middle of the stage and faced the crowd.

"Which one of you will take me?" she asked coquettishly.

It was quite the heartstopper of a line. The boys watched with flushed faces as Lady Adelaide walked off behind the curtain on the other side. Even the men, in spite of their many encounters with all kinds of beauty, were charmed ever so slightly.

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All right! So far, so good! Mitsuha smiled at the edge of the stage, microphone in hand.

There were speakers on both sides, lots of dry ice doused in hot water, and a projector connected to a laptop. It was the kind that could project from the side rather than the front. All this technology was powered by a battery Mitsuha had bought at the home improvement store. Because of some mic-related problems and the difficulty of the performance, Mitsuha had ended up doing all the voices. As for the projected background, it was a random fairyland scene she'd found on the internet.

At the moment, the maids were changing Adelaide's costume. They'd broken their backs training to make the process as swift as possible.

Now's probably a good time, Mitsuha thought, and changed the projection to a picture of a noble mansion. She then slipped back into her narration.

"The lord is away. A horde of bandits is using this opportunity to ransack the fiefdom. Most soldiers left with the lord, leaving only the lady and a small troop behind…"

Ohh, they changed the setting! Count Bader clapped, completely enthralled. The other guests seemed to share the sentiment. *I do wonder how they changed the picture, though…*

Adelaide walked back on stage, this time clad in a different costume: an armored dress with a blue color scheme. She clumsily held a sheathed sword in hand. It was as ornate as the most prized decorative blades. She was followed by an old man who was perhaps her butler. They both stopped in the middle of the stage.

Mitsuha's voice echoed throughout the room again. "Madam, the brigands

have sprung an attack on a nearby village!”

“We’re going. Tell the remaining soldiers to prepare to march.”

“But madam, we mustn’t! They should be kept here for an emergency! Also, if something were to happen to you—!”

“Is this not an emergency?! It is my duty to protect our people in my husband’s absence!”

Mitsuha spoke those familiar lines with burning enthusiasm. Adelaide and the butler lip-synced along with her words.

“Very well… I won’t stand in your way. Let us hold them off at the river and buy time until our lord returns. I shall, of course, attend at your side.”

“Thank you. By the way, may I ask you something?”

“Yes, madam?”

“Buying time is fine, but you won’t mind if I *cut them all down*, will you?”

The line was third on Mitsuha’s list of things she’d always wanted to say. Finally having a reason to do so sent her over the moon. *Oh, if only my brother were here to see this…!*

The crowd broke out in cheers. Adelaide gripped her blade with both hands, thrust it into the floor, and faced the audience with a dignified expression.

“I ask of you… Are you my soulmate?”

The roar of the crowd reached an explosive crescendo. With that, the play was over, and the two left the stage.

Success! So glad I got that 18,000-yen Excalibur in Akihabara! Mitsuha thought as she watched them. Adelaide had liked the prop blade so much that she’d asked to keep it, and Mitsuha had been just fine with that. It couldn’t cut, but it was made of real metal. The heaviness probably made it a good exercise

tool.

Adelaide was changing costumes yet again. This dress would be a normal one, since she needed to move around and mingle with her guests. It didn't take long for her to come out. She was wearing a cute pink dress perfect for a girl her age.

The dressmaker had worked extremely hard on this one. Material, design, sewing—every aspect was filled with her soul… Maybe even too much of it. She'd determined she would never receive a job of this caliber ever again. It was literally the work of a lifetime, and she'd treated it as such.

"As of today, I'm no longer a fairy," said Adelaide. "I shall now do my best as a member of high society. I hope we get along!" She walked off the stage and toward the crowd, welcomed by a storm of applause. The young nobles banded around her and made a real commotion.

Done! What a show! Mitsuha thought in satisfaction. *Good work, Adelaide!* All that was left now was to complement their mingling with some good food.

Mitsuha gripped her microphone tightly. "Now, please relax and enjoy your evening. While your tables hold the standard fare, at the back, you will find exotic foods from a distant land. If you're feeling daring, be sure to give them a try! There is also a selection of foreign beverages. Each drink's potency is marked. You should try them with the appropriate amount of water or ice."

Oh, so that's why the tables are a bit sparse, Count Bader thought. *Foreign food isn't for everyone, after all. Well thought out…*

Knowing he could eat the standard courses at any time, he went to try the exotic food before he got lost in conversation. But the dishes on the table made him stop in his tracks.

Wh-Wh-What?! Is that…fish?! Not dried, but fresh *fish? And those bits on the ice look raw… But that's impossible!*

The other nobles were also staring at the plates in disbelief and nervousness. After all, it was something that just shouldn't have been here. No one wanted to touch it, and everyone knew why.

Is it even edible? What if it's rotten? Count Bader wondered, but he'd seen enough fish to know this was fresh.

Still, the collective doubt was too strong, and no one was willing to try it. Count Bader, however, saw this as an opportunity to do the Ryners a small favor.

Here I go! It's your time to shine, Albert von Bader! He mustered up his courage as he reached for an empty plate. He took a small sample of all the seafood he could find, including fried fish, boiled fish, and rice topped with raw fish, and brought the first piece to his lips. His heroism earned him some praise from his fellow nobles.

"Delicious…" the count uttered in astonishment, then rushed to take even more. The rest of the pack, having seen one of their members survive the ordeal, edged forward to try it for themselves.

"It truly is…"

"Superb!"

It only escalated from there. The food─fish or otherwise─began to vanish like it was going out of style, only for the servants to bring replacements. They were soon noticed and joined by the youths surrounding Adelaide, as well as the ladies idly chatting.

Sweet, it's all going well! Mitsuha thought. *Too well, actually. I can't shake*

the feeling something bad is about to ha—

Out of nowhere, a hand latched onto her shoulder, freezing her in place.

"Just *what* are you doing in this dump…?" The voice was as strong and fierce as its owner's grip.

Sweating bullets, Mitsuha turned around and saw none other than Countess Iris Bozes. *Oh, right… This is a party! That means the ballroom season they mentioned has already started! Crap, I completely forgot!*

Not giving Mitsuha a chance to speak, Lady Iris dragged her to the Bozeses' table. "Mitsuha. Might I ask what's going on here? You refused to live with us, didn't you? So why are you here, of all places?"

Y-Your eyes are freaking me out, Mitsuha thought.

"I went to your shop countless times, only to find it closed! Do you have any idea how worried I was?! And now I find you in this dump! What's the meaning of this?!"

Mitsuha would've liked it if she stopped calling the place a "dump." It wasn't good for the Ryners' reputation, although their status wouldn't have allowed them to complain to a countess. Mitsuha made calming Lady Iris her number one priority.

"I-I don't live or work here or anything! I'm just here to represent my store! I did a couple odd jobs for them, made some deliveries… That's it, I swear!"

Lady Iris was still glaring, but the response had been enough to stop her from chewing the girl out. Count Bozes shot Mitsuha an awkward smile.

"Wait, where's Alexis?" Mitsuha asked, quick to change the subject. The only ones at the table were Lady Iris, Count Bozes, and Theodore. Beatrice, still too young to make her own debut, was absent.

“Oh, he’s over there with Lady Adelaide,” Theodore said. “Hmph. He never changes…”

“Ohh, I see the eldest son knows how it works,” Mitsuha said, prompting a bewildered look from him. “I mean, this *is* Lady Adelaide’s debut party, isn’t it? Men who ignore the star of the show to talk with other girls are the absolute worst, don’t you think? Even if they end up disliking her, they should at least talk to her. It’s the polite thing to do.”

“E-Excuse me for a second!” The boy sprung up from his chair and ran off. Count Bozes smiled yet again.

“ANYWAY!” Lady Iris raised her voice again. “You are to visit us as soon as possible!”

“Okay,” Mitsuha replied meekly. A moment later, someone grabbed her by the shoulder again.

Jeez, what now?! And why do I have such a bad feeling about this?

She turned and saw Marcel’s sous chef, a sister-in-arms who’d braved the hellish days of training at her side.

“W-We have a problem! Th-There’s…”

Huh? She’s stuttering?! It’s gotta be bad!

“There’s not enough food!”

“HUUUUHHHH?! Didn’t we make enough?! You and Marcel both said we’d even have leftovers! What happened?!” As Mitsuha pressed her for answers, the chef looked like she was about to cry.

“That’s how it would normally go, but for some reason, no one is leaving! Also, they’re chatting around the food now, so there’s less and less of it by the minute…”

Usually, the nobles who'd shown up out of courtesy would leave as soon as the main event was over. Meanwhile, those who stayed merely nibbled the food they'd grown tired of long ago, and instead mingled with alcohol in hand. The latter saw these events as networking opportunities rather than diversions, as they presented a chance to acquire important information and connections. Here, that was simply not the case. Everyone was eating and loitering to their hearts' content.

Of course we'd run out of food like this. I really overdid it…

The play had been so well received that everyone wanted to talk about it, and there wasn't a single soul who'd left right away. Some even thought there might be something more in store, to say nothing of all the exotic food and drink keeping them around.

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The kitchen staff had made enough food for a *usual* affair. It was actually double the amount they expected guests to consume, but that was standard for any noble event. There was also the rule of thumb that any food eaten absolutely had to be replaced. Empty plates were basically a sin. Even plates with only a quarter of the food left were impermissible, as it would give the guests the impression that the hosts didn't make enough, which was tantamount to an insult. If such an affront happened here, the Ryners would be branded as nobles so poor they couldn't prepare enough food for a single party.

I can't let that happen! Mitsuha thought. *No noble's gonna tolerate something like this. And besides, this is Adelaide's debut—her future depends on it!*

To prevent something like this from happening, nobles tended to prepare obscene amounts of food prior to the event. They didn't *want* to waste money, but it was a safety measure put in place to prevent a lifetime of embarrassment. This meant that anyone who failed to provide on this front was subpar as a noble, no matter the reason.

This is an emergency. I've gotta do something!

"Excuse me for a moment!" Mitsuha said to the Bozeses, then ran off to the kitchen.

The chefs were bereft of life, and had they not been in the middle of cooking, they no doubt would have been pushing up daisies. Thankfully, there was still time. They would run out of food if things went on as they did, but they hadn't run out *yet.*

Mitsuha looked around, examining her options, and noticed a box half-filled with potatoes. She'd memorized the menu and knew that there were no

plans to use them, meaning that they were extra.

"Can you get some oil boiling?" she asked Marcel.

His reply was a lifeless "Yesh…"

Keep it together, man! Mitsuha thought, then switched to giving orders. "All right! Peel those potatoes! Cut them up and fry them in oil! We scrapped some stuff from the menu, right?! Make that! We'll have lots of good food, and fast! You remember how, right?! Get to it!"

"Y-Yesh…"

"Stop dragging your feet! Didn't you promise you wouldn't bring shame to the viscount and his daughter?! Don't act like there's anything more terrifying than messing that up!" Her harsh words instantly woke him out of his stupor, and soon his eyes were gleaming with vigor.

"We don't have time to get new ingredients, so use what we have! Empty the pantry! Take all the ingredients you didn't plan to use and bring them to the table! See what you can make with them! Think simple, fast, and large amounts!

"Even commoner dishes are fine! Nobles probably don't know the difference, so just tell them it's foreign cooking! Use potato peels or pumpkin seeds if you have to—just make something! I'll buy some time, so don't waste it! And bring out the biggest plates you've got!"

Mitsuha fetched a big cardboard box from the corner of the kitchen. It was three feet on all sides. While large, the box was lighter than it looked.

"I had this stuff saved for the afterparty, but I'll use it now!"

She started emptying the box, one bag after another. Fried squid, peanuts, roasted almonds, peanut and rice cracker mixes, squid-flavored peanuts, crispy fried cutlets with sauce, chocolates, rice crackers, potato chips… She opened

them all, poured them onto plates, and had them sent out to the hall.

"It's a bit early, but screw it—we're bringing out the dessert right this instant!"

The guests who'd brought their children often stayed until the end, so they hadn't brought out the dessert yet. Doing it too early could distract the youths from Adelaide and all the other food, but given the circumstances, there was no other option.

Mitsuha had supplied most of the desserts. She'd cut no corners trying to capture the hearts of the children and impress the Ryners. *Eat this! My ultimate weapon!*

She went back to the hall and took the mic.

"Ladies and gentlemen, pardon me for the interruption. I want to inform you that we've prepared more exotic foods. This time, there are snacks, drinks, and desserts."

Well, that sure got their attention, she thought.

"Try pairing the snacks with different drinks to excite your palate. The dessert, however, goes best with juice. I believe the gentlemen here will enjoy this course just as much as the ladies and children."

The crowd stampeded to the snacks and desserts.

All right. If they're too busy drinking, they won't eat as much food. Getting blitzed makes it harder to eat, too, and a good dessert paired with some juice fills you up in seconds.

For dessert, there was cake, shortcake, fruit, chocolate pastries, cookies, pudding, mousse, cream puffs, ice cream—anything you can imagine. The ladies and children were floored by the selection.

Yes… Let the power of Japan's sweets industry flow through you!

After a good deal of stalling, the servants brought in the french fries, as well as the impromptu dishes. They were followed by courses that had actually been a part of the plan. Somehow, they succeeded in reaching the end of the party without embarrassing themselves with any empty plates.

What? You're wondering if the party was a success? Is that even a question?

What a stupendous night that was, Albert von Bader thought as he walked to his carriage. His mind was consumed with thoughts of the party. *It started out with a play… Although brief, it was nothing short of excellent, and I still can't wrap my head around how those pictures worked.*

The girl herself was beautiful, and her stunning dresses only added to her charm. Their materials were so high-quality and the designs so elaborate that I couldn't even guess their price. And the foreign food and drink was excellent beyond compare!

I can't imagine the wealth and connections it must have taken to construct such an affair. A lady's coming-of-age may be important, but who would lavish such resources without a second thought? Just how powerful are these Ryners?

Hmm, perhaps I'm not close enough with them. Fixing that will no doubt be beneficial, and if possible, I would love to have that charming maiden as a daughter. I'll have to light a fire under my sons…

The horses cantered off, taking the count to the Baders' capital mansion. He ruminated about what had just happened, as did all the other guests who'd attended the party. Most were merely blown away, but the ones with daughters

who would soon debut were absolutely distraught.

How can I compare to this? they thought. *How can I make my daughter's debut as impressive as this one? Please, help… Someone… Anyone…*

Thus, a number of nobles asked for Viscount Ryner's help and became indebted to him, and Mitsuha's General Store profited immensely from this venture.

As for Mitsuha herself, she had officially retired from party planning. *Sure, I'd be down to sell some ingredients, but never again with the whole hosting thing. No giving out complete dishes, either. I mean, it was a real pain, and I don't even wanna think about what could've happened to me if I'd screwed up. No theatrical stuff, either. They can handle that all by themselves.*

The Ryners were a special case. I only did it 'cause the viscount, his wife, and Marcel were referred to me by my first customers. Besides, they seemed like good people, and I desperately needed the publicity. With that out of the way, I just need some good ol' R&R.

Cooking lessons? Oh, for the other noble families? Marcel can handle that.

There had also been a casual, makeshift afterparty for Mitsuha and the staff. Plenty of ingredients had gone unused, so the chefs had done some experimenting─boiling veggie peels in oil and such─and they'd all had a great time trying the results. Naturally, the servants and the viscount's family joined in. The servants had been a bit sad they hadn't gotten to try the foreign food or the snacks from Mitsuha, and those who were backstage or in the kitchen had been disappointed about missing the play.

I mean, they did see the rehearsals, and they tried the foreign food while Marcel and his team were training! Though, yeah, none of that was perfected

yet…

There had also been a great deal of alcohol left over. While Mitsuha wasn't yet of age, she saw no reason for abiding by Japanese law in another world. Even Adelaide had enjoyed her fair share of drinks…

I'm not drinking with her ever again, though, end of story! And don't even ask about it!

In the end, Mitsuha received 260 gold coins. Apparently, it was normal for events like these to cost upwards of 300. Having seen luxury kimonos with obscene price tags, Mitsuha didn't find it unusual that the same could happen with dresses. Some even had authentic gems sewn in, and the prices could skyrocket from there depending on the gem's type and quality.

Additionally, the food was always gratuitously lavish. Not only did the nobles have to provide the best-quality meals from local ingredients, but they also had to bring something exciting to the table to stimulate their guests, who had seen it all before. The money involved there was a whole new brand of madness.

Though, that's kinda understandable… Transporting and preserving food is hard work in this world, Mitsuha thought, feeling smug about the fact that such problems didn't affect her.

But let us return to the important part: the 260 gold coins. That was about 26 million yen in this world and 6.5 million back on Earth─a tidy profit, even after you accounted for the equipment, ingredient, and dress expenses. Then again, the only food Mitsuha had actually brought with her were the complete meals and specialized items like fish and snacks. The Ryners had provided the

lion's share of the ingredients.

Mitsuha had also been paid separately for the fish and the other ingredients used during cooking training. After all, their practice versions had replaced all the meals in the household. Even the servants had eaten like royalty. It was a shame the servants would likely never feast so richly again. But Mitsuha's primary focus was the hefty sum she'd earned from the affair. She still owed debts to the mercenary captain, however, so she wouldn't be using her "deep pockets" just yet.

Of course, she hadn't forgotten about the photography. She'd personally trained two servants to use cameras, and they'd dutifully taken both photos and videos of the event. Mitsuha couldn't be bothered to pick and choose from them, so she sent them all to the dressmaker.

She'd edit and copy the stuff even if I didn't ask her to. Then I'll print out some stills and sell them to the viscount for even more money!

The dressmaker had requested prints, too, but she'd obviously make some herself. Probably life-sized. *Hey, I should ask her to make the ones I'll sell to the viscount. I'm guessing she'd make them for free.*

The day after the party, Mitsuha was so tired that she spent the entire day lazing around the store. She was especially glad to have her private quarters all set up. *With this, I don't need to return to Japan all the time… I can relax here just fine. There's even a bath! Well, I'd be lying if I said the bath back home wasn't a whole lot better, but I've gotta get used to living here.*

That's a little easier said than done when it comes to the toilet, though. I mean, taking care of a "number one" is easy. I've got a Western toilet, and it

even flushes. The carpenters hooked it up to a water tank that's linked to the well with a motorized pump.

As for "number two"… Uhh, I did make it usable in case guests came, but there's…y'know…the clean-up part. For now, I'm just gonna keep jumping back home whenever I've gotta drop the kids off at the pool, if you know what I mean.

Two days later, Mitsuha opened her store for the first time in ages. It was business as usual. It had been so long that the neighbor lady came to check up on her.

Oh, the beauty of human sympathy! Mitsuha felt so moved that she gave her another towel.

A few days had passed after her reopening. It was three o'clock─close to closing time.

Ding-a-ling!

My first customer in a while! Mitsuha cheered on the inside, though she hadn't been entirely dry. She'd had a decent amount of people come and buy things like shampoo, shampoo, and of course, shampoo. She *did* sell other wares, but the overwhelming majority of her customers were girls buying shampoo.

The number of customers was steadily growing, at least, and she made enough sales to live her everyday life. If you'll recall, Mitsuha had keen senses when it came to her profit margins. Additionally, she owned the place, so she didn't have to worry about rent.

Anyhow, let us return to her current customer… As soon as he entered, the man stomped over to Mitsuha like he was on the warpath.

“Give me fish,” he grunted.

“Huh?”

“I said, give me fish!”

“Sir, this is a general store. You may want to visit the fish shop instead.” Mitsuha had no idea if there were any in this town, but she had to guess there were none. She was actually quite cold to people with bad attitudes, if you couldn’t tell.

“Stop fooling around! I did my research, and I know you sell fish! Do you have any idea what will happen if you don’t do it right now?!”

“No. Do tell me.”

“The insolence…! Do you really not know the consequences of refusing Baron Turck?!”

“What? You’re a baron?”

“Wha…?” Her question caught him off guard. “C-Certainly not! I’m Lord Turck’s head chef!”

Yeah, I could tell he wasn’t a noble. I’ve got eyes, and they work just fine.

“What brings a baron’s head chef to my establishment?” Mitsuha asked, her customer-service smile fading.

“Since coming back from that accursed Ryner affair, all he does is complain about the food! He demands to be served what he had at the party. I asked around, and discovered it was exotic food that included fish. I can easily make food of that caliber as long as I have the ingredients. That’s all I need!”

“Ohh, well… I didn’t actually ‘sell’ any fish, per se. I accepted a request to host the entire party, and the fish was simply a product I had to provide to complete the contract. It’s not the same as selling fish.”

“What?!” he snapped. “Stop talking nonsense and just do as I say! If you don’t, I’ll—”

“What’s all this noise?”

Whoa, it’s Lady Iris! Mitsuha thought. *Crap, I totally forgot about the Bozeses…again!*

“Why haven’t you come to see us?!” she asked aggressively.

“Oh, I…I’ve been pretty busy lately…”

“With this man, perhaps? Is he your customer?” She looked down her nose at the head chef. The sudden appearance of an obviously noble lady had him nearly cowering.

“Uh, no. Not by a long shot,” Mitsuha said, then quickly changed her tone. “He said he would hurt me if I didn’t do as he said! I don’t know what’ll happen to me now…”

“HUH?!” The man immediately turned pale. “Wh-What are you—?”

“What business do you have with our girl?” They were joined by Count Bozes himself.

“Eep!” the head chef squeaked.

Feel that? That’s the heavy air of nobility.

“N-Nothing… I’m just a customer looking for some—”

“He said he works for the Turcks, and that he’d hurt me if I don’t do as he sa—”

Ah. He escaped. Didn’t even let me finish. Look at him go.

“I’ll be sure to mention this to Lord Turck,” said the count.

Lady Iris had an ice-cold smile on her face.

“I, uhh…”

Before Mitsuha could argue, she was thrown in the carriage and shuttled off to the Bozeses' mansion.

Umm, can we turn around for a sec? I wanna lock the door.

Chapter 9
Adventurers

"Hey! No fair!" Beatrice was livid.

Mitsuha had been taken to the Bozeses' capital mansion, where she was instantly put on trial. The judge and prosecutor was none other than the Bozeses' youngest child and only daughter, Beatrice. Mitsuha had no lawyer. Both Alexis and Theodore had run away.

"Why didn't I get to go to the party?!" she demanded.

"You're thirteen. You haven't come of age yet," Mitsuha replied.

"B-But all that tasty food! And sweets!"

"Sorry…"

"What about my debut, huh?! You're gonna make it up to me by throwing me the best one ever, right?!"

In the end, Mitsuha had to promise that her debut would have an electric light parade, a fireworks show, and food stalls, including ones for takoyaki and cotton candy.

Let's hope she forgets about it in the next two years.

Come dinner, she was barraged with questions.

"What *was* all that food?"

"How about those pictures?"

"Just *where* did you get the odd things you're selling in your store?"

Knew this was coming. I guess it's time to make something up.

Mitsuha ran with the following story: The friends she'd left behind in her

country were so worried about her well-being that they'd secretly sent her things by boat. Since they sent so much, however, Mitsuha had decided to sell the extras. She added that the boats were small and swift, and that they only brought the supplies at night.

What a crock, she thought when she finished. *Hope it lines up with my story so far… Then again, they'd probably understand a little white lie or two, considering I'm trying to hide my identity.*

H-Huh? You won't pry any further…? Wow, Count, you really are a stand-up guy. Wait, "We're dealing with Mitsuha, after all"? What's that supposed to mean, Lady Iris?! Ah, sorry. Forget I said that!

Once the matter was settled, the rest of the family joined in to chat.

The what, now? "Artificial golem soldiers"? Huh? I told you about them? Doesn't ring a bell, sorry. Salt-making? You're hell-bent on that, huh, Count? Oh? Your territory has a coast? All right, I'll look it up on the internet.

Alexis? You found me more charming than Adelaide? Yeah, right. Are you okay in the head? Know your place, I'm older than─Hold on. Count? Lady Iris? Why are you encouraging him?!

Ah, Theodore and Beatrice are on my side! You guys want me to spend the night here because it's late? Okay. I expected this, anyway. I'll have a glass of wine and it's lights out.

The next day, Mitsuha returned to the store right after breakfast. She had to open, after all. Diligent girl that she was, she couldn't skip out on work for no reason.

Well, there goes the weather, she thought, watching a murky wall of clouds

move in. A drizzle soon followed, which grew to a downpour in no time. It was the first rain Mitsuha had ever seen in this world.

How does everyone get by when there's barely any rain? she wondered. *Maybe I missed some when I went to Japan? Either way, there's no way I'm getting any customers now. The locals probably don't have umbrellas… Ah! Maybe I should start selling them myself!*

The bell rang not a moment later, catching her by surprise.

Customers?! In this weather?!

"Sorry," came a woman's voice as she stepped inside. "We'd like to stay here until the rain passes, if you don't mind."

Oh. Well, that's fine by me. I like people with manners, and she's easy on the eyes. Hmm, so there's three other people with her… Wait, hold on a sec!

"A-ADVENTURERS!" Mitsuha cried.

"Huh?" The four raised their eyebrows in unison.

Two of the party members were male, and two were female. One of the men had black hair and a muscular frame that supported the greatsword on his back. The other was a slim blond wielding a spear. The woman who'd spoken had red hair and a sword in her belt, while the other girl had silver hair, a bow on her back, and a dagger at her waist.

Mitsuha guessed the larger man was nearing his thirties, the blond just over twenty, the redhead about twenty or so, and the girl no older than sixteen. Though petite, she was at least more mature than Beatrice, so Mitsuha assumed she was about as old as Adelaide. She glanced at the girl's chest, and for some reason a feeling of camaraderie washed over her.

Anyway, it's a ragtag group of specialized fighters! There's no way they

aren't adventurers!

"Actually, we're just mercenaries…" one of them said.

Well, I stand corrected.

Although the group hadn't come to buy anything, they still took a look around the store, perhaps as a courteous gesture. Whatever the reason, they found Mitsuha's inventory extraordinary enough to have a good time browsing. The bigger man was mesmerized by the knives, the blond captivated by the cookware, the redhead charmed by the accessories, and the archer transfixed by the tools.

"They're so cuuute," said the redhead as she looked through the trinkets. They weren't too expensive, but "mercenary" wasn't the most lucrative career during peaceful times, to put it mildly.

The rain showed no signs of abating, so Mitsuha boiled some water and prepared tea and snacks for her guests.

"Would you like some?" she asked.

"Huh? We don't have any money…" came the instant response from the redhead.

"Oh, this is on the house. I'm not getting any customers in this weather, but I can't just leave, either, so I'm kinda bored. I was hoping we could chat."

"Oh, then sure thing!"

"Ah, hey…" The bigger man cracked a strained smile at his companion's lack of restraint.

In the end, they all accepted her invitation and joined her at the table in the kitchen. As it turned out, they were all mercenaries from the same village. The black-haired man was Sven, twenty-seven years old, the blond was Szep,

twenty-two, the redhead was Gritt, twenty-one, and the silver-haired girl was Ilse, sixteen. Mitsuha was disappointed to find out she wasn't a mage.

What a letdown!

She did find it strange that a sixteen-year-old was working as a mercenary, but she considered that her own worldview was the problem. Any villager who couldn't feed herself had the option of becoming a merc or bandit. Gritt said that she had also started out at sixteen.

At present, wars and local disputes were scarce. With so little demand for mercenaries, many of them had switched to marauding. These four, however, didn't stray from the more righteous path and continued making a living doing odd jobs, foraging, gathering, or going on hunts. Sadly, they earned so little they couldn't even afford replacements for their damaged weapons, let alone treat themselves to any luxuries.

"So yeah, we can't buy anything from you. Sorry." Looking apologetic, Gritt bit into a steamed bun Mitsuha had served with the tea.

Ilse was eating one, too. Stuffing her face with it, actually. Mitsuha found it cute. *She looks like a hamster*, she thought. *Though she probably wouldn't want to hear that from me, of all people.*

The men were reluctant at first, but they couldn't resist the allure of hot food and were soon gobbling them up.

"Don't be shy," said Mitsuha. "Like I said, I'm really bored… Can I ask some questions?"

"As long as that's all you want, then yeah, ask away!"

They happily obliged her inquisitiveness about all sorts of things: their gathering and hunting trips, the guilds that referred them to jobs, the troubles and

unexpected joys of travel, goals for the future, and so on.

This is it! Mitsuha thought. *I smell some serious money… And my nose never lies!*

"Umm, do the mercenary guilds take jobs from *anyone*?" she asked.

"Yeah," Sven nodded, still eating a bun. "All that matters is that it ain't illegal and doesn't break the guild's guidelines. They charge you a bit, though."

"And designated jobs work just like you said they do, right?"

"Right."

"Then how would you like to take a designated job from *me*?"

"Huuuh?" they blurted, all at once.

Mitsuha's request was simple: she wanted them to take her on their next hunting and gathering trip, protecting and supporting her the whole way through. She claimed she wanted to learn how these jobs were done so she could stock up on items that might be useful.

The party considered her offer. Although she was a child, Mitsuha ran an impressive store. They appreciated that someone of her status was so considerate of people like them. The forest they'd be working in was not too far from the capital. It wasn't very dangerous, so looking out for her wouldn't be difficult. It shouldn't impact their work much, either. At worst, they might have to carry Mitsuha's things─or the girl herself─but she was so small that it wouldn't be a hassle.

And most importantly, they'd be paid. Hunting and gathering didn't always go well, but these kinds of requests always guaranteed money. The guild would take the payments and distribute them to the mercenaries once the task was done.

Plus, the only way they could fail this request was by getting attacked and wiped out by bandits, and what kind of bandit would attack armed and penniless mercenaries?

They concluded that this was basically easy money with no negatives whatsoever. Furthermore, it would increase their reputation in the guild, since personal requests made mercenaries seem more trustworthy. Besides, they really wanted to establish a connection with this store. The potential of more jobs in the future─and more of these delicious treats─was just far too enticing. It wasn't even a choice, really. The four looked at each other and nodded.

"We'll take it!" they shouted in unison.

The mercenaries told Mitsuha they would move out in two days. The rain had let up by this point, so Mitsuha closed the store and the five of them headed for the guild.

Oh, I forgot to ask about the pay, thought Sven, ever the party leader. *Well, whatever, I won't mind even if it's just a couple silver.* Needless to say, the gold coin she presented blew him away. *Things are really looking up!*

The next day, after closing up shop, Mitsuha began preparing for the three-day trip. Besides the bare necessities, she stuffed her backpack with some odds and ends, the usefulness of which she'd asked the mercs about ahead of time. That was all well and good, but keeping the bag at a weight she could carry was a challenge. Some items were light but too large, while others were small but too heavy, and so on and so on.

The food and water were especially heavy. The place where they planned to set up camp was near a stream, but she needed water for the journey there. At the

very least, a quart didn't seem like enough. She most likely wouldn't be able to use world-jumping to stock up, either. One of their objectives was to protect her, so they'd surely keep an eye on her for the whole trip, nights included. Trying to jump in that situation would be too dangerous.

On the day of departure, Mitsuha woke up earlier than usual. She had a filling breakfast, then jumped back home to use the bathroom, as she didn't want to have to answer nature's call on the way there. She'd been told that they'd only be eating two meals on the first day, so she ate well in the morning to hold her over until evening. Though she did intend to have a snack or two regardless.

This world's travelers had a difficult relationship with food, as it was both heavy and took time to prepare. During trips like these, they could live off the land by eating wild plants and animals, but mercenaries preferred to take anything they could sell back with them, often fighting off hunger for the money.

Because of all that, they only brought along the absolute minimum, then hoped to get by with just the wild goods that weren't worth much on the market. And if that didn't work out, they'd make do with the little food on them. They offered to prepare shares for Mitsuha as well, but she refused.

"Hey, I just wanna give this food a try! Don't look at me like that! There's nothing to worry about! Boil-in-the-bags are awesome!"

Boy, do I talk to myself a lot recently, she thought. *Well, I don't have anyone else to talk to. Anyway… Knife? Check. Dagger? Check.*

Mitsuha had given up on taking the short sword. It was way too heavy for her. There was a world of difference between short swords and daggers in that regard. The differentiation between "short sword" and "long sword" was

actually based on what kind of soldier used them─the former for infantry, the latter for cavalry─so there were long short swords as well as short long swords. That basically meant that short swords were weapons used by adult foot soldiers. The term "short" was pretty deceiving.

Mitsuha needed something about half as long as a normal sword─a dagger, basically, like the one owned by Ilse. Twenty inches in overall length with a thirteen-inch blade would've been perfect. When she'd mentioned this to the captain of the mercenary organization who had outfitted her, he'd made a face that said, *Yeah, had a hunch you didn't know what you were dealing with,* much to her annoyance.

The knife was mostly a generic tool for survival and work, including skinning and whatnot. It wasn't as though she'd be doing that, but she felt it was good to have one for appearances' sake. Plus, it could easily work as a weapon.

It's kinda hard to tell the difference between knives and daggers. Like the "Orichalcum Dagger" or whatever from Triton of the Sea… *It's clearly as short as a knife, but it's shaped like a sword. Then again, "Orichalcum Knife" doesn't sound nearly as cool. Guess you've just gotta feel it out!* she thought, equipping both blades and a couple of guns. *Time to head out!*

By the time the four mercenaries arrived at the guild that morning, Mitsuha was already there, despite the fact that they themselves came early to keep her from waiting.

Just how excited for this is she?! The group was at a loss for words.

They found Mitsuha's get-up a little strange. She was wearing a plain top with a surprising number of pockets and a tough-looking pair of blue pants.

Well, that's a whole lot better than some flashy, frilly dress.

She had a knife and a dagger at her waist. That was all good, but they didn't know what to think about the metallic object hanging on her belt. It wasn't too big, but looked pretty heavy. On her back, she carried a large bag, a small quiver, and some other strange tool. It looked like a bow at first glance and had a string on it, so they guessed it was a ranged weapon. Besides that, there were two large, cylindrical objects. They didn't look that heavy, but they were certainly long.

What's with all that stuff? Is it a girl thing? Is that bag full of spare clothes, make-up, and skincare products or something? They hadn't even started, yet Sven was already feeling exhausted.

Once they were assembled, they set off. Sven was slightly moved that the young lady insisted on carrying the huge load by herself.

I don't have much stuff on me, so I really don't mind being a mule for her, he thought. *I guess she's at the age when she wants to show off. I'll just wait till she's tired and asks for help. I'll have game to carry on the way back, though, so I won't be able to help her then… But she'll probably have less to carry, too, what with the food she'll be eating and all.*

I don't even want to think about a case where we don't have much to carry at the end. Then again, there's still her payment, so… Damn it! No! Get a grip, Sven! It won't always be this easy!

Their leader's tendency to overthink things always gave him too much to worry about.

After several hours of walking with a few breaks in between, they arrived at the

forest. They'd left early, so it was still only noon. The party had passed a lot of merchants and other travelers, but overall, it had been a pretty uneventful trip.

The only thing Mitsuha took note of was how populated the road had been compared to the one in Colette's village. The path that branched off into the forest was just as empty as that one, however, and all she could hear were birds chirping in the distance. The presence of a footpath at least indicated that people traversed the area. According to Sven, they were mostly hunters, foragers, and mercenaries like themselves.

The group walked through the forest for half an hour before putting down their bags. They'd chosen a clearing not too far away from a stream.

Yep, looks like a good place to camp, Mitsuha thought. Going any further would make hauling their equipment or any game they might catch all the more tedious, and it wasn't as though they'd gain much by setting up camp closer to the forest's center.

The mercenaries didn't want to let the daylight go to waste, so they started working right away, saying they'd set up camp once it was too dark to find anything. They wouldn't hunt today, since the meat would go bad over the next couple of days, so everyone took to gathering herbs and wild plants that sold for a pretty penny.

Yams, maybe? wondered Mitsuha. *Ugh, but they're so hard to dig up. When I was little, I tried getting one that was about as wide as my pinky, but I gave up after digging down, like, five or six inches.*

She tagged along with Gritt, asking if the mercenary could teach her the ropes. *I'll give her whatever I find, obviously. I'm not* that *greedy!*

There were no yams to be found. They looked mostly for wild fruits,

vegetables, and that sort of thing. It was hard to tell whether some of these were medicinal herbs or food. Once it started to get dark, they went to set up camp.

If you can call this "setting up," anyway, Mitsuha thought as she looked at their bed. It was a piece of cloth draped over some grass clippings they'd spread on the ground. *No need for shelter when it's not raining, huh? And, uh, am I supposed to join them? Not a chance.*

She walked several feet away, plucked a large cylinder from her belt, and started fiddling with it. A few seconds later, it made a loud shuffling sound as it popped open and spread out.

"Wh-What?!" Gritt jumped in surprise.

"Ta-da! The 'anywhere tent'!" Mitsuha proudly presented the one-person pop-up tent she'd scored from the home improvement store's bargain bin. It was small, but meant for adults, which made it pretty spacious for someone with her petite build.

"Urethane foam sheet!" Mitsuha spoke in a grandiose manner, but naturally the mercenaries had no idea what was happening. It just made things awkward. Slightly embarrassed, Mitsuha undid the other cylinder and spread out the sheet.

A tent and an insulating sheet… My bed, made in just a few seconds!

Sven's eyes went wide.

"Do you think this would sell?" Mitsuha asked.

"Y-Yeah…"

The mercenaries said they'd normally make food out of any animal they encountered while foraging, but they weren't so lucky today. Surviving out in the wilderness was far from easy. Thankfully, they'd found some edible, albeit

bitter, plants. Trying to sell them just wouldn't be worth it, but they could be used to make a soup that was mildly filling when paired with the hard bread they'd brought. Throwing in a bit of dried meat would give the stock a bit more flavor…but not much.

Gritt was hard at work trying to start the fire so they could make the soup, if it could be called that. She was using a bit of flint, but not having much luck. The wood and leaves here were still a bit damp from the rain.

"Umm, excuse me…" Mitsuha stood beside her, and she looked up. "Can I do it?"

Gritt─a veteran at fire-starting─was having a hard time. Mitsuha also wasn't some housewife who lit the hearth daily. In fact, they probably figured she'd never held a flint in her life. If Gritt couldn't do it, there was no way Mitsuha could, right? Actually, she was more than capable…of starting a fire, at least. But the group had no way of knowing it, so they assumed she stood no chance. However, one of the reasons they'd brought her here was the experience, so they couldn't ignore her request.

Gritt extended the flint toward her and said, "Sure. Try it."

Mitsuha held up a palm and refused. "No, thank you. I've got my own."

She crouched down, squeezed a gel-like substance out of a tube, and rubbed some twigs into it. Then, she ignited them with a disposable, long-reach lighter.

"Wh-What?" Gritt was flabbergasted.

"Science wins!" All smug, Mitsuha puffed out her chest… though it was hardly noticeable. *Shut up, you!*

"How did she…?" Sven whispered.

By this time, Gritt had moved on to preparing the soup, while Mitsuha was

making her own food. Curious about what she was doing, they talked among themselves.

The particular item that had them so perplexed was her micro camping stove. It was about half the size of a regular one─so small you could see half of the gas cartridge. Simmering above it was an aluminum pot full of soup. Beside Mitsuha, there were plates, utensils, some empty soup cans, a 148-yen pack of miniature red bean buns, and canned peaches that had been poured onto an aluminum dish.

Needless to say, it was too much for one person.

"The rest of her stuff's all food?" Sven was awestruck.

"Ah, this is a bit too much for me to eat all by myself. Think you can help me? I'd like to have a taste of your soup in exchange, though."

"GLADLY!" they shouted in unison.

This is so unfair… I feel like the owner of some shady gastropub.

"It's so good…" said Sven after trying a spoonful of the rich soup. "When did you have the time to make this stuff? I thought you were just the spoiled daughter of some noble or merchant, but this just proved me wrong. You're so good, you could easily run a fancy restaurant." He could hardly believe what he was eating.

Sorry, bud, that's just concentrated minestrone I bought at a supermarket.

"Wait, this is bread? It's so soft! And what's this inside?! It's so sweet!" Gritt stuffed her mouth with the cheap buns.

Ilse munched on her food without saying a word. Always the silent one, that girl. Speaking of silent, Szep didn't have much of a presence. Mitsuha had almost forgotten he was there.

And to think I was expecting him to be a womanizer like Alexis… Oh, I get it─he thinks I'm a child. That was a little ignorant of me, sorry.

"Well? Do you think this would sell?" she asked. "Everything besides the bread stays fresh for a long time."

Sven took a moment to think before answering. "Depends on the price, but nobles, rich people, and the army would go crazy for this."

"I see."

The army, huh?

Mitsuha felt that supplying the army would bring her unwanted attention. Not to mention it'd make her so busy, she wouldn't have any time for herself. They'd probably buy things by the thousands. She doubted even the count could protect her from the military.

"I can't provide that much," she said, "and rich people have good food all the time. Let them eat some nasty stuff while they're traveling, at least. I'll just try to sell these at a price that people like you can afford."

"Huh? Are you crazy?! D'you have any idea how much you'd make if you played your cards right?!"

"It's fine, I make enough off my other stuff."

Hmm… If I got one can for 150 yen on Earth, it'd be worth six small silver─the equivalent of 600 yen─here. And if I used fair prices instead of ripping off the─ahem, I mean, using my shop's usual profit margins, they'd be eight to ten small silver each… 800 to 1,000 yen, basically. That's still a little too much to replace a poor merc's diet. At most, it'd be a once-every-few-trips luxury. Also, cans are kinda heavy, although freeze-dried food is even more expensive…

Ah, what about CalorieMates? Those little Japanese energy bars would be a good emergency snack in case they had terrible luck hunting or got lost or something. I could sell them for a higher price, since the mercs wouldn't be buying 'em every time. Welp, I guess I know what I'll show them tomorrow morning! I already have something in mind for lunch. Uhh, why do they all look so moved? Is the food that good?

After they'd eaten, the group sat around the campfire for a while and chatted. Mitsuha boiled water and prepared some tea. Powdered black tea au lait, to be precise. It was cheap, easy to make, and tasty, which made it one of Mitsuha's favorites. Everyone loved it, so she mentally tacked it onto her growing list of future goods.

When she found a good opportunity, Mitsuha excused herself from the group. Having heard in advance that there would be a stream nearby, she'd prepared a little something to make bathing easier. She retreated into her tent and changed into a bikini. Well, it wasn't showy in the least. Simply put, it was hard to properly wash oneself in a one-piece swimsuit, so Mitsuha had purchased this one for just that. It was purely functional.

I'm not gonna use any soap. The water's just too clean to pollute, and using it in a swimsuit is a pain, anyway. I'll just take a quick dip and be done with it.

She left the tent, towel in hand, and immediately locked eyes with Szep. The cup he was holding slipped out of his hand.

"Y-Young lady… Y-You… You…"

"YOU IDIOT! WHAT ARE YOU WEARING?!" Gritt yelped. "MEN, TURN AROUND AND DON'T YOU DARE LOOK AT HER!"

Ilse ran up and threw her cloak around Mitsuha.

Huh? What's going on? Mitsuha thought.

"What are you thinking?! Why would you walk out naked?! There are men here! I know you're a child, but you're not that young anymore!" Gritt shouted, red as a tomato, while Ilse nodded furiously. Sven and Szep had escaped off to… somewhere.

"Hey, it's just a swimsuit. It's okay to show it…"

"Shut up! It's not even underwear! You're naked!"

Oh, right. Girls here wear those so-called "bloomers" or "drawers." Now that I think of it, when I tried selling underwear to Beatrice and showed her mine, she actually fainted. Whoops… Sorry, girlfriend.

Following a long scolding session, they let her bathe, but Gritt kept an eye on the men while Ilse watched over her the whole way through.

The next day, Mitsuha woke up with the sunrise. The mercenaries had planned to go out and forage without any breakfast, then have a relatively filling brunch before hunting till evening. By the time they woke up, however, Mitsuha was already waiting for them with some water boiling on the micro camp stove beside her. *Good work, little guy! They would've needed to start a fire for this, but you've made it real easy.*

"Try these, please," she said, holding out two boxes of fruit-flavored CalorieMates along with some tea. "They're really nutritious, keep fresh for a long time, and are easy to carry around!"

Each of the four hesitantly took one and gave it a try.

"It's delicious…" said Gritt.

"There ain't much of it, but it feels…nutritious?" added Sven.

Nice, they like it! Oh, they want seconds? I don't think so. They've got foraging and stuff to do, after all.

While the mercenaries went off to forage, Mitsuha stayed behind at camp. They didn't stray very far, however, so it wasn't a problem. *Huh? You're wondering why I'm not going? I got bored of it, okay? Get off my case!*

They returned before midday, at about ten o'clock. Mitsuha was thoroughly prepared. She already had water boiling, so all that was left to do was throw in some noodles.

"Welcome back! I'm almost done cooking!"

They were rather used to it by now, so no one said anything. A few minutes later, Mitsuha gave them a dish that looked a little like stew. But rather than giving them spoons, she handed each of them a fork.

"What's this?" Sven asked.

"My family's secret recipe! We call it 'Bag Ramen'!"

They "oohed" and "aahed" appropriately.

Glad to see you can play along now.

"Oh, man, what *is* this stuff?!" Gritt said.

"It's so good!" Sven joined in.

It feels like that's all you ever say, Mitsuha thought bitterly. *Work on your vocabulary.* Which isn't to say instant ramen isn't great. It's cheap, warm, light, and easy to cook.

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You know all those people who eat cup ramen every day and act like they're totally broke? Fakers! All of them! If they were really poor, they'd go for the bagged stuff or some bread crusts. And let's not forget bean sprouts! Those little guys used to be just 34 yen, but they're a measly 26 now. Do companies even make any money off those?! Well, I can't sell cup ramen to mercs, anyway… The packaging would probably break inside their bags.

But, hey, I've found a real power product! Now we'll have a little post-brunch rest and start the main event─hunting!

Unlike when foraging, they didn't split up, and instead hunted as a single group. Everyone had a fighting style and range they were good at, so they picked the best person depending on what game they came across. Plus, larger prey was much easier to handle when they worked together. Some animals had to be herded or surrounded to be caught, while others were too tough for one person to take out. Such beasts could be worth as much as two gold, and one catch alone would make the trip a huge success.

The five of them quickly and quietly moved through the forest, keeping an eye out for prey. Their first target was a large bird perched in a tree overhead. Ilse took a shot at the animal, but missed.

"Sorry," she said. Gritt patted her head, and they resumed their search.

Is that…a bird?

Despite being a newbie tracker, Mitsuha found another bird before anyone else in the group. She crept closer to Sven, tapped on her crossbow, and whispered, "Can I have that one?"

Bows and arrows weren't all that accurate to begin with, and considering

the target was in a tree, the leaves and angles involved would make it even worse. Skilled as she was, Ilse would probably miss again.

Sven let her give it a try. She didn't think he believed she could bring it down—he probably just didn't mind wasting an opportunity if it would satisfy his employer. The fact that she'd found it herself probably had something to do with it, too.

Well, whatever, Mitsuha thought. A grin slipped onto her face as she pulled back the crossbow string.

As an archer herself, Ilse seemed pretty curious about the horizontal contraption. A sharp *twang* cracked through the air as the metal bolt flew out. It was followed by the soft thud of the bird falling to the ground. The mercs couldn't believe what they were seeing. Ilse in particular was so dumbfounded she couldn't close her mouth.

Did I mention I actually had some crossbow training at the captain's base?

"That's going straight to the market. We're not eating it." Sven overcame his shock and made that point clear. A true leader, indeed.

A few more hours passed. Szep was carrying the bird Mitsuha had brought down. Gritt said he must've felt guilty about last night, but Mitsuha still couldn't make sense of his actions. *Well, whatever. We already agreed that anything we pick or catch here goes to them, so carrying it sure isn't my job.*

When they stopped for a short break, Mitsuha told them she was "going to pick some flowers" and headed off by herself.

"For decoration? I'll come with you," said one of the guys in a profound display of density. It earned him a whack from Gritt.

I have to go far enough to not be seen, heard, or smelled, and find solid ground that's slanted enough for it to flow in one ejection─I mean, direction! It's a "number one," okay?!

Huh? What's that rustling in the bush─whoa! Something just came outta there!

It was clearly a wild animal. The creature was pretty boar-like, but even if it wasn't a boar, Mitsuha's brain interpreted it as such. More importantly, it was glaring at her. Their eyes met.

Did I invade its territory? Or does it see me as prey? Ahem. Sweetie, I'm the one doing the hunting here, thank you very much.

It wasn't too big by boar industry standards… Not that Mitsuha knew whether something like that existed. *Is it a juvenile? A wild boar piglet? A boarlet? Well, it doesn't seem that small. It looks big enough to send little ol' me flying, at least. It's already got tusks, so maybe it'd stab me? Or toss me up in the air and ram me? It doesn't look the least bit afraid, so maybe it's an adult?*

Before Mitsuha could finish her train of thought, the boar bellowed, pawed the dirt, and threatened her with a "ready to charge" pose. She felt no obligation to hang around and wait for it to come at her.

My dad was from the sticks─ahem, I mean…the countryside. Specifically, this one town where it wasn't unheard of for the local newspaper to have headlines like "Local Boar Goes Ham on Car" and for foragers to get badly injured in boar attacks. So I know all too well that these animals aren't to be messed with… There's only one thing to do!

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHH!"

She ran. Or rather, she skedaddled.

Boars can't make sharp turns, so I just have to run to the si─HUH?! It's still gaining on me! Dad, why would you lie about something so important?! Oh, yeah… He probably didn't think I'd ever be chased by a boar. That probably never happened to him, either. He'd probably heard it and accepted it as fact without confirming it himself.

The boar wasn't very nimble, but it gradually closed the distance between them whenever it had a straight path. It wouldn't be long until it caught up. If that happened, Mitsuha would be in for much more than a world of pain… Its tusks were deadly. The forest was hardly a good place for running, either, so she quickly ran out of stamina. She felt as though she could trip at any moment.

This is bad! she panicked. But before she realized it, her right hand was reaching for the holster on her waist and pulling out a gun. It was the Beretta 93R─the handgun with the three-round burst mode. Her left hand joined in, setting it on semi-auto─the single-fire mode.

Dry, loud pops sounded as she shot at the animal three times. There was a noticeable lack of echo; she wasn't indoors, after all, so there wasn't much for the sounds to bounce off of.

The boar dropped dead on the spot. Only one of the three bullets had missed. *Good thing I'd changed to single-fire mode. I'd have been lucky to get a single hit in burst.*

What? You think using guns is unfair? Come on, now, it's not like this is pro wrestling and the boar is some heel. I'm lookin' to survive out here, not have some honorable "fight of the century" or whatever. Mitsuha rushed to grab two crossbow bolts from her quiver before shoving them into the boar's wounds.

"What happened?!" The mercenaries dashed onto the scene and came upon

Mitsuha next to a boar with two bolts sticking out of it.

"O-Oh, it attacked me outta nowhere," she said. "I panicked and shot it, and it kinda worked out…"

Four pairs of eyes cast a suspicious look her way.

Ah, that's gotta be 'cause the crossbow wasn't that loud when I used it in front of them.

They took the boar and carried it back to camp, only to go out hunting again. Gritt stayed behind to gut the game and protect it from other animals. The rest of them went out, Mitsuha included. As an archer, Ilse was an obvious choice, but it looked as though they now recognized Mitsuha as a valuable asset, too.

Ilse took down a rabbit and a bird, while Mitsuha shot only a single rabbit. She could've gotten two, but the second had run away when she missed. Quite a shame. Both rabbits and birds sold for a decent price, so they'd be going on the market. That was enough for the day, so the group returned to camp for the night.

By the time they arrived, Gritt was stewing up some offal. *Ahh, yeah. Organ meat rots pretty quickly, so it makes sense that they'd eat it instead of taking it back. I bet it's a delicacy for these guys. I'll eat some, too, of course. I like offal, and it's plenty nutritious.*

Everyone was in high spirits. Though they didn't catch a fox or anything else with an expensive pelt, the two rabbits, birds, and of course the boar more than made up for it. Their trip was a success, no question about it. There was also the mountain of herbs they'd picked over the last day or so, and they'd go hunting again tomorrow. All that combined with Mitsuha's reward would make

for some good money. Probably not enough to get new weapons, but enough to take it easy for a while.

Everyone was excited for their first meat in a long time, even if it was just organ meat, and their laughter rang through the trees.

The next morning…

"Huh? Food? What are you talking about? You're going hunting, then having brunch, and then we're all going back to town, right? Why are you wasting time here?"

Saddened by Mitsuha's cold response, the four trudged off.

Huh? Me? I'm looking after the camp. Hunting is super bori—I mean, I need to preserve energy for the trip back. I will *make something for them to eat, though.*

Since visibility was low, Mitsuha took the chance to properly arrange her inventory. She jumped back home with the items she wouldn't use again, like the camp stove. She left them there, and instead picked up some salt and pepper, herbs, and other seasonings.

I think I'll stew the leftover offal, she decided. She'd brought the camp stove home since she wouldn't get another chance after everyone got back, so she decided to use Gritt's stone stove.

The four came back way earlier than she'd expected, and she was doubly surprised upon seeing the deer they'd brought with them. *No way, we've got venison! The average American, sick of eating beef at every meal, will rush out of work for this legendary meat!*

This stuff's worth a lot. Everyone looks happy as a lamb! Ugh, yeah, I know

it's "clam." But really, how does that make any sense? Imagine a bunch of lambs just hopping around a pasture, grazing without a care in the world. That works better, doesn't it? I mean, really, can clams even feel happiness?

Whoa, went off on a tangent there. Back to the matter at hand…

What a shame to waste the deer's organs! But I already made offal stew! Even though the deer's would obviously have been way tastier… Then again, even if we started cooking them right now, we'd end up getting back too late, so we would've had to throw them out regardless.

Everyone began carving up the deer. It was too heavy to bring back in one piece, so they would only keep the parts worth selling. They threw away the innards, cut off its head, and set aside the antlers. The legs would be helpful in carrying it, so they tied them together using some ivy, then put a branch through so two people could lift and haul it. That was Sven and Szep's job. Gritt and Ilse would carry the boar, of course. As for the birds and the rabbits… Well, Mitsuha was grateful she'd gotten rid of some of her things when she'd had the chance.

"It's so damn go-o-o-od!"

Of course it is! There's tons of spices in that! They pack a punch, don't they?! Eat up!

On the way back, Mitsuha became keenly aware of how heavy their spoils were. The others were having even more difficulty, but imagining their load as a sack full of coins was all they needed to keep on trucking. By the time they got back to town, it was already dark. They'd had to take many breaks on the way…

The next day, Mitsuha met them in front of the mercenary guild. By the time she arrived, they'd already sold the game to the guild. Mitsuha signed the paper

saying that they'd completed her request and gave them an "A" rating, which they were quite pleased with. The guild gave Sven the one gold coin they were promised, and he tucked it away with great care. That was half a month's worth of modest food and rent in a cheap room, which was pretty big.

What was even bigger, though, was the party they were about to have. They'd decided to celebrate their successful trip. Between the earnings from the game and the herbs, the mercenaries could afford to have a good time. They probably also thought that getting close to Mitsuha would be beneficial, so this wouldn't be a waste of money.

Mitsuha had been too exhausted to even have dinner the night before. They were most likely the same on that front, and just like her, they probably hadn't eaten anything in the morning to leave room for the party food. All five of them were hungry as bears, so not wasting any more time, they headed to their favorite place.

It's only midday, but hey, it's five o'clock somewhere, right?

"Here's to our success!" Mitsuha raised her ale.

"CHEERS!" all four of them shouted back.

After the toast, they ordered more and more food and enjoyed some leisurely chit-chat. They talked about the hunt, the food… that sort of thing. None of the mercenaries mentioned the crossbow. In all likelihood, they assumed Mitsuha didn't want to talk about it. An employer was entitled to her own private matters, so they didn't dig any deeper.

Among mercenaries, there were some lowlifes who cared for nothing so long as they got paid, but Sven's group was on the other side of the spectrum. They took the mercenary rules to heart, because if they didn't, they couldn't

complain when someone else broke them.

"Anyway, the…ramen? And, uhh, CalorieMates? Those are pretty good," said Gritt.

"Yep, they really are," Mitsuha nodded.

"Your little stove was really useful, too, but it looked like a pain to carry around. I think it's better to just use makeshift stone stoves. That thing's expensive, too, isn't it? It uses fuel, and if it breaks, then you're outta luck."

"Oh, yeah." Mitsuha had learned a great deal from this trip, and had a good time, too. *If only carrying the stuff back wasn't so—Ah!* "Hey, don't you think it'd be great if you could carry more stuff?"

"Well, of course. We could take more game with us, so we'd obviously earn more. But we can't buy a carriage or anything like that. The maintenance costs waaay too much. Just getting one carriage and some horses would cost us an arm and a leg."

At that moment, a certain search result came back to Mitsuha: "Foldable Aluminum Bike Trailer, Non-Bursting Tires: 37,900 yen." *If they bring one of those on their trips…the possibilities are endless!*

"Hey, does that fire stick cost a lot?" Gritt asked.

"Oh, not really. Especially the smaller ones. They can be used hundreds of times, and they cost less than a silver."

"HUHH?!" Gritt and Ilse were dumbfounded.

Yeah, they come in packs at the discount store. Each one probably had a value of about a small silver. With my store's insane profit margins, that'd be one silver. Also, why are the girls the only ones surprised? Mitsuha wondered. *Oh, I get it, they're the only ones handling fire and food, huh? I see how it is.*

The chatter went on and on, but Mitsuha didn't mind. She found the conversation both fun and useful. Suddenly, she remembered something.

"Oh yeah, look at this," she said, taking a magazine from her bag and placing it on the table. "Remember how you said I was being reckless on the first night? Look! Where I come from, it's pretty normal to wear *this* when swimming!"

The four opened the magazine and immediately gaped at the content. Men and women of all ages clad in swimsuits were making merry in pools and beaches. A seductive bombshell in a bikini gazed out at them from one of the…*special* pages.

The group was frozen at the sight. Except Szep, whose shaking hands were flipping through the pages on some sort of autopilot.

"No way…" said Gritt.

"Th-This is just…" Sven couldn't even form a sentence.

Ilse had no words.

Szep, however, was pretty talkative. "Hey, these are just pictures, right? They're detailed, yeah, but this can't be real! A heaven like this just…can't exist…"

Yesterday evening, Mitsuha had jumped back to Earth. It had been a struggle, considering how tired she was, but she'd dragged herself to a secondhand bookstore and picked up a glossy men's magazine. Mitsuha had made sure it was both cheap and impactful. Her nation's honor had been on the line, after all.

Man, even though I changed before I went in there, I still totally reeked of blood and wild animals. No wonder I got all those weird looks. There was that

old guy with a mean look in his eyes… He stared daggers at me, like the smell of blood gave him flashbacks or something. What was his problem?! Ugh, I really should've taken a bath…

After the party was over, Mitsuha and the mercenaries said their goodbyes, and that they hoped to work together again. One of them tried to ask more about her crossbow, but the others nipped that in the bud. With that chapter over, she went back to her store.

Man, I close up way too often. I'll really have to open the shop tomorrow, she thought.

Before they parted ways, Szep had inquired about the magazine. It had served its purpose, so Mitsuha let him keep it.

A few days later, Mitsuha returned to the place where they'd had their little gathering. She had really enjoyed the food. *Even I like eating out every now and again. Cooking for myself too often always drains my veggie supplies, so saving them is nice, too.*

The four mercs happened to be there, as well. Upon seeing her, however, they jumped as though she were a ghost. *What the hell's up with that attitude?!*

"Hey, it's been a while. What's wrong?"

"Ah, nothing, just, uh…"

That was when she noticed they had different gear.

"Huh? You got new weapons? Congratulations!"

"W-WE'RE SORRYYYY!" The four of them bowed down and apologized in unison.

Uhh… What? Oh, they sold the magazine to the fourth son of a noble for

seven gold coins? That's just fine and dandy. I gave it to them for free 'cause I didn't need it. I didn't care whether they threw it out or sold it.

Reselling something I didn't know the value of probably made them feel guilty, like they swindled me or something, but really, I'm not bothered by it at all. Then again, for me to make seven gold, I'd have to sell 140 generic shampoos. I sold them for eight silver each, but only five of that was profit. And these four went and made it all with just a single resale, huh?

No, really, it's fine. I don't think much of it. Seriously. Honest. I do feel like I might be popping a blood vessel and that my smile's a little stiff, but that's probably just my imagination. They look kinda pale…and they're shivering? Nah, gotta be my imagination.

"All right! You're buying my lunch!" she declared.

"Y-Yes ma'am!"

Mitsuha went on to enjoy a long stretch of peace. The country she was in became her second home. She was fairly safe in this world, and the people were kind. It had its share of bad seeds, but the same was true of Earth.

Don't sweat the details or you'll go bald, I always say!

She aimed to acclimate at her own pace, then think of a way to strike it rich. For now, she was leading a comfortable life and had all the time in the world.

I'm gonna take it easy and bring happiness to everyone!

…Ah, so there *was* a time when she'd believed that, wasn't there? Well, it's not as though you could blame her. She had only known of this one, relatively prosperous nation, after all. There was no way she could have noticed the shady

activities of its neighbors or seen the writing on the wall that said, *War is coming.*

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Mitsuha spent her days blissfully unaware of the political intrigue, never sensing the oncoming danger…

Bonus Chapter

Easy Money

Mitsuha was lost in thought.

Maybe I really should find a way to make some quick and easy money. Once or twice wouldn't hurt, right?

Although she was getting a steady income from the (overpriced) products she sold as a store owner and the information (and overpriced ingredients) she provided as a consultant, Mitsuha wasn't really satisfied with the speed at which her wealth was growing. It was for this reason she had started brainstorming some get-rich-quick schemes.

Cooking's a no-go. I'd be so busy, I wouldn't have time for anything else. Working all the way from morning till evening would be way too tiring for my liking. Besides that, I can't do anything that'll mess with this world's natural progression, sell anything that could be used for war or crime, or anything else that would throw this world's politics or economy into chaos.

These limitations didn't leave her with many options.

There has to be something, though. Wait, I've got it! The four mercs got seven gold for that girlie mag I gave them! That means I can make a killing selling por─I mean, "romance novels"!

There were no scientific, distributional, or economic problems with those, so it wouldn't mess up the world. Both buyer and seller would be satisfied, and no one would have a problem with it. It seemed like the perfect idea.

She decided to investigate her potential clients and find out what kind of

prices to set. Needless to say, the best person to start with was Szep─the one who had already sold a girlie mag to a noble.

"So yeah, I'm thinking of selling these," Mitsuha said, presenting one of the magazines. She was in the eatery Sven's group frequented. Once there, she'd quickly located the mercenaries.

Upon seeing the por─apologies, *romance novel*, all four of them froze. Unlike the one she had shown them last time, this magazine was overtly erotic. Though not enough so to be "18 and up."

"Think you can point me to somebody who'd buy─"

Before she could finish her sentence, Szep─who was standing behind her─clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Guh, mmgh! Grrrmgh…!"

"Why the hell'd you do that?!"

Sven was profusely apologizing, while Szep made a disheartened face. There was a five-fingered mark on his left cheek.

"I-I did it for your safety…" Szep made the same excuse as always, but Mitsuha'd had enough of it.

I know he's not lying; he really did do it for my sake. But there are limits! You don't just grab a girl from behind and cover her mouth! Hmph!

According to Szep, the first magazine had become such a hot topic among the nobles that it had actually reached the royal palace. Some wanted to know its source, while others demanded more. Eventually, things had escalated to the point that even the church got involved. They could now declare it heretical, take

and use it themselves, or demand the rights to it. Regardless, getting involved with it wasn't a smart move at this point.

Out of respect for Szep and a desire to monopolize, the guy he'd sold the magazine to hadn't let anything slip, but it was possible he'd tell someone about Szep someday. If that were to happen, Szep planned to say that he'd gotten it off a wandering merchant and had no idea where the man had come from or where he'd gone. If Mitsuha were to put something similar on the market, Szep's protective lie would be pointless. Thus, he'd done his best to silence her, even if it meant using force.

Man, this sucks, Mitsuha thought. *I was planning to sell the mags through Szep. As in, without any official involvement from my store. I don't mind selling p…romance novels in secret, but I don't want my store to be known for that kind of stuff. My establishment is wholesome! I sell children's toys, not adult toys!*

In any case, it looked as though Mitsuha had no choice but to give up on this venture. *It was such a great idea, too. What a shame. Oh well, it's best if I just let it go and move on to something else!*

Hmm… People in this world can't read books from my world, and I can't sell anything with pictures or photos depicting progress they haven't made yet…

I guess I could copy and sell famous paintings from Earth, but even if this is another world, I'd feel bad for the original artists. Mechanical copies of true art are nothing but sacrilege. Though homages and reworkings based on non-copyrighted material are another story…

Maybe I could make my own? No. I don't have the time or the talent for it. I can't draw, carve, sculpt, or─HEY, THAT'S IT!

A few days later, Mitsuha wound up in a quarry during the night. She was focused on mining stone suitable for sculpting. If you're wondering why she was in such a dangerous place alone, at such a late hour with no tools in hand, don't worry… You'll find out soon enough.

"Hrmmm… Venus de Milo with arms, Venus de Milo with arms… C'mon!" Mitsuha repeated this strange mantra, touched the rock face, and jumped back home to Japan, bringing a chunk of it with her. Right away, she arrived in her garage. Filled with anticipation, she turned to the rock she'd brought along, expecting to see a complete Venus de Milo, but…

"WHAT THE HELL?!" What she saw was a vaguely feminine creature with arms at such disturbing angles that it's better we don't describe them here. Let's just say that if you saw this thing at night, you'd run like hell.

"Nike with a head, Nike with a head… Come onnnn!"

…Why'd she end up as a harpy? This has to be because I'm trying to imagine something that isn't there and impose it on the result. That means I have to go for something that's already complete! Aren't I a clever girl?

"The Thinker, The Thinker… Come on!"

He was sitting on a toilet with an expression of pure ecstasy. This was no "Thinker." In fact, it didn't look like he was thinking anything at all.

"David! Come on!

"The Little Mermaid! Come onnn!

"The Statue of Libertyyyy!"

Mitsuha had completely forgotten how dreadful she was at drawing and, well, any other kind of art.

Weird, since I'm pretty good at die-cutting… Anyway, I'll have to think of

something else. I can't keep these freaky statues at home, though. If anyone sees them, they're gonna think I'm in the cult of some evil god.

With that, Mitsuha brought them back to the general store.

"Excuse me, how much for this one?"

Yay! A customer! What's he buying─Huh…?

"This evil-warding monster sculpture is so well-made. The ugliness, the eeriness… Most magnificent!"

Mitsuha sold it for quite a lot, but didn't feel happy in the least.

Whatever, I'll just think of something else! Moving on!

Chapter 10

Enter the Lightning Archpriestess!

A few days had passed since Mitsuha's camping experience in the other world, and business was booming. A steady stream of customers had been flowing in to buy a variety of products, such as shampoo, shampoo, and shampoo. With so much foot traffic, Mitsuha figured her store was becoming the talk of the town.

Great job, girls! she thought, attributing the increase in popularity to the Ryners' maids. *You too, Count Bozes.* Mitsuha had an inkling he was the reason she hadn't had any strange or unsavory noble visitors.

Ding-a-ling!

The bell chimed, and a young girl stepped inside. Mitsuha had no doubt that she, too, was after shampoo.

"Umm, is this Mitsuha's General Store?" she asked.

Man, I just realized I don't have a sign out front! Is that why I've barely had any customers until now? Damn it, Kunz, you're supposed to point out stuff like that! I'm gonna have you make one and put it up for me later!

"Yes, you're in the right place. Please take your time," Mitsuha said with a bow.

Her customer looked to be about ten years old. She had feathery blonde curls and a refined aura about her, despite her adorable countenance. Immediately, Mitsuha knew the girl was a noble. It was even believable for her to be a princess right out of a fairytale.

It also dawned on Mitsuha that most girls in this world were beautiful. She

imagined it was because noble men married attractive women, and these women eventually gave birth to more of their kind. It certainly wasn't related to some sort of freemason or reptilian conspiracy. At least, that was what she wanted to believe.

"I'll take a look around, then." The girl smiled and ventured further into the store.

As Mitsuha watched her customer, her mind drifted to the degenerate dressmaker. *If she could see this girl, her blood pressure would skyrocket till she had blood shooting out of her nose. Not enough to pass out, though, since she would still need to take a mental snapshot. That lady operates on a whole different level, and it's not exactly something to aspire to.*

After Adelaide's debutante ball, the seamstress had given Mitsuha an edited Blu-ray and a set of photos from the event; their quality was exquisite. Mitsuha was planning to sell them to Viscount Ryner, but she still hadn't decided on the price. She had briefly considered charging one gold per picture, but such a rate would have made her a swindler exploiting his fatherly affections. Simply put, it wasn't her style.

Mitsuha's present customer seemed to delight in her shopping trip. The basket she carried was stuffed full of items, and their total value was already impressive. As Mitsuha wondered if she would be able to afford them, the girl approached her.

"I would like to buy this and some shampoo, please!"

"Certainly." Mitsuha placed her items in a bag decorated with a cute animal mascot─a rare thing around these parts. "You can keep the bag, by the way," she added, and the girl brightened. As her customer took out some gold coins,

Mitsuha wondered if she would be safe walking around without a bodyguard.

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“That was fun! I’ll be sure to come again,” the girl said, full of enthusiasm.

“Thank you very much!” Mitsuha replied, seeing her off at the door. There was no retail fakery in her words. The girl had been a great customer.

As Mitsuha watched her leave, she noticed something unnerving on the other side of the road: a filthy, suspicious-looking man who seemed to fit the classic stalker archetype. If Mitsuha could have called the police, they would likely have arrested him without question. The man was lurking in the alley between buildings, not doing anything of note. Was he after Mitsuha? Or maybe her shop? She couldn’t tell.

Before Mitsuha could write him off as insignificant, however, he abruptly began walking in the direction of the girl who had just left.

A noble girl goes missing right after visiting my store? Now that *rumor would be bad for business!*

Mitsuha rushed back into the store and pulled out her “counterattack bag” from behind the counter─a pun that may or may not have been intended. She threw it over her shoulder and left the building, locking the door behind her.

The girl still hadn’t gotten far. Mitsuha could see her a short distance away, completely defenseless. The man from the alley approached her from behind while Mitsuha swiftly and silently closed in on them. Just as they passed the entrance to a back alley, the man jumped on the girl, clamped a hand over her mouth, and dragged her into the shadows.

Bingo, Mitsuha thought. She darted into the alley, then chased after them as fast as her feet could manage. They vanished at an intersection, and by the time she caught up, the girl was already gagged and surrounded by four men, who were tying her up. There was an empty sack sitting beside her, perfect for a

kidnapping.

Aren't you a well-prepared bunch of scumbags!

"What are you doing?!" she shouted.

The thugs panicked for a moment before they noticed their opponent was merely another little girl. They breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Heheh. Brave one, ain't ya? You showin' up just means another payout fer us, though. Thanks fer makin' it easy."

The man who had spoken stepped closer to Mitsuha. She quickly took a sheathed knife from her bag and slipped it into her belt.

"Oh? So yer gonna put up a fight? Ya got guts, I'll give ya that. But a li'l sweetie like you can't kill nobody. Killin' a man is—"

Before he could finish, Mitsuha reached into her bag again, grabbed one of the things inside, and pointed it at him.

Bang!

A sound cracked through the air. The bandit collapsed to the ground and began to convulse.

"I *can* kill you," she said. "On the contrary, if there's a reason to let scum like you live, I'd like to hear it."

"HUH?!"

The three men still standing were dumbfounded. Despite Mitsuha's words, however, their partner in crime was still alive; the item she'd used on him was a pistol-shaped stun gun. It fired electrodes that attached to the target and applied high voltage through thin cords. To prevent nefarious use of this weapon, firing it would scatter a burst of paper confetti, with each piece containing the weapon's unique serial number. Of course, this function had little significance if

the stun gun was acquired illegally or used in a different world altogether.

Though the sale and possession of this weapon was banned in Japan soon after its release, it was readily available in a number of foreign countries. Mitsuha had acquired this one through her mercenary connections. She wanted to avoid killing as much as possible.

"Who the hell *are* you?!" one of the men cried out in panic.

I thought you'd never ask! Time to put on a real show. Come back out of the darkness, cringey Mitsuha from middle school!

"Me? I am…the Archpriestess."

She spoke in a low tone in an attempt to mimic one of her heroes, Asahi Kurizuka. He had starred in a historical Japanese drama from the 1960s called *I Am a Bodyguard.* To suit her personal tastes, however, she chose to replace the titular "bodyguard" with "archpriestess."

"Whazzat?" The bandits had no idea what she meant, and frankly, neither did she. Mitsuha was simply itching to cross off yet another entry on the list of things she had always wanted to say.

"I am the Lightning Archpriestess! Those who stand against me deserve no mercy!"

This time, she whipped out her Beretta 93R and fired a three-round burst at some pots nearby.

It won't look cool if I stop to change modes, so let's just roll with this.

Ba-Ba-Bang!

Gunshots echoed around them as the bullets shattered the pots, sending ceramic fragments flying everywhere.

"EEEEEK!"

The bandits screamed and tried to escape, but just as they did, a group of somewhat imposing soldiers popped out from the other end of the alley.

"Princess! Are you all right?!" one of them called out.

Oh, so she really is a princess? Mitsuha thought.

While the soldiers were busy capturing the men and retrieving the princess, Mitsuha slowly backed away from the scene. She ducked into a side alley in an attempt to flee, but luck wasn't on her side.

"Please wait, Miss Archpriestess." Upon hearing the address from behind her, Mitsuha let out an internal scream of frustration.

There were soldiers at both ends of the alley, but this one in particular seemed somehow more important than the rest. He was an older man, and his face gave Mitsuha the impression that he had been through many an ordeal.

"Umm, how long have you been listening, if I may ask?"

The man's answer crushed her. "Everything from 'What are you doing?!' onward."

Oh, so all of it. Great. Thanks, Mitsuha thought, moments before she collapsed dejectedly to the ground, her hands splayed in front of her.

"Archpriestess?"

Let me go, I'm begging you. I got carried away… I'm sorry!

"Come with us to the castle," said the soldier.

Mitsuha had somehow known things would come to this the moment she found out the girl was a princess. And the girl had seen her face, so there was no way out of it now.

Please don't look at me with those sparkling eyes, Princess.

"Let me at least close up shop."

She still hadn't run the numbers for the day, closed the curtains, or switched the security systems to their "after-hours" settings. There was still a lot for her to do.

The princess and most of the soldiers returned to the castle, while Mitsuha returned to her store accompanied by the aged soldier and two others.

They don't have to be so on edge; it's not like I'm gonna run.

She finished closing up relatively quickly, and her thoughts moved on to how she would prepare for the castle visit.

A dress, maybe? Nah, too early for that. I already have a good ruse going on with the count, so this time I'll be nothing more than a humble merchant. What about guns? Hmm, they already saw me shoot. Assuming I keep the Walther PPS at my side, would I need the 93R? I can't picture myself using it.

Mitsuha briefly entertained a scenario where she escaped the castle while clearing a path with gunfire, but she figured she could just world-jump out of any real danger. If she did that, though, her efforts toward setting up the store and her network with the nobles would go down the drain.

In the end, she tucked her Walther into the holster at her side and put the 93R in her bag. She had fired it off in front of the kidnappers and hadn't had time to reload.

As for knives, she left them behind. While she could claim her guns were something akin to religious tools to explain away their existence, wielding a knife in front of the royal family was completely off-limits.

Opportunist that she was, Mitsuha also stuffed her bag with various items from the store's shelves. They were as full as ever, since she made sure to

continually restock. Additionally, her business model prioritized quality over quantity─one item for ten silver over ten items for a silver apiece. Of course, she was willing to make sacrifices if it meant spreading happiness to girls around the world.

Ah, I should sell stuff for that time of the month, too.

It dawned on her that many of her wares didn't sell not only because of their prices, but because the people of this world simply didn't understand how to use them. In order to increase an item's popularity, she would need walking advertisements─it had worked for shampoo. But she imagined she would become far too busy if she upped her advertising, and so she dismissed the idea.

Once she had put her gun and some souvenirs in the bag, Mitsuha's preparations were complete. She hadn't even changed out of her shopkeeper clothes.

"Uh, Mister Soldier, you should be more careful where you step. The store's closed, which means the security system is on. Don't come crying to me if you're struck by lightning." The young man turned a bit pale.

Atta boy. Now, walk straight ahead. That's right… Don't even think about touching the shelves.

I don't recognize this ceiling, Mitsuha thought, fully aware of just how dead the horse she was beating really was.

She had just arrived at the castle and was feeling somewhat let down. Part of her had expected to be transported in a carriage drawn by an excessive number of white horses─this world's equivalent of a limousine, surely─so you could imagine her disappointment when she had to walk like the commoner she

was.

The aged soldier remained at her side even in the waiting room. Mitsuha passed the time by reflecting on her personal fondness for "refined older gentleman" types like him.

This guy, Count Bozes, Stefan the butler… In ten years or so, Viscount Ryner will probably make the list, too.

Her thoughts were interrupted as someone called for her.

"You are Mitsuha, I presume?"

Immediately upon seeing the man who had spoken, Mitsuha was compelled to curtsy. *Yep, that's the king, all right!*

"Please, raise your head. Come here and take a seat," said the king. "There is no need for my daughter's savior to trouble herself with formalities. I myself won't bother with a terribly 'royal' attitude. Treat me as you would an equal."

Oh, so this isn't his "king" voice, huh? Mitsuha understood that even kings behaved differently depending on the surrounding company. They had families, for example, and it wasn't as though they all began life as kings. Some were even saddled with the title without expecting it.

The hall in which they met was far from a looming throne room full of ministers, and she wasn't having an audience with him on some sort of official business. This was simply a casual meeting with a father who wanted to thank her for saving his daughter.

Realizing she'd been nervous for nothing, Mitsuha took her first real look around the room. It was a relatively humble space housing a table and some chairs. Everything was luxurious, of course, but such was standard fare for a palace. Mitsuha would've been more surprised if the room had been decorated

with a cheap folding table and chairs instead.

With the king were a mature, dignified lady—the queen, no doubt—as well as the princess from before and a princely-looking boy. He appeared to be younger than the princess; if Mitsuha had to guess, she would have put him at eight years old. He seemed particularly interested in her.

Was it something the princess told him? she wondered.

Behind them, there was an elderly man she assumed was the grand chamberlain, while behind her stood the refined soldier who had accompanied her there.

I said I'm not gonna run away, damn it!

"Now, Lady Mitsuha the Lightning Archpriestess…" the king began.

"Mitsuha the general store owner," she corrected.

"Lady Mitsuha the Lightning Archpriestess."

"Mitsuha the general store owner."

"Lady Mitsuha the Lightning Archpriestess."

"Mitsuha the general store owner."

"Lady Mitsuha the Lightning Archpriestess."

"Mitsuha the general store owner."

"Lady Mitsuha the…general store owner." He gave in at last.

Mitsuha was aware that this was a golden opportunity to turn her reputation around and insist that she was, in fact, the Lightning Archpriestess, but she ultimately decided against it. Once they had settled on her mode of address, she explained what had happened earlier in the day:

"After the princess bought some items from my shop, I saw her off. It was then that I noticed a suspicious-looking man following her. It worried me, so I

ran after them. You wouldn't believe my surprise when I found a group of men trying to kidnap her! I gathered up my courage and called out to them, but since I'm just a little girl, there was really nothing I could do. That was when the soldiers came and saved us both."

"Hmm. I've been told a different story," the king said.

"After the princess bought some items from my shop, I saw her off. It was then—"

"I understand that part! Let's move on!"

Heehee. I win again!

Mitsuha continued to treat the "Archpriestess" affair like some sort of fairy tale or a figment of his imagination, so the king surrendered. Whatever had actually transpired was left unclear.

According to some reports that arrived during their conversation, the kidnapping hadn't been politically motivated—the perpetrators were human traffickers who had merely wanted to abduct and sell a beautiful girl. The princess had heard of Mitsuha's General Store from one of the maids; she had escaped from the castle, shaken off the guards that came after her, and caught the eye of the traffickers, who had no clue that she was royalty.

The local human trafficking industry was secretly backed by some influential nobles, so even the king could do little to stop it. Regardless of the circumstances, however, an attempt had been made to kidnap the princess. No matter how much power they held, any noble who would speak out against an official investigation of this incident would be labeled an ally of the traffickers and a traitor to the kingdom. Therefore, both the traffickers and those who supported them were in serious trouble.

Wow, the princess did something great for the country, Mitsuha thought.

She learned that the princess, Sabine, was ten years old, and the young prince, Leuhen, was eight. They were the youngest of five siblings, and the others─two sisters and a brother─were a fair bit older than them, so Sabine and Leuhen were closer to each other than the rest. The older siblings did love them, of course; they just chose not to join in the young ones' childish games.

"I hope you get along with my children," the king told her with Sabine at his side, both of them beaming.

"S-Same here," Mitsuha replied awkwardly.

Hold on, "children"? Uh, you got plans for me or something? Wait, more importantly…

"Your Majesty, do you feel that you don't see as well as you used to?" Mitsuha asked.

"Yes, actually. For a while now, I've found it difficult to read small letters, so I've started using a lens."

Huh? You have those?! You're more advanced than I expected!

She briefly wondered why she hadn't seen anyone wearing glasses, but remembered that back on Earth, convex lenses used for presbyopia had spread long before the concave lenses used for myopia. The first lenses used to support eyesight were either like magnifying glasses or nose glasses─not the Groucho kind, but rather pince-nez.

Unlike those with myopia, people with presbyopia didn't need to use lenses all the time. Pince-nez glasses were flawed and could fall off easily, so they were mostly worn while reading─definitely not during walks around town.

I don't know what seeing aid is popular right now, but there's no point in

thinking about it! Whatever they've got, it won't hold a candle to Earth's modern marvels!

"Could you give these a try for me, please?" Mitsuha asked, then presented the king with five sets of glasses from her bag. "Try putting them on like this. Each pair is slightly different, so find the one that helps you see best."

"Hmm, like this?" he asked, donning the first pair. "Oh, my! They're so light! And I can see so clearly! They help both of my eyes, and my hands are completely free. They don't move when I look down or shake my head, so I don't have to keep adjusting them!" He then went on to try the other glasses.

Huh, so they do have pince-nez glasses. Doesn't sound like they're the kind with a string, though.

"Saar! Come over here and try these!" the king called out to the old man behind him, who came and picked up a pair for himself.

"Oh? Ohhh!"

"Well? You said you didn't like using a hand lens or glasses. What do you think of these?"

"Everything is so clear… Why, these glasses are better than anything I've ever known! They're light and sturdy, and I'm free to use both my hands. This would make working long hours much easier!"

The old man was even happier than the king. Mitsuha hadn't anticipated this outcome, but saw no harm in getting on good terms with the grand chamberlain. Surely the king would appreciate it, too.

"With these, it will be a few more years until this old dog stops being chancellor," the old man said proudly.

Oh, so he's the chancellor, Mitsuha thought as she put the remaining pairs

of glasses back into her bag. With these two as her walking advertisements, she would gain even more customers, especially among the country's elites─a group she was planning to make a great deal of money from.

What? You think this is predatory salesmanship? How d'you mean? I'm just selling something for an outrageous price, that's all!

"Do you have more wares of such quality?" asked the king. "Please, don't hold back. Money is no object!"

"Well, I do this for a living. As long as you pay me, I can sell you anything. Except for girls, of course."

"No girls, you say?"

"Nope."

"I see. Hahaha!"

The chancellor and Mitsuha joined the king in his laughter. Though the joke may have seemed a bit dark considering the princess's failed kidnapping, it was also Mitsuha's way of saying, "You can't control me no matter how much money you have." The king understood this and so did the chancellor. The queen, on the other hand, likely did not.

Despite taking a liking to her, the king did not provide Mitsuha with a carriage home, so she had to go back the way she had come─on foot. She believed it was for the best, however. Being delivered to her back-alley store by a carriage bearing the royal family's crest could have caused her unnecessary trouble.

Chapter 11

Ruin the Wicked Merchant!

Ding-a-ling!

I smell trouble, Mitsuha thought.

A terribly corpulent man walked into her store, flanked by three other people. His appearance set off Mitsuha's internal "scumbag" detector.

"You're the shopkeeper?" he asked.

Called it.

"Give me the rights to this store and its supply routes. Mhm, I'll be taking you under my wing."

Whoa, what the hell?! Don't we have laws in this kingdom? I know I look like a child, but that's too much. I'm kinda impressed, though. He doesn't give a damn about what society thinks. Is he that rich and powerful?

"Sorry, but who are you?" Mitsuha asked, just for the sake of it.

"What? You don't know *me*?" The man seemed genuinely insulted. "I guess I can't expect much from a little girl. Very well, I'll enlighten you. I am the president of the Adler Company, Nelson Adler!"

"Ohh, *the* Adler Company?!"

First I've heard of it, Mitsuha thought to herself.

"Yes. Rumor has it that this place deals in fish, so-called 'shampoo,' and other curiosities. You're young, but you have potential. I'll look after you, so you'd better appreciate it."

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I guess Count Bozes's pressure didn't

squash nosy merchants, too.

"Umm, I'll need to run this by my trade partner, so could you come around the same time tomorrow? I'll make sure he's here."

"Mhm. Very well."

Pleased that his demands had gotten through to her so easily, Nelson turned around and left. He had likely intended to strong-arm Mitsuha if she refused, and her obedience led him to believe that she either knew going against the Adler Company was a bad idea, or she was simply an idiot.

Hah! As if I'd make it that easy for him. Also, I said I'd call my "trade partner," but I didn't say anything about a supplier.

Ding-a-ling!

"Mitsuha! I'm heeere!" came a girl's voice.

"So you are!" Mitsuha replied, thinking about what a regular Sabine had become.

The girl had initially called her "Mistress Mitsuha" out of respect, but Mitsuha didn't want it to seem like she was forcing the princess to humble herself before a commoner, which would certainly buy her a one-way ticket straight to the gallows. She had therefore insisted Sabine just call her "Mitsuha," which eventually worked.

Sabine joined Mitsuha behind the counter. There was a small TV and a DVD player hidden there. Customers couldn't see them, and Mitsuha made sure to stop whatever was playing if she needed to greet someone. For this reason, any customers who arrived during an engaging part of a show earned an intense, largely unmerited glare from Sabine.

Since the princess had become a daily visitor, Mitsuha, unable to tell her much about Japan, had run out of discussion topics. Then one day, she had accidentally pressed the wrong button on the remote, revealing to Sabine the existence of the TV and DVD player. The princess had gone wild over it, and Mitsuha had found herself unable to play off her mistake. Soon enough, the two of them began watching things together.

However, Mitsuha had made sure to tell the princess that the TV was a magic mirror of clairvoyance that would break if she told others about it. She even selected appropriate shows to increase the potency of the lie, including a story about a little witch who would lose her magic if her identity was discovered, and another about a character who lost everything because of a broken promise. It worked spectacularly.

Additionally, as Sabine didn't know Japanese, Mitsuha had to translate the shows on the fly. Doing this was so tiring that intense transformations or special attack scenes, which involved little to no dialogue, relaxed her.

"Ah, Sabine, please give this letter to the chancellor when you get back. It's very important, so don't forget it."

Though she had a devilish side, Sabine was a bright girl with a good head on her shoulders, and Mitsuha was fully confident in her abilities. The princess nodded with a serious expression, took the letter, and tucked it into her pocket.

Ding-a-ling!

"I brought the contract, girl. Sign it."

Well, then. You sure don't waste time, do you, Nelson?

"Mitsuha, who is this?" Sabine asked, peeking out from behind Mitsuha.

Since the princess was just ten years old, few citizens knew what she looked like at a glance. She was also wearing plain clothing so as not to stand out. As pretty as she was, in her current state, no one would assume she was royalty.

"He's from a big company and says that he wants to take me in," said Mitsuha.

"Whaaat? You're going away? Nooo! Please don't!"

What an actress. This girl actually scares me sometimes.

Upon seeing a girl who was exceedingly charming even by noble standards, Nelson cracked a fleshy grin.

"Oh? If you want to stay with her so much, why not come along?"

"Really?!" Sabine jumped for joy, and just as Nelson's smile stretched even wider…

Ding-a-ling!

The bell chimed yet again.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." The newest visitor showed himself in.

"Wha─Chancellor?!" Nelson couldn't withhold his surprise.

Yep. Everyone's here, Mitsuha thought.

"Sorry for calling you like this, Saar."

"Oh, don't be. Your calls come before all other matters, Lady Mitsuha!"

She refers to him by his first name?! Nelson was panicking. *And why is the chancellor so humble with her?!*

He had a bad feeling about this.

"This man told me to hand my store over to him for free!" said Mitsuha. "He also wants to take me away, and the princess as well. I just wanted to tell

you that…well, it looks like I'll have to refuse the king's requests from now on."

"Oh? What's this I'm hearing, Mr. Adler?" The chancellor gave the large man an icy glare.

"Huh?! Wait, I, uh…" Nelson was sweating bullets.

"Do you truly intend to interfere with the business of a merchant working directly for His Majesty the King, lawlessly take possession of her place of business without compensation, and coerce young girls into becoming your property?"

"What? No, uh, not at all!" By now, the president of *the* Adler Company was as clammy and desperate as a fish out of water.

Is he even breathing? Mitsuha wondered.

"'Not at all,' you say?"

"No! I mean, er, yes! Exactly!"

"Then I trust you will not meddle with this store or anyone associated with it, directly or indirectly?"

"I won't! I swear by the Goddess!"

"Then I would like you to keep watch for any obstruction of this business. You will be held responsible if something happens, so you had best inform any pertinent parties right away."

"Certainly!"

With that, the Adler Company was now obligated to make sure that not only its own members, but all businessmen in the capital, avoided meddling with Mitsuha's General Store. Mitsuha couldn't even imagine what kind of punishment the chancellor would bring down upon Nelson, were he to fail. It had come at a cost, but Nelson had made it through the most dangerous moment

in his life…or so he thought.

“One more thing, Mr. Adler,” the chancellor continued. “I hereby revoke your permission to set foot on the castle grounds. Starting tomorrow, employees of the Adler Company are barred from entering the royal palace.”

“What?!” Nelson turned white as a sheet.

For the Adler Company, a purveyor to both the palace and the government, a ban from the palace was far more than merely a loss of sales. It also meant losing the people’s trust and becoming a laughingstock among fellow merchants. Even the top businessmen in the capital─no, the country─wouldn’t have been able to pick up the pieces from this degree of damage.

“Why would you do such a thing?” Nelson had believed he was safe when he agreed to keep the other merchants in check, but…

“Simply put, His Majesty the King is a gentle man, but even he would not tolerate the presence of his young daughter’s would-be abductors.”

“Huh?”

“Now, let us return, Your Highness.”

“What? But I wanna play with Mitsuha some mo-o-ore!” the princess whined as the chancellor dragged her out of the store.

All that remained in their wake was a lone man collapsed into a puddle on the floor.

Rest in peace, Nelson.

Soon after that, the president of the Adler Company retired, leaving everything to his son.

“Do not lay a hand on Mitsuha’s General Store.”

His last order as acting president may have been uttered through gritted

teeth, but it was heard by all the merchants in the capital─no, the country.

“Hey, Sabine! Wanna inherit the title of ‘Plumber of the Opera’ from me?”

“No! That sounds weird! You just want to push it on me to get rid of it, don’t you?!”

Such keen senses! She really is scary!

Chapter 12
Yamano Cuisine

Mitsuha was selling more and more pairs of glasses by the day, and she knew she had the chancellor to thank. Between this increase in business and his help with the Nelson affair, she was developing a real appreciation for the man. Sales of her other stock were picking up, too, despite the outrageous prices.

She had also managed to sell Sven's party a bike trailer. The mercenaries had thought long and hard before making the decision. They knew the purchase would blow a hole in their wallets, but since it had seemed like a worthy investment, they'd ended up biting the bullet. Mitsuha had explained the alternative options of renting or leasing, but Sven had ardently refused.

How manly.

She had sold it to them for about the same price as she herself had paid, which was a great kindness by her standards. However, she *did* make them swear to secrecy regarding what they'd paid for it, claiming she would go out of business if others expected such a generous rate. They had all nodded in unison, taking her words to heart.

They probably think I'm deep in the red or something, Mitsuha had thought. *And honestly, I don't see a downside. Now, go on and advertise me! Bring demand to my supply!*

Sven and his crew were immensely satisfied with their purchase. Previously, they'd had to increase their meager earnings by gathering cheap herbs light enough to carry, which was a time-consuming and laborious task.

Now that they had the trailer, carrying capacity was no longer an obstacle, so they could focus solely on hunting. They could return to the capital more quickly, and they wouldn't have to toil under the burden of their game on the way back.

Yeah, I imagine that hauling all that weight with a branch on your shoulder the whole way back would hurt like hell. I bet it's so bad they have to take a day or two off afterward.

The mercenaries had already used the trailer on a couple of hunting trips, and the results were outstanding. They could spend twice as much time hunting as before, and Mitsuha found herself thinking that they would fare better now as hunters than mercenaries.

Ilse, the archer of the group, was really interested in a crossbow. She seemed to want to say something about it whenever she and Mitsuha met.

Earth had crossbows for a long time, right? Mitsuha thought, feeling conflicted. *Should I just sell her one?*

That was just one of the many things she had to worry about, however. There was also the matter of how to handle bike trailer sales going forward. She would only supply one if a customer ordered it, but she wasn't sure how to price them. After all, the target audience was poor mercenaries and hunters.

Mitsuha had also finally used one of her "deep pockets" for the first time. Throwing in the first coin had been an exhilarating moment for her. She had placed her ear against the pipe as it fell, waiting in anticipation. But to her disappointment, she hadn't been able to hear anything at all.

Yeah, I'm gonna need more gold if I wanna hear that sweet, sweet sound. Damn it!

As for Princess Sabine, she was in a foul mood these days. More customers meant more interruptions of her precious films and dramas. She had even asked Mitsuha to stop bringing in so many people, but her proposal was swiftly rejected.

Should I just let her go up to the third floor? Nah, she'd probably insist on living here. Please don't ask to bring Prince Leuhen along either. I'm begging you!

On one occasion, Beatrice Bozes had visited the store and run into the princess. Both of them were surprised to see the other; they were apparently already acquainted, which was something Mitsuha hadn't expected. She had assumed that members of high society weren't aware of one another prior to their debuts.

The noble girls had explained things to her: as the eldest daughter of an influential count, Beatrice had been assigned to socialize with the youngest princess. Their relationship was something akin to school friends.

Good call not picking someone Sabine's age, Mitsuha had reflected. *I can just imagine the kind of fights they'd have. Beatrice is older and more mature, so she probably lets things slide here and there.*

Hey, Sabine, don't try to talk to her about the DVDs! Don't even think about showing them off, either! I said the TV would break if you talked about it, didn't I?!

Ding-a-ling!

A girl no older than eighteen entered the store. Instead of heading into the aisles, she walked directly over to Mitsuha.

Huh? What?

"Excuse me, is this where I go for consultations?"

Would you look at that. The sign I hung up at the entrance is already working! This'll be my first consultation request in a while. Oh, and just so you know, I also put up a sign with the store's name.

The girl's dilemma was as follows:

Her family's home also functioned as a diner, and it employed five people: her parents, herself, and two prep cooks. Her father was the owner and head of operations. A twenty-eight-year-old man was sous chef, and the nineteen-year-old was part apprentice, part assistant. The girl and her mother worked as waitresses, though she was training to become a cook herself.

All was well until she caught the eye of a certain young man: the second-oldest son of a family who owned a larger restaurant in town. The girl was a cheerful character beloved by many, and this man began to pursue her aggressively. She refused his advances, as she herself was attracted to the young apprentice working for her family, but her suitor showed no intention of backing down.

Eventually, the restaurateur himself got involved. Since his own business would be passed down to his eldest son, he wanted his second son to marry the girl and take over her family's diner. He couldn't do anything to outwardly destroy its reputation, of course, so he started to meddle in their business by way of underhanded tactics. His first move was buying out the older of their two cooks.

Not long after that, the girl's father was suddenly assaulted by a group of thugs. They deliberately broke his right arm, leaving the rest of him unharmed. It

would heal completely if given enough time, but he couldn't cook until then, so they were forced to close up shop temporarily. This last event had occurred just a few days ago. The family learned of the restaurant owner's plot from an employee of his who happened to owe a debt to the girl's father.

Her request was simple:

"Please, help us!"

"Hold on a second," Mitsuha said. She went and hung her "Closed Due to Special Contract" sign on the door, then closed the curtains.

Time to get my rusty consultation gears a-rollin'! But, why'd she want to talk to a girl who only looks twelve or so about something so heavy, anyway? Oh, she's friends with the Ryners' maids? Makes sense.

"Let me get this straight. You want me to reopen the diner, prevent any further damage to business—as well as any future interference from the restaurant—and, if possible, help you tie the knot with the apprentice. Is that everything?"

"Um, yes," the girl replied meekly. She was surprised to hear such words from someone who looked so much younger than herself. The mention of her love interest had also caused a flush to spread across her cheeks.

"First of all, getting new cooks would be tough. Inexperienced hires probably wouldn't be of much help, and unemployed veterans are pretty rare. You might even pick up someone hired by the restaurant to sabotage you."

"Huh?" The girl's reaction made it obvious that she hadn't even considered the possibilities.

"Basically, to solve this problem, we need to reopen the diner, run it without hiring anyone untrustworthy, and gain enough profit to make up for the

losses from the temporary shutdown. Then we've got to keep it running at a profit, crush the other restaurant owner's plans, and lead him to destroy himself. Then he'll never bother you again. It's that simple!"

"No, it isn't! How are we supposed to do that?!"

"That's a job for Mitsuha's General Store's Consultancy Division! Leave it all to me!" Mitsuha's words were brimming with confidence.

"But, uh, you didn't mention anything about tying the knot…"

This girl's a lover and *a fighter,* Mitsuha thought.

At nine o'clock that evening, a group of five people were holding a meeting inside the girl's family's diner, Paradise. A single light shone over their table, and seated there were Bernd and Stella, the couple who owned the establishment; Aleena, their daughter; Anel, the apprentice; and, of course, Mitsuha. She had just finished explaining to them everything she said to Aleena earlier in the day.

"That's impossible!" Bernd declared. "First of all, look at my arm! Anel can do the prep work just fine, but he can't run the kitchen by himself. All Aleena can do at this point is help out with the simple stuff, and if we've got three people in the kitchen, Stella's gonna have to do hosting and serving all on her own. She can't work the dining room *and* the register!" He seemed adamant.

"Bernd, do you understand why apprentices need years and years to become proper chefs?" Mitsuha asked him.

"Wha? Well, 'cause they start from the basics, watch the other chefs work, practice in their spare time…"

"Exactly! No one sits down to teach them. They have to use what little

spare time they have to train through trial and error, making lots of culinary disasters. Am I right?"

"Yeah, that's how you become a chef."

"Then imagine spending the whole day teaching Anel how to make a single dish. He already mastered prep, didn't he? If you hammered it into his head, eventually he'd know it well enough to make it at least nine-tenths right, don't you think? It wouldn't have to be perfect."

"You're not wrong about training, but in cooking, that remaining tenth is hard to get right. If nine-tenths is enough, Anel can probably do a few dishes already."

"I want you to spend a week coaching Anel and Aleena. Don't worry, you can keep an eye on them and help them get it right even while they're working. A broken arm won't get in the way of that, right?"

"Uhh, I guess…"

Anel could barely believe what he was hearing. In the realm of cooking, the only ones who could learn directly from their master were either their direct successors or employees trusted enough to inherit the establishment, and even then, it only tended to happen at the end of the chef's career. An apprentice chef getting a whole week of training was simply unheard of.

"But the taste would still be lacking, and it's not like our diner has some kind of specialty. I don't think the customers who went elsewhere during our short-term closure would come back fast enough, and the regulars would notice the drop in quality… And like I said before, Stella can't handle the customers alone."

Mitsuha grinned. "Don't worry! I have a plan! I'll make it a real walk in the

dark!”

“That’s not reassuring at all!”

One week later, Paradise was back in business.

“One order of omelet rice for you, and an udon for you! Enjoy!”

“Hamburg steak special, comin’ right up!”

The diner was bustling with activity. Four waitresses were taking orders and running food out to customers. Besides Stella, there were the two female mercenaries, Gritt and Ilse, as well as one more part-timer.

Mitsuha had offered this job to the two of them. Drawn to the idea of good pay, free food, and a chance to take a break from hunting, they didn’t hesitate to accept. The wages and meals from Paradise, as well as the commission and reputation they would earn after completing the job, made for an offer they couldn’t refuse. Mitsuha had chosen only to hire the women, however, feeling the male mercenaries were unnecessary in this situation.

Back in the kitchen, Anel and Aleena were hard at work following the instructions of Bernd and Mitsuha. Bernd taught them how to make the items on Paradise’s standard menu, while Mitsuha guided them in the arts of Yamano Cuisine.

Yes, Yamano Cuisine. That was the name of the mysterious culinary style that had recently become a hot topic among the nobility. It was said to be unbelievably delicious, and thought to be made using unimaginable methods and impossible ingredients.

Many cooks tried to emulate this food based on what little information they had, but none of them succeeded. The only exceptions were those who had

begged for help from the head chef of a certain noble house.

While learning under him, they had asked him what to call it, to which he had replied, “Yamano Cuisine.” Each dish had its own name, of course, but that was the name he’d provided for the style as a whole. Yamano Cuisine was not the name of a single dish, but of all dishes that used the Yamano techniques. It was akin to a secret martial art.

The other chefs praised him for the food, but he always shook his head in response, saying that he had created none of it—he had simply learned it from his master, then honored her by putting her name on it. That was the story of Yamano Cuisine.

As the name spread among the wealthy, it naturally reached their servants, and through them, the commoners. Similarly, Mitsuha had gone out of her way to use hearsay to her advantage. She had asked the Ryners’ maids, as well as Sven and Szep, to spread the rumor that Paradise was serving up Yamano Cuisine. She hadn’t even bothered to use flyers this time because, as it turned out, most commoners were illiterate.

So that’s why the flyers did nothing when I opened my store! Damn it!

Mitsuha had learned from this blunder, and she now stuck solely to word of mouth in order to advertise. She had been careful not to overdo it, as she didn’t want the diner to receive more patrons than it could handle.

Business isn’t about getting as many bodies as you can on day one—you need long-term stability!

At Paradise, Yamano Cuisine followed Mitsuha’s business model of “Big Profits, Slow Returns.” After all, there was a limit to how many customers the diner could hold. She chose to target wealthy individuals, commoners who

desired a taste of luxury, men looking to show off to women, old couples who had money saved and wanted to celebrate a special occasion, and so on.

Of course, Yamano Cuisine that was cheap and easy to make had lower prices than the rest. A bowl of udon, for example, cost just five or six small silver. It didn't look terribly fancy, either, so putting a high price tag on it wouldn't have been a good idea. These dishes were quite popular, though, so Mitsuha was satisfied.

Even the more expensive dishes weren't on the same level as the rip-offs in her general store. Nothing was priced higher than two silver, which was about 1,800 Japanese yen. And, as you might expect, the diner's original menu maintained its usual prices.

On the first day after Paradise's re-opening, most of the tables were occupied for nearly the whole day. It wasn't a full house, but it was still a great success, and an example of the power of gossip. Sometime in the afternoon, Stella had briefly caught a man peeking in through the window, wearing a bitter expression. From what she told Mitsuha, this visitor had been the crooked restaurant owner who'd been trying to bring them down.

Y'know, I feel like I should add that Marcel considered calling it "Mitsuha Cuisine" instead of "Yamano Cuisine," but I begged him not to do that. It was tough trying to figure out what to use instead. "Japanese Cuisine" wasn't completely right, and it would confuse me, too. "Earth Cuisine" didn't work well, either. In the end, we talked about it and agreed to call it "Yamano Cuisine." I was fine with it 'cause there aren't too many people around here who know my last name.

Anyhow, Paradise's part-timers had been hired on a seven-day contract.

During this time, Anel and Aleena aimed to become skilled enough to run the kitchen by themselves, which would allow Bernd to stick to front-of-house work. He didn't need both hands to run food or handle payments.

On the second day, Mitsuha began to notice wealthier-looking individuals and possible nobles among their customers. As these people likely had a reputation to maintain, they didn't want other members of high society to know they had visited such a commoner-oriented diner. It was for this reason they all wore plain, modest clothing.

That plan would've been smart if it wasn't so obvious, thought Mitsuha. *Not that I care if they come to this place—it was actually part of my plan! If Paradise's one-of-a-kind menu brings in nobles and influential people, anyone who wants to mess with this place—like that restaurant owner—will be in for a hell of a time. Powerful customers make powerful allies!*

Uh, it looks like there's way too many of them, though. We even have a line outside. Didn't really see this coming. Will it even out in a week, I wonder?

Wait, Aleena, that's not how you make katsudon!

By day three, business was booming. The training in the kitchen was also going swimmingly; Anel and Aleena had begun to excel at their jobs.

Mitsuha had thought long and hard about what kind of Yamano Cuisine to put on the menu. It was essential that the dishes were cheap for the diner to make and didn't rely on her world-jumping power, especially since she wasn't entirely convinced it was permanent. There would be no cheating with spices or anything like that, and the food had to be simple enough that even beginners could put it

together quickly and with minimal instruction. Under those conditions, she had chosen things like omurice─fried rice encased in a fluffy omelet─Hamburg steak, and udon.

I also taught them how to make mayonnaise. I mean, it's just a mix of eggs, oil, vinegar, and some other stuff. There's no harm in advancing their cuisine, right? It's not like I'm popularizing microwaves or something. I do have one for myself, though; I need it for frozen food.

Soon after opening up for the fifth day, Paradise was visited by a group of five men. They cut discourteously into the line outside.

"Ah, sir, please don't─" Stella's words were cut short when she realized who she was dealing with.

"Business is booming, I see," said the man who stood out most in the group─the owner of the large restaurant. His entourage included the ex-Paradise employee he'd bought out, two guards, and a portly man Stella didn't recognize. She quickly called for her husband.

"Can I help you?" Bernd asked as he walked out of the kitchen, clearly in ill humor.

"Now, now. There's no need for such a sour expression. I am merely here to do my duty as a virtuous citizen," said the restaurant owner.

"What are you talking about?"

"I reported your criminal acts and came to see to it that you're properly penalized!" He pointed at Bernd with a wide smile on his face. The recent change in the diner's operations had led him to switch to a direct assault.

"Criminal acts? What do you mean?"

“Don’t play dumb! I have guards with me!”

“Listen, I really don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re going to have to explain.”

In response to Bernd’s words, the restaurant owner pointed at the menu on the wall. “That! That right there is proof of your misdeeds!”

“Huh?”

“You falsely claim to sell the famous ‘Yamano Cuisine,’ fooling your customers and robbing them blind! Guards, arrest this man at once!”

Bernd and Stella were flabbergasted. The three part-timers looked on with worried expressions, and the customers braced themselves for the outcome.

Finally, Bernd snapped out of his stupor. “Uhh, what proof do you have that our Yamano Cuisine is fake?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” The restaurant owner cracked a devilish grin and presented one of the men that came with him. “This man is the founder of Yamano Cuisine! Viscount Ryner’s one and only head chef─Marcel!”

Gasps broke out among the crowd, though the more noble-looking sorts simply gawked.

“Marcel, please testify!”

“Hey, I can’t do that without trying the food. Let’s start there.” He wasn’t wrong, and the guards needed proof to make an arrest, so the restaurant owner reluctantly complied.

It won’t take long, anyway, he thought.

“All right, then. I’ll have that soup, the…‘omurice,’ and the, um, ‘Hamburg steak,’ please.”

The restaurant owner was grinning from ear to ear. Marcel didn’t seem

familiar with the dishes' names, further evidence that the diner's Yamano Cuisine was fake. Bernd shouted the order to the kitchen, and everyone else waited. The guests resumed eating and watched the unfolding drama in silence.

A short while later, the food was on the table in front of Marcel.

He was upset by the udon, huffy with his Hamburg steak, and outraged by the omurice. He seemed on the verge of shouting…

"Bring me the one who made this!"

Aaand, there it is.

"Man, what's with all the noise?"

It was Mitsuha who walked out of the kitchen.

"What's the meaning of this?!" Upon hearing Marcel's shout, the restaurant owner's sneer grew to Cheshire proportions.

Marcel directed his frustration toward Mitsuha. "Master!" he cried. "Why did you teach these people dishes you didn't teach me?!"

"What was that?!"

"Hey, that was party food," Mitsuha replied. "These dishes are for the general public. I couldn't really teach them to you back then, could I?"

"B-But I would like to serve this to the Ryners, too…"

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“Uh, then how about you learn by helping out in this kitchen? Maybe you can even teach the staff here a thing or two. They’re your fellow disciples, after all.”

“Certainly!” Marcel ran off to the kitchen, leaving the restaurant owner slack-jawed and the guards unsure of what to do next.

“So, what was it you wanted again?” Mitsuha’s voice could be heard throughout the hushed diner.

“Is this where you get to eat Mitsuha’s cooking?!” Suddenly, the tense atmosphere was broken by a girl violently dashing through the door. “Ah, it’s Mitsuha!” she exclaimed.

“Beatrice…”

The girl was soon joined by her family: Count Bozes, Lady Iris, Alexis, and Theodore.

Hey, you guys need to get in line! Oh, who am I kidding, Mitsuha thought as the family simply waltzed in. While the other nobles had tried to masquerade as commoners, the Bozeses were as unabashed and gaudy as always. No one had the gall to complain about them cutting the line. The high society customers turned their faces in the other direction, hoping not to be recognized.

“Uhhh. Bernd, we know each other. You won’t mind if I let them cut the line, right?”

Bernd nodded vigorously, unable to speak.

“Is this where my daughter works?”

The door had opened up once more, and the man who had spoken was none other than…

“Ah, Your Majesty.”

Upon hearing Mitsuha’s words, Bernd collapsed.

Careful with that broken arm, she thought.

As I said, the diner had four waitresses: Stella, Gritt, Ilse…and Sabine.

The girl hadn’t been able to bear Mitsuha’s absence for an entire week, so she had come to the diner every day. Mitsuha had asked her to help with running food and other assorted tasks, and the girl seemed to enjoy it. She would even sit beside customers she liked, talk to them, and share their food. Essentially, Sabine did whatever she wanted, but the customers didn’t mind, and so neither did Mitsuha. However…

Of course they don’t mind; what kind of man would say no to this cutie fawning all over them? It’s the pretty face, isn’t it? Women are worthless without one, huh?!

And man, whenever she talks to those noble types, she always takes notes. I don’t know what that’s about, but it scares me!

Mitsuha was also feeling mildly impressed by the guards brought in by the restaurant owner. She had heard that the town guards were all commoners with little training or social standing, but they ran to the king’s side with fierce loyalty. The king was accompanied by the chancellor and the older palace guard; the two of them looked very pleased with the town guards’ performance.

I really hope this ups their reputation. Oh, and another thing…

“Hey, guys,” she said, addressing them directly. “Bernd was attacked by thugs recently, and I think there might be more to that… Think you can look into it?” Mitsuha shifted her gaze from the guards to the restaurant’s owner. The king looked at him, then the guards, and nodded in encouragement.

“Right away, Your Majesty!” the town guards replied rigidly.

Not like they could’ve said no, but it’s a chance to move forward in life! G’luck, guys!

The guards grabbed hold of both the restaurant owner and the ex-Paradise employee and took them away.

They aren’t going home, that’s for sure, Mitsuha thought. The king’s own guards were, by the aged man’s order, stationed outside the diner.

Also, as it turned out, the ex-Paradise employee had committed a grave sin. The culinary sphere in this world valued relationships, including seniors’ affection for junior workers, bonds between fellow chefs and cooks, and gratitude toward one’s instructors, with the third being the most important. Betraying this principle was so heinous that no reputable restaurant or noble kitchen in the capital would hire him now.

The local chef network is something else, Mitsuha mused.

After everything that had happened, Mitsuha was sure no one would ever interfere with Paradise again. Part of her was a little worried that the diner itself was now beyond belief.

Imagine telling somebody, “Hey, there’s a commoner diner that nobles love, the king pops into now and again, and has a princess among its waitresses!” Of course they’re gonna say you’re full of it. But I didn’t plan on any of this, I swear! Seriously, talk about overkill. And speaking of “kill,” I sure hope that restaurant owner doesn’t get snuffed out.

As service resumed, the three Bozes children insisted Mitsuha herself make them something to eat. Sabine dropped all pretense of working and joined her father to order something as a customer.

This is going on your tab, Your Majesty. Oh, well. Guess I'll treat the princess to an improvised kids' meal using a Hamburg steak and some omurice.

This turned out to be a mistake, however, since everyone else then wanted the same.

It barely makes a profit, it's a pain to make, and it's not even on the menu, damn it!

"I guess you…couldn't make it happen, huh?" Aleena asked, back in the kitchen.

"Uh, what do you mean?" asked Mitsuha, puzzled.

"You haven't helped me…t-tie the knot with Anel!"

"Ah." It had completely slipped her mind.

"Hey, Your Majesty, can you help me with some matchmaking?"

"NO-O-O!" Bernd cried out in desperation.

You're a papa bear when it counts, huh, Bernd? Wait, what? You wouldn't mind 'cause he'd marry into the family? You stopped me 'cause of "something way more important"? What the hell…?

And so, Paradise continued to run as a relatively normal diner. Besides the fact that it served Yamano Cuisine, had hidden nobles among its customers, was often visited by the king, and employed a princess as one of its waitresses, that is. Each new day saw another full house, and another line out front.

You guys should hurry up and hire more people before one of you keels over.

The whole Paradise ordeal had not been a very profitable venture for Mitsuha.

She had merely helped out a diner that wasn't doing so well. Between the mercenaries' wages and various other expenses, she was left with just over one gold in profit.

Well, at least I had fun, she thought. *I'll chuck this gold coin into one of my deep pockets. It's got more significance than the gold I make selling glasses, after all.*

Sabine had taken a liking to serving customers, so she sometimes went to Paradise to help out. She waitressed for free─unless you included her staff meals─but received enough tips from customers to put away a healthy amount of savings. The princess was extremely good at coaxing things from other people.

Additionally, she was always under the watchful eye of her guards during shifts. Some disguised themselves as customers, while others pretended to be random citizens walking by or loitering outside the building.

Once their contract ended, the two female mercenaries returned to their party, having made a pretty penny from their wages and tips. They could have chosen a comfortable career as waitresses, but what would the poor men of their party do then?

It really is all about the face, huh?! Oh, what? I just didn't get any tips 'cause I was in the kitchen the whole time? Okay, that's a relief.

"I see we still know next to nothing about her," said the king.

"It appears so," replied the chancellor.

The two of them were in the king's office at the royal palace. Saar stood and listened attentively as the sovereign read a report.

"She appeared out of nowhere in the Bozeses' county. Soon after, she killed

a pack of wolves unaided in order to save a village girl. This encounter left her with severe wounds from which she quickly recovered. She then became acquainted with the Bozes family and went on to open a curious shop in the capital.

"Furthermore, the wares she sells have unknown origins, her knowledge is outstanding, and she displayed exceptional talent as host of the Ryner girl's debutante ball. I find it hard to believe she is merely a noble young lady from a small, faraway country.

"The Lightning Archpriestess, eh? Truly a character. She seems to mean the kingdom no harm, at least. We met through the dissolution of a human trafficking ring, and she helps people a great deal, from what I hear. She even saved Sabine, who has grown quite fond of her. You also have her to thank for those glasses."

"True…"

"Anyway, I see no problem with her. We should even work to bring her closer to us. After all, she's…"

"Very interesting, Your Majesty."

"Indeed she is!"

Their laughter echoed throughout the office.

"Huh? An invitation from the king?" Mitsuha asked.

"Yes." Sabine nodded. "My older brother is returning from training for campaigns with the royal guard, and my sister's coming back from her diplomatic mission to another country. He wants to introduce you to them over dinner."

Man, talk about a royal pain in the neck.

Mitsuha had no idea why she had to be introduced to the other prince and princess. While she and Sabine were on good terms, the others were basically strangers to her; she didn't understand why that had to change. Even the king himself was simply "a friend's father" to her.

Dads who care too much about their daughter's friends are weirdos. But he is the king… It'll probably be way worse for me if I say no. Guess I've gotta go, then.

"I'm heeere!"

"She's heeere!"

Mitsuha arrived at the palace to find Sabine waiting for her right at the gate.

I guess she's really excited to have a friend come and visit her place. Well, it's better than being welcomed by some grim-looking soldiers. I like refined older men, not dirty old farts.

The princess led Mitsuha into a relatively simple room, and it took her a moment to realize that it was the same one as last time.

Maybe the palace has fewer rooms than I thought.

The king and his wife were already inside. The queen was beautiful, but her silence minimized her presence in the room.

Oh, I get it, thought Mitsuha. *She's just letting her husband have the spotlight. Well played, lady.*

In addition to the two of them, there was a prince who was perhaps a little over twenty, and a princess who looked to be in her mid-twenties.

Wait, mid-twenties and still living with her parents? In this kind of world?

Y'know, that pretty much makes her a spinst─uhh, never mind. I didn't mean it, all right, so don't look at me like that! And did you just read my mind? Is Professor X your dad or something?!

Lastly, there was a princess in her late teens─seventeen or eighteen, Mitsuha guessed─and the two little royals she already knew, Sabine and Leuhen.

The entire family was present, and their combined gazes made Mitsuha feel as though she was being evaluated all throughout dinner. The stares from the eldest brother and sister were particularly stern. They didn't seem malicious or hostile, however, and so Mitsuha assumed they were merely sizing up the stranger their youngest sister had suddenly become so fond of.

Hey, now, it's not like I meant for this to happen. Ahh, Sabine, don't you dare mention the DVDs!

When the dinner finally came to an end, Mitsuha was glad to leave. Though she had initially been apprehensive about joining them, their discussions about the specialties and economic situations of the country's separate territories had made the affair worthwhile. However, the king had also spoken with her about the surrounding countries. The eldest princess had even pried for her opinion.

Why?! I'm just a merchant! I don't care if the neighbors are acting suspicious. And why does the prince talk about blades so much? Is he cut from the same cloth as Theodore?

On one particular occasion, Mitsuha took the day off. She actually did so whenever she felt like it, but preferred to reserve such days for when she had business in Japan. This time, however, she had other arrangements.

She made her way to the forest she had camped in with Sven's group not

too long ago. Her goal, you ask? Well, the mercenary captain from Earth had invited her to a barbecue, and she wanted to hunt down a present for him and the rest of his crew.

Yeah, I actually became good friends with everyone in Wolf Fang─not just the captain. There was a new drill instructor every time, and we'd always get to talking. Plus, they're all from different countries, and I could speak everyone's native language, so that helped me score some points with them.

Now that I think about it, Sven and his party are all mercenaries, too. Crazy how I know mercs from two completely different worlds, and all of them are good people.

She shifted her focus to potential targets for her hunt. Firstly, a boar would be too much for her. Not because she couldn't shoot one down, but simply because she couldn't carry it. She opted to go after rabbits instead. Birds were also a viable option, but plucking off all the feathers would have been a tedious process.

If I had more time, I'd make a bird stuffed with veggies or herbs… Oh well.

In the end, she managed to get four rabbits. Wanting to get in some practice, she had chosen to use her slingshot instead of a crossbow.

I'll just take two in each hand and─oh, man, they're heavy. Ahh, ow ow ow! One of the horns just jabbed into my leg! Huh? Did I forget to mention that the rabbits here have horns? My brain just processes them as "rabbits," not "horned rabbits" or whatever, so there's that.

Having completed her goal, Mitsuha world-jumped to an empty part of the mercenary base. Flames were raging in the bodies of many makeshift barbecue

grills, which the mercs had assembled using cut-up metal barrels.

She should be here soon, thought the captain. Seconds later he saw her, as well as the strange objects in her hands.

"I'm heeere!" she said in a singsong voice.

"Uh, I see that," the captain replied awkwardly. He was taken aback by her appearance.

The clothes she had on reminded him immediately of hobbits. In her belt, she had equipped a 93R, a revolver, a knife, a dagger, and a slingshot. A crossbow was slung across her back. Her entire ensemble, combined with her silky black hair and youthful face, made her look like some kind of elf or fairy.

That reminds me… She paid in yen the first time. Hotel workers and businessmen sometimes call Japanese people "fairies," right? Makes sense, I guess. They're small, polite creatures who're always busy, wearin' a smile, and makin' places prosper. And if something bad happens to 'em, they don't complain, they just disappear and never come back. Once one goes, the rest follow, and when all of 'em are gone, the place goes to shit. Or so I hear, anyway.

One of my boys said they were like some kinda critter called a…what was it, a "zashiki warashi"? That guy was always creamin' himself over Japan, though. Who knows what the hell he was talking about.

Despite finding Mitsuha strange in many ways, the captain appreciated her as a business partner. She paid well, never caused trouble, and was generally just a fun and interesting─albeit tiny─girl.

He was, however, at a loss for what to make of the things she had brought along with her this time. *You can keep sayin' these're rabbits all ya want, but*

rabbits don't have horns, y'know? Yeah, I still ate 'em! And yeah, they were tasty as hell, damn it!

One of the younger men in the group uploaded some photos of Mitsuha and the strange animals on the internet, along with the following caption: "A princess came to our BBQ. Brought horned rabbits with her. #justmercthings"

C'mon, man, you ever hear of privacy? thought the captain.

Some days after their barbecue, they were visited by a number of eccentrics. One claimed to be a scholar and wanted to see the horned rabbits. The mercenaries informed him that they had already eaten them. In response, he asked where the compost pile was and promptly went to dig out the remains. Then he handed them his business card and left.

What the hell? And no, you numbskulls aren't gonna see or take photos of the fairy! Get the fuck out and get yer own!

And so, the peaceful days continue for me, even if they don't for anybody else, thought Mitsuha. *Huh? That's not real peace, then? Oops.*

Chapter 13

This Means War!

"We're at war," the king said.

His words were directed toward Mitsuha, who had been invited to the palace once again via the Sabine Express.

Well, that came out of left field.

"I would like you to take Sabine and evacuate to another country."

So that's *why I'm here, huh.*

"Absolutely not!" Mitsuha cried.

The king and chancellor were taken aback by her rapid rejection.

"I poured blood, sweat, and tears into building my store. Leaving it behind is nothing but a last resort!"

"Oh, this is but a temporary evacuation; a cautionary measure, if you will. You would be able to return as soon as the coast was clear."

"That's not a guarantee, though, is it?"

The king had nothing to say to this.

"No thanks, I'll stay and protect my store, and if worst comes to worst, I'll take myself out along with it!"

"Take yourself out? Why would you go to such an extreme?!"

"My store is my home and my castle. If someone wants to break in, I'm taking them down with me!"

The king looked uneasy.

Naturally, Mitsuha wasn't *really* planning to die with her store. When she

referred to taking herself out along with it, she meant this quite literally—in an emergency, she would jump to an uninhabited area on Earth, taking the store with her, then find a secure return location in one of this world's other countries. Jumping along with an entire building was child's play for Mitsuha.

To continue her business elsewhere, she would simply have to make it appear as though she had died when the store vanished. Therefore, she could stand her ground there until the very last moment. The information network in this world was relatively weak, and there was no photography, so she would have no trouble creating a new life for herself somewhere far away.

Besides, people think I'm a little kid, so they'll picture me looking different in a few years' time. That means I'd be safe, because by then, I'd still look the same. Too bad for you, would-be sleuths, I'm already fully grown! Agh… Even though it's a good plan, it still hurts, damn it!

Above all, Mitsuha had no desire to get involved in a war, so she simply refused the king's request and left the palace. However, she did intend to come for Sabine if the country's situation turned dire. The young princess had the adaptability to make it anywhere, be it another country in this world or even on Earth.

Back in her store, Mitsuha spent a long time thinking. No customers came, surely because everyone had heard about the war. It wasn't something that could be kept secret, and there was no point in doing so. War involved mobilizing a great number of soldiers, calling for volunteers and mercenaries, gathering food and other supplies… These activities simply couldn't be hidden.

Now that ballroom season was over, the nobles had all returned to their

homelands. Beatrice had wanted to stay in the capital, but in the end, she too had gone back with her family. The only nobles who remained were those who had sons or subordinates to run their lands, and the landless nobles who had power only through their posts.

According to the king, the country they were now at war with had been acting suspiciously for some time, but he hadn't expected them to take action so soon. They shouldn't have had the military and financial resources to fight a war for several years yet, and neither country was terribly impoverished or lacking in options, so the king had wondered what they were planning.

Then, he had received earth-shattering news: the enemy empire had somehow added monsters—orcs, ogres, and the like—to their army.

On top of these grievous conditions, a few nobles with territory near the border had chosen to defect to the other side. Normally, these nobles would have kept enemies at bay while buying time for the kingdom to gather its forces. With their betrayal, however, the enemy army had quickly crossed the border territories and gone on to crush all others in their path as they advanced toward the capital.

Express messengers had been dispatched throughout the kingdom with requests for reinforcements. They were constantly switching out horses and riders to save time, but it didn't seem as though they would make it before the enemy arrived at the capital. Even forces closest to the enemy's path of conquest had a difficult time getting in their way.

Additionally, no one in the kingdom knew *why* monsters had joined the enemy army—the creatures couldn't be communicated with, after all.

Things aren't looking too good, to put it lightly, Mitsuha reflected. *The*

kingdom's pretty much in checkmate.

Her benefactor, Count Bozes, resided near the sea on the other side of the country, far away from the invasion. On the one hand, his territory would be safe, but on the other, his troops clearly wouldn't arrive in time.

Armies were far slower than stagecoaches, but from what Mitsuha had been told, the enemy would soon reach the capital's doorstep.

It takes a while for info to get from the observation posts to the city, after all. Hmmm.

All right, I've got it. I'm gonna go to the palace. If something happens, I can just jump to Earth, then to the store. My priorities right now are info-gathering and supporting little Sabine. And of course I'm gonna go in fully strapped!

Mitsuha equipped a knife-proof vest, three guns, a knife, a dagger, and some spare magazines. She set the store's security system to maximum defense mode. If someone were to enter, it would release a smoke signal and fireworks, alerting her immediately.

Here I go!

The guards let Mitsuha into the palace without issue, which initially caught her off guard.

Oh, so you know my face? And the king told you to let me pass? Okay, then.

Grateful for their reception, she walked into the building. This time, she hadn't come to see the king. The two of them had already met quite recently, and he was likely too busy for her now. She searched for Sabine instead, but had no luck finding her.

I'll have to ask someone. But then again, I feel like a person walking around a palace searching for a princess would come off kinda sketchy. It'll be hard to play it off.

While she was wandering around, Mitsuha bumped into the chancellor, who let her know that the king was otherwise occupied. Before she could inquire where to find Sabine, he asked her to come sit in on a meeting, practically dragging her along with him.

Hey, that's not asking! You're totally forcing me to come! What kind of meeting is it, anyway? And what's it got to do with me? We talkin' business? Do you want some supplies? Oh, so it's a war council. Gotcha.

The council room they entered was already occupied by about thirty people, each of whom looked to be of either a noble or military sort. They were seated on simple chairs, and at the far end of the space, there was a long table with a few distinguished figures behind it.

Uh, you're gonna drag me this far in? I'm fine with sitting in the back! Look, now they're all staring at me!

"And who is this, chancellor?" someone asked.

See?

"Everyone, this is Mitsuha, in the flesh," said the chancellor.

"Ahh, the infamous Mitsuha, eh?"

What do you mean, "infamous"? What'd you hear about me?!

"Mitsuha!" One of the men in the room stood up, running over to her with arms spread wide.

Is this guy comin' in for a hug? Hell no!

THWACK!

Mitsuha sunk her fist into his stomach. The mercenary captain had taught her how to punch, and the way the man collapsed made it clear she was a star student.

Wait… That's Alexis!

"How could you?" he squeaked, his eyes brimming with tears as the others laughed at him.

What made you think you could hug me in front of people? Or at all, for that matter?

Mitsuha soon discovered that Alexis had been sent to the capital to gather information and open lines of communication as his father's representative while Count Bozes prepared his army to support the capital.

Alexis's responsibility carried real weight, and Mitsuha fully understood why he was participating in the war council. He even had a seat near the front of the room, which showed how important a count's son really was. Additionally, while it was his duty, his presence here was likely also a way to help him gain some prestige.

He had come here by a fast carriage, which meant the journey had only taken him three days. The count's forces were expected to arrive in seven.

Well, the troops are heavily armored, thought Mitsuha, *so a week is actually pretty good for such a tight schedule.*

In the end, Mitsuha was provided a seat in one of the front rows─closer to the edge, at the very least. Thereafter, the council discussed the current state of affairs, examined the enemy's routes, and so on. In all likelihood, the hostile forces would arrive at the capital by tomorrow evening, make camp, then lay siege to the city the next morning.

They figured the enemy army was composed of about 20,000 individuals, 3,000 of which were goblins, orcs, ogres, and other monsters. The kingdom's allied forces amounted to just 2,000. Any troops that had been deployed to buy time had probably been killed in action, so it was best not to count them. The current plan was to hole up for a siege and defend the city with the capital army, guards, royal guard, and mercenaries until reinforcements from the other territories arrived.

At the front of the room, in the center of the bigwig group at the table, was the supreme commander─Marquis Eiblinger. His hair barely had sprinkles of salt within its pepper, but he was a decorated war hero. He had braved the front lines toting a great Zweihänder until he inherited his father's title. His peers' respect and admiration had made him the best man for the job.

While the roundtable was considering how to position their forces, the guards let a tired-looking soldier into the room. He was clad in iron armor and had a short sword at his side.

"I come with a message about the state of the enemy army!" he declared, sliding a large leather bag off his shoulder and opening it.

Before she knew it, Mitsuha had leapt up from her chair and was dashing toward Marquis Eiblinger, her thoughts lagging behind.

Weird─that's not right─a long-distance messenger would wear light leather armor and keep the message somewhere more discreet and not have any other stuff getting in the way─I know he could be tense about talking to these people, but those eyes are just too bloodshot─the hard leather bag looks like a pain to carry─he's like a hunter ready to strike─if I shoot him, I'll hit people behind him─am I an idiot─I'll die─but I have to prevent the marquis's

death─the chaos would be too much to handle─crap, I needed bulletproof not knife-proof kevlar─aaahhhh!

Mitsuha defended the marquis like a goalkeeper in handball. She didn't regret her reflexive reaction; even afforded the time to think, she would have done the same.

I'm Mitsuha, goddamn it! Mitsuha Yamano!

The faux messenger whipped out a small, multishot bow. It had the shape of a crossbow and a special design that allowed it to release five bolts at once. Right before he fired, someone jumped in front of Mitsuha.

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THUD.

Mitsuha's left shoulder was seared with pain as she fell backward. A moment later, a man collapsed on top of her. Both his shoulder and abdomen were riddled with bolts.

Upon realizing he had missed his target, the intruder unsheathed his short sword and rushed toward the marquis. Since this was the royal palace, and everyone was seated together in close quarters, most people had removed their sword belts and couldn't maneuver in time to act.

Mitsuha pulled out the 93R with one quivering hand, attempted to stabilize it with the other, and took aim at her opponent. Heat throbbed in her left shoulder, but the pain had been suppressed by adrenaline or dopamine or whatever else had begun coursing through her. It didn't stop her arms from shaking, however.

She was lying on the floor, watching the assassin running behind her. From this angle, any bullets that missed would hit the ceiling─no bystanders were at risk.

I can fire!

B-B-BANG, B-B-BANG, B-B-BANG!

Three three-bullet bursts. The would-be assassin dropped to the ground and the room fell silent, hardly daring to breathe.

"Mitsuha… Do I pass…as your knight?" her protector asked in a weak voice.

"Alexis!" Mitsuha looked down at him. "No, actually. You totally failed!"

"FAILED?!" their audience blurted in disbelief. "How?!"

Duh, she thought.

“Look, there’s one in my shoulder! So yeah, you failed.”

“Haha…” Alexis laughed dryly, his head drooping.

“But,” she continued, “I respect your effort. You may have messed up, but I’m not disqualifying you yet. Make sure not to disappoint me next time.”

“‘Next time,’ huh?”

“Yes. Next time.”

So that’s where she was going with it!! thought the men in the room. But the veterans present knew full well that there would be no “next time.” A shoulder injury was hardly fatal, but his stomach wound would quickly decay. The courageous soul would die a painful death in just a few days… Truly a shame.

Alexis closed his eyes as the pain sapped away his consciousness.

“Ahaha.”

Mitsuha’s sudden laugh startled everyone.

“Haha… Ahaha… AHAHAHAHAHA!”

Have fear and grief driven her mad?! they wondered, feeling a change in the air.

“I was holding back,” she said to no one in particular. “All this time, I was holding back.”

What is she saying?

“I tried not to mess up this world’s progression, to make sure the hardworking people here didn’t suffer. I mean, I know I overdid it here and there, but I was still holding back a lot. And *this* is what I get? I almost died, and I couldn’t even protect someone close to me.”

The council members weren’t sure what she was talking about, but

understood she was expressing some measure of regret.

"That's it. ENOUGH! NO MORE HOLDING BACK! I'LL SHOW THEM WHAT I'VE GOT!" Mitsuha turned to the marquis. "Lord Eiblinger, I'll return the day after tomorrow, at dawn. If you would, please forbid passage into the palace's inner courtyard starting tomorrow night."

"Well, I have nothing against doing that, but what are you planning?"

"I'm going to prepare an unstoppable army. And come dawn, two days from now, the enemy…"

She cracked a sinister grin.

"…will know the true meaning of fear and despair. They will see that hell can exist in this world."

The next moment, Mitsuha and the unconscious young man vanished from the room.

Wolf Fang, the mercenary group Mitsuha had allied herself with, had enormous headquarters. Land in the area had been quite inexpensive, allowing them to really spread out. They even had enough space to construct a recreation room, which was located in a two-story building at one corner of the base. Currently, the mercenary captain was enjoying a game of billiards and a fresh cigarette in this very room.

However, his leisure time was about to come to a very abrupt end.

WHUMP!

Out of nowhere, a client he was all too familiar with materialized a few feet above the table and immediately fell onto it. She was bloodied, writhing in pain, and in her arms was a young man in even worse condition. The captain gaped at

the two of them, cue still in hand.

"Ow, ow, ow!" Mitsuha cried. "These balls are so hard!"

No way those hurt more than that bolt stickin' outta yer shoulder, the captain thought.

"Get the medic," she said, rolling off the table with a serious expression. "He protected me! Don't let him die!"

The captain gestured with his jaw, spurring the young mercenaries around him into action. One called for the medic while the other began administering first aid to the unconscious man. He didn't remove the bolt, however; it would have worsened the bleeding, and they didn't know what kind of tip it had.

That guy put his life on the line to protect the li'l lady, so 'course we're gonna fix him up. Can't let a guy like that kick the bucket. Not likin' that bolt in her shoulder, though. If yer gonna protect her, don't fuck it up, man. Yer eatin' my fist when ya get back from death's door. He put down the cue and took a glass off a nearby table.

"Captain, you said you don't have any big jobs lined up, right?" Mitsuha asked.

"Yeah."

The girl smiled from ear to ear. "I want to hire *all* of you. We'd move out in the morning, day after tomorrow. There are about twenty thousand enemies, including monsters. I'll pay you forty thousand gold coins, guaranteed…if not more. You up for it?"

CRASH!

Huh, some guy dropped his glass. What a coward, the captain thought. *Jeez, my throat's super dry. Lemme just drink this and… Aw, shit. I'm the one*

who dropped it.

"Before that, li'l lady…"

"Hmm? What's up?"

"Let's go to the hospital and get that bolt outta ya, all right?"

Chapter 14
March of the Archpriestess

When Alexis awoke, Mitsuha told him that they were in her homeland. Their medical technology was highly advanced, and he would be on his way to recovery so long as he obeyed the doctor's gestured orders. She added that she would be back in a few days, and they would return to the kingdom once he had healed. Relieved, he went back to sleep.

Mitsuha herself had already gotten the bolt in her shoulder removed and the wound stitched up. According to medical personnel, it would recover completely without leaving a scar. She had been delighted to hear it.

All mercenaries had been given an urgent summons, even those who were on vacation. Mitsuha had assured them they were welcome to opt out of the job, but still wondered how many of the 59 members of Wolf Fang would participate.

By now, everyone was preparing for battle. Some checked the condition of weapons and vehicles, others worked on securing more ammo. There was a decent quantity in reserve, but considering the amount this job would require, they decided to buy more just to be safe.

Mitsuha found some time to explain the kind of forces they were going up against. She mentioned that orcs were most likely too tough to go down with just one handgun bullet, and that ogres and beyond would probably survive barrages from handguns, SMGs, and perhaps even 5.56mm assault rifles.

I haven't fought any myself, so this is just a guess based on what Sven's crew told me.

The mercenaries knew they were traveling to another world. Mitsuha's visits and behavior up until now were strange enough, but the way she had showed up this time left no room for doubt. Most of them had readily accepted the fact, and no one really questioned her about it.

Just like Sven and his people, they respect their employer's privacy. Must be a merc thing.

At five o'clock in the morning, about a day and a half after Mitsuha had appeared in the rec room, 57 mercenaries stood in formation outside the vehicle garages.

At the front of them all stood Mitsuha, wearing a white dress and a gun belt. There was a 93R on her right side, and since her left arm was still incapacitated, she didn't have her usual dagger and revolver. Instead, she carried several spare magazines. Though her left arm was tied up in a sling, she could still move her hand and use it to reload.

She raised her right hand. Everyone fell silent and waited.

"Gentlemen, it's time for war! There are twenty thousand of them and fifty-eight of us! No doubt, this is going to be a dangerous mission. However, your rewards will be gold, honor, recognition, and the people's eternal gratitude.

"In war, each side claims to be the righteous one, but they're all the same. There's no justice. They fight over money and power, and the ones who suffer are always the little people. But not this time! Our mission is to defend the capital's innocents from an enemy that not only broke a treaty, but invaded the country with a horde of monsters!"

She paused. Her eyes swept across their faces before she continued.

“I say that in this fight, we ARE the true justice!”

“YEEEAAAAHHH!”

The mercenaries’ roar was deafening.

“I’m going to step away for ten minutes. Anyone who doesn’t want to fight, leave now. Those who stay are going with me to the battlefield. I have faith in your courage.” Mitsuha then walked off the platform and into a nearby building.

Ten minutes later, all 57 mercenaries were still lined up and ready to go. Two people remained absent from the group, but only because they were on vacation far, far away.

“To the vehicles!” Mitsuha shouted.

“You sure are somethin’, li’l lady,” the captain remarked breathlessly.

The beginning of her speech she had cribbed from a recruitment ad for an Antarctic expedition, but the captain, unaware of this fact, was moved by her knack for leadership.

Wolf Fang was in possession of a great number of vehicles: lightweight armored vehicles, jeeps with mounted machine guns, tarp-covered trucks…and “God.”

“God” was the one thing Wolf Fang had unwavering faith in.

Once, when their group was still small and nameless, they had been hired to fight in a battle. Their employer─a government’s military─had used them as the rear guard. They hadn’t had the power or position to protest, and they knew no one would sacrifice their own to cover a couple of mercenaries. Military soldiers had always looked down on them. After all, while they may have chosen to fight and sacrifice themselves for their country, mercenaries’ one true allegiance was to their paychecks…or so the soldiers believed.

From the soldiers' perspective, it was entirely possible that these dishonorable dogs would quickly turn and become their enemies if the opposition offered them better wages. As long as they remained allies, however, the mercenaries wouldn't fight the soldiers, and the soldiers needn't bat an eye at mercenary deaths. In fact, the mercs should have been honored to die as the soldiers' shields─they were on a grand mission, after all. This was the kind of mentality that had led the military to use mercs as bait and fodder while they themselves retreated.

With no transport trucks or even lightweight armored vehicles, the mercenaries had quickly been chased down by the rebel soldiers. But just when they had accepted their impending demise, "God" had descended upon them.

It was a half-track that had been abandoned after becoming lodged atop a large boulder. Mounted on the vehicle was an out-of-date 20mm autocannon. The desperate mercenaries had examined it and soon discovered they could turn on the engine by tinkering with the electrical systems. As it turned out, the artillery had still been fully functional.

They had taken down the half-track, stashed it behind the rock, and ambushed the rebel soldiers pursuing them. The 20mm autocannon had roared something fierce as it delivered its divine punishment. Not even trucks or LAVs had been able to withstand the wrath of the exploding 20mm shells.

In the end, the mercenaries had survived. They had then poured great funds and effort into bringing their deity back with them. God crushed and devoured their foes, on the surface and in the air. It served as their fangs, and so became the namesake of their crew. These events had occurred so long ago that the current captain hadn't yet been known as "Captain," but rather as "Young'un."

Been a while since God made an appearance on the battlefield, the captain thought. His gaze wandered over to Mitsuha. *And this time, we've even got one of his angels.* He felt certain of their victory.

A few seconds later, the people in the yard disappeared, and a gentle breeze was all that filled the empty space.

As he had been ordered, a soldier was keeping watch over the royal palace's inner courtyard. By now, he had lost track of time.

What's the point of watching this place? he thought, his eyelids drooping. *The enemies are outside the capital, right? It's gonna be morning…soon…*

Just before sleep overtook him, there was a rapid shift in the air. He opened his eyes, and standing before him was a great pack of strange, angular beasts. A girl in a white dress was riding one of them.

"Wolf Fang's here!" Her voice echoed across the palace grounds.

Upon hearing the news, Marquis Eiblinger and the other noble officers hurried to the inner courtyard. They gawked at Mitsuha, who had gone from poking out of the hatch of an LAV to kneeling on top of it.

Mitsuha winced. *This is hard on my knees.*

"Everyone, assume your positions! We're going to move through the capital's main gate at dawn and destroy the enemy. Lord Eiblinger, you stay in the city and protect the gates. I'll be sending you some support."

"Huh?!"

Leaving the dumbfounded nobles behind, the wolves went to their posts. As part of the plan, groups of six mercenaries were dispatched to three of the four city gates, the exception being the main gate to the south. They drove around

supplying each gate's forces with equipment, machine guns, grenade launchers, and ammunition.

Once everyone was sufficiently armed, the vehicles converged at the palace gates, passed through, and halted at the main gate. Their sounds roused the townsfolk, who trickled out to see what was happening.

"Cut the engines!" Mitsuha shouted once they had arrived, wireless mic in hand. Her booming voice was soon the only sound in the capital.

"Everyone! I love this country!"

No one in Wolf Fang knew the local language, so they had no clue as to what she was saying. She was grateful for that.

"I'm telling you, I *love* this country. I love this city! I love the people living in it! To protect you all, I'll stain my hands with the blood of our enemies.

"Wolf Fang, move out!"

The last part had been in English, so the mercs turned on the engines again and began their advance.

"Open the gate!" she ordered.

The guards could hardly refuse, so they quickly did as she told them. The army of vehicles slowly passed through the gate and left the city. Mitsuha's white dress danced in the wind.

"Ohh, goodness! The Lightnin' Archpriestess is setting out for battle!" someone marveled.

"You know her, old man Leiden?!" a young man asked him.

"Yes… When the third princess was bein' attacked by scoundrels in an alley, that girl brought her lightnin' down upon 'em! Said her name's the 'Lightnin' Archpriestess'! I saws it all through a hole in the wall!"

“An archpriestess?”

“Lightning Archpriestess…”

“The Lightning Archpriestess is going to battle for us!”

The murmurs grew louder, and word spread. Soon, they grew into joyous cries.

“Praise the Archpriestess!”

“All hail the Lightning Archpriestess!”

“We can’t see nothin’ from here! Let’s climb up on the wall!”

I think I hear something disturbing behind me, Mitsuha thought, feeling an uncomfortable tingle in her spine. *I’m just imagining it, right? Yup, I’ve gotta be. I can’t hear you! Lalala!*

She tried to cover her ears, but unfortunately, she couldn’t lift her left arm. At the very least, no one in Wolf Fang understood nor cared what they were saying.

Whew, even this cloud’s got a silver lining!

The enemy─the Imperial Army─had set up makeshift front-line headquarters within view of the capital. As dawn broke, the supreme commander of the invasion stood to order the start of the attack. However, he immediately lost his composure upon seeing what was happening down below.

“They’re opening the main gate?”

Their operation was supposed to be a siege. The Imperial Army had already gone over the plans again and again; the capital’s forces should have had no other option than to try and hold their ground until reinforcements arrived a few days later. The kingdom had no knowledge of the empire’s secret weapon, so

they likely believed they would survive the assault.

Surely they aren't stupid enough to try and fight us out in the open, are they?

Such a strategy might have been feasible if some agent of the kingdom had assassinated the commander, but it was otherwise impossible. As he contemplated their intentions, a series of shapes came through the gates, advancing a short distance before stopping. Then, the gates closed once more.

"What in the world are those?"

What had emerged from the gates appeared vaguely like carriages without horses.

Are they being pushed by people? Or are they just throwaways to buy time? Is the enemy here to negotiate? I don't intend to let them waste our time, but it's common etiquette to make an attempt.

"It's a parley. Go. And make it quick," he ordered.

"As you wish!" The noble responsible for such matters quickly prepared himself, mounted his horse, and galloped off.

"Welp, someone's coming," said Mitsuha. "Snipers, prepare to fire. Your target is the mounted enemy soldier." She had sent the order through a microphone at her throat, which was wirelessly delivered to the snipers waiting on the walls.

The rider stopped about a hundred yards before the vehicles and raised his voice.

"I am a noble of the venerable Aldar Empire, Count Tristan von Lotz! Currently, we—"

"Shoot him."

BAAANG!

The rider toppled off his horse.

“How dare you… You harmed a messenger?! Do you know anything about honor and pride, you barbarians?!” The enemy commander flushed with rage.

Suddenly, Mitsuha’s voice came through a set of speakers, reaching all 20,000 imperial soldiers, not to mention every corner of the capital.

“You! Honorless, prideless dogs of the empire!”

“Wh-What?!” Upon hearing his own words redirected toward him, the commander began to shake.

Mitsuha continued her verbal assault. “You broke the treaty, snuck into this country with the help of some traitors, joined hands with monsters, and killed civilians on your way here. Glorified bandits like you have no right to talk about honor or pride!

“God is angry. No matter how courageously you fight or what kind of deeds you do here, you imperial dogs will not go to His side! Hell is where you all belong!”

The commander wanted to bark back, but no matter how hard he shouted, he couldn’t speak over the girl. While her voice reached all of his soldiers, his could only be heard by those close to him. He clenched his teeth in impotent frustration.

Mitsuha, on the other hand, was just getting started.

“Wanna know why I’m right? Because I said so! Now, feel the wrath of the one true God!” She switched back to her throat mic. “Machine gun one! Ten o’clock to two o’clock, mow them down in five seconds! Fire!”

The order was given, and the execution came soon after.

BA-BA-BA-BA-BA-BA-BA-BA-BANG!

These were loud, thunderous sounds the soldiers had never heard before, and what followed was the complete, brutal destruction of dozens of their brothers-in-arms. Bodies were torn apart, spraying flesh and gore in all directions.

"AAAAAAAHHHH!"

Hell truly did exist in this world.

"Wh-What? What's happening…?" The imperial commander was at a loss. Neither his heart nor his mind could keep up with the reality unfolding before him.

"Li'l lady, seems like each monster's got somebody handlin' it," noted the captain.

"Pick them off one by one."

"You got it."

BANG, BANG, BAAANG!

More shots cracked across the field.

The commander snapped back to his senses and began shelling out orders. "Attack! Make the monsters charge! Hurry up and crush them! Follow them up with recruits!"

However, his forces didn't budge.

"What's the matter with you?! Hurry! What if that attack comes again?!"

"C-Commander, all the officers in charge of the monsters are down!"

"What?!"

Our men toiled for ages, learning how to communicate with those monsters through gestures and sounds. They were irreplaceable… Invaluable. We had

casualty after casualty, but they refused to give up. Having the monsters on our side was the result of literal blood, sweat, and tears. And now they die here, without achieving anything?!

"All right, everyone, leave your vehicles and set up arms!" Mitsuha ordered.

Every mercenary, save for those manning mounted weapons, exited their vehicles and spread out. Some readied lightweight, stationary machine guns, while others prepared the assault rifles and rocket launchers they had on hand.

"Force the monsters to come to the forefront! We'll overwhelm them once we have the momentum! Make the new recruits come out too, but remember, they're just expendable farmers!

"Light machine gunners, you harass the monsters, but don't outright attack them or the conscripts unless they charge! Then join the mercs manning assault rifles and aim for the real soldiers!"

"Huh? We're not doin' the monsters?" asked the captain.

"Nope. We'll make them think they've been duped, so they never trust humans again. Then we chase them back to the empire. Maybe monsters from this territory will join them, too… Eat a lot of their soldiers on your way back, my lovelies! Then all those conscripted farmers will be terrified, and they'll turn on the empire out of hatred. They'll make sure no one is ever forced to ally with the empire again."

"Li'l lady, can I say somethin'?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"You're freakin' me out!"

B-B-B-B-BANG!

BOM-B-B-B-B-B-BANG!

D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-DUM!

Gunshots claimed the lives of enemy soldiers one after another─the ones giving orders, the well-armored, and the ones on horseback alike. Losing those in the middle of the leadership pyramid was especially damaging, since they could no longer control the army.

The farmers, who carried nothing but cheap spears, refused to move forward. As for the monsters, they had seen their leaders fall one by one, and the smell of impending danger fueled their desire to flee back home.

Naturally, this fight was not just a matter of killing 20,000 soldiers; causing them to turn tail and retreat was just as effective. Even in wars back on Earth, it was rare that most people on the losing side died. A battle where even half an army was killed in action would be considered catastrophic. In fact, defeat often came once a side had lost about a third of its forces.

It was for this reason that Mitsuha had chosen to target the career soldiers; they were the meat of the army and the only ones who had a solid handle on what they were doing.

Mitsuha found herself wondering if there were mercenaries among the professionals. *If so…whoopsie. Sorry, fellas. You had a chance to make some money in this war, but now you're gonna get shot down just because you have better gear and fight better than peasants.*

Hmm, I wonder if Sven's crew got hired on this side. They probably feel lucky that they're getting paid without really having to fight. Maybe they'll make even more in the pursuit that'll come afterward.

Anyway, the enemy commander's doin' a solid job holding his people

together, but I feel like more and more of them are retreating, and— What the hell is that*?!*

"They're here! Now we can fight back!" the empire's commander shouted, looking upward.

Above him, darkening the morning sky, was a swarm of wyverns. 36 of them, to be exact.

As he gazed upon the creatures, he thought of what a struggle it had been to raise them. A good number of soldiers had been killed during attempts to steal wyvern eggs, but a few had eventually succeeded, and the incubation process had begun. The first round of hatchings failed, with the young dying prematurely, which led the army to sacrifice additional soldiers to steal more eggs.

One man had even lost his life to a healthy juvenile. The thing had eaten him.

This majestic achievement is the result of hundreds of sacrifices and decades of work! The riders and wyverns are now united as one—these are the world's first flying knights!

The men mounted on wyverns wielded swords and pikes for close combat as well as javelins for ranged attacks, making them a formidable force. They could easily rain down spears upon their enemies, then fly behind the gates to fight them with swords, spears, and even the wyverns' powerful claws and beaks, making it easy to force open the gates and let the rest of the army inside.

It's beautiful, *the commander thought, bliss bubbling up within him.* Ohh, how blessed am I to see this moment with my own two eyes!

Mitsuha's voice abruptly cut through his excitement. "God! It's your turn!"

“Roger!”

D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-DUM!

“Huh…?”

Seconds.

It had taken mere seconds to eradicate twenty-some years’ worth of funds, bodies, and labor. The first flying forces of this world were reduced to nothing more than chunks of flesh.

The enemy commander collapsed, his eyes filling with tears. *Our battle is just beginning; I know that. But I lost my superiors, my subordinates, my academy classmates, and even my cousin in order to create this wyvern army. All that, and it was torn to shreds in just a few moments. Forgive me, but allow me to mourn for a moment…*

THUD. THUD. THUD. THUD.

The ground shook as something massive appeared from behind them.

“What are you doing, you pathetic creatures?”

Dragons had come.

Ancient dragons, to be precise, and there were three of them. These beings had intelligence far beyond that of mankind, and the ability to expel magic breath. They were the very reason behind the empire’s absurd invasion.

He was born in Dragon Valley 328 years ago. Dragons had a terribly low birth rate, so he was spoiled and treated like a child for quite a long time. That ended when a baby girl was born, followed by another boy. These two were now 127 and 76 years old, respectively.

They had been the first dragons born in over 200 years, so the new pair had

brought immense joy to the rest of their village. The oldest of the three was pleased that he was no longer being babied and enjoyed acting as a big brother to the two fledglings.

No new children were born after these two, and the other dragons seemed to take it for granted that they would be mates. The two of them were aware of this, especially the girl, Lewlieu. Girls were always the first to mature, after all.

The older male dragon hadn't objected. *I can always get with that older girl with the cute scales, or the one who has that perfect tail, or any of the others. I'll be fine,* he'd thought.

Now, the younger boy, T'elli, had recently caught a certain sickness common among young dragons─the "I am a strong, wise, ancient dragon. I shall go out into the world and guide these fools" sickness.

He's adorable, the older boy had thought. *And since he respects me like a big brother, I guess I should show him a good time.*

Whenever anyone wanted to play around with humans, this strange, cranky old dragon who lived in a mountain cave would make a big stink about it: "Don't mess with humans!" and "Don't lay a hand on them!" He had died a little while ago, though, so he wouldn't be a problem.

Nowadays, dragons could do whatever they liked without fear of reprimand. They could gift power to a single country, laughing as the humans got carried away and used their power in odd ways. Or the dragons could just secretly manipulate several nations at once, reveling in the feeling of cross-species domination.

I wanted to try games like that when I was a kid, but that pile of scales would never shut up about it. Plus, all the dragons older than me were girls, and

none of them would've joined in. No, I don't have the sickness, I just want to try this kind of stuff.

And so, he had decided to invite T'elli to play. Lewlieu had also insisted on tagging along, much to his delight.

His grand idea had been to teach a bit of monster vocabulary to an ambitious human country, then just sit back and watch things unfold.

Things aren't going too well right now. Seriously, how did they mess up right at the beginning? It'll really be a bore if you can't take this capital, you powerless, pathetic creatures. How are T'elli and Lewlieu supposed to have fun? All right. I'll help them get things started, at least. I'll just crush this bunch, then destroy the gate with my breath.

Whoa, we've got a big one! thought Mitsuha. *Three big ones, actually, but one's bigger than the others. He can speak, so I'll try to make contact. Oh, don't worry. I've experienced tons of first contacts through movies, anime, and sci-fi novels. Think of it as research material. I can handle this!*

"Greetings, O great Dragon. Wonderful day we're having."

"Nonsense. It's not wonderful, and it's all because of you. Just let yourselves be crushed already."

This exchange was enough for Mitsuha to realize talking to him was meaningless. *Well, he* is *on the enemy side, I guess.*

Following the failure in communication, she tried shooting him.

B-B-BANG, B-B-BANG!

"What's that supposed to be?"

Doesn't hurt at all, huh? Okay.

“I’ll do it!” piped one of the smaller dragons.

Oh, so I’m just practice for the babies, huh? Damn, this brings back bad memories… Makes my arm throb. But I guess a youngling will be easier to handle, at least.

“Just the two of us now, huh?”

Wait, what am I saying? This ain’t an arranged marriage meeting!

The large dragon had backed up a bit, and there was a second small dragon beside him. Before Mitsuha could concern herself with that one, however, she had to take care of the one in front of her.

“Hey, wanna talk?”

“Die.”

Guess not.

“Fire the assault rifles!”

B-B-B-B-BANG!

“Is that the same thing as before? Well, it doesn’t hurt me at all!”

I can tell from your eyes that it does. Assault rifles pack way more of a punch than a pistol. And these aren’t your usual 5.56mm bullets; they’re 7.62mm. Is your skin more sensitive than the big dragon’s?

“All weapons, prepare to fire. Light weapons, fire.”

Mitsuha wanted to reserve their most powerful weapons for later. She also wanted to find out which of them worked best against dragons, just in case she ever dealt with another one.

I’ll use this little dragon’s cluelessness and ego to find out their weaknesses.

B-B-B-B-BANG!

“O-Owch! Owie, owie, owie!”

For a moment, Mitsuha thought she had taken him down, but soon realized he was simply sore.

Are dragons weak to pain? Is it because they don’t feel much of it in their lives? Or because this one’s just a kid?

Wait, did he use dragon language? The pain was so bad it made him speak in his mother tongue, huh? Ah, wait, that’s not all. Apparently, I picked up some monster-speak from the adult dragon. So, they know non-human languages.

She had tried a polite approach, especially considering they were dragons, the famed mythical beasts of yore. But she’d grown tired of doing so already, as well as of this whole affair, so she decided to just finish them off. She needed to make sure to end it before any of them could retaliate.

Mitsuha scanned her forces and mentally confirmed that everyone was ready to fire. *That’s the captain’s people for ya!*

“Heavy machine guns, fire!”

B-B-B-B-BANG!

“RAAAAAGHHHHH!”

The young dragon roared in pain as his scales flew off and bullets ate through his thick skin, sending flesh and gore into the air.

The other dragons were frozen in place.

They probably didn’t expect humans to be able to hurt a dragon. Of course they wouldn’t know how to react.

“D-DAmn yOoUuu!” The wounded dragon’s face was so warped with pain and fury that he seemed to have gone mad. He opened his jaw wide and began to inhale.

Yep. We all know what he's doing!

"Fire an RPG into its mouth!"

FWOOM FWOOM FWOOM!

Three RPG-27s sounded off, rockets exploding from the single-use anti-tank weapons and zooming toward the dragon's maw. Only one made it inside; the others exploded on his jaw and skull.

The juvenile collapsed, causing tremors in the earth around him.

"T'ELLIIIIIII!" Overcome by rage and despair, the other young dragon charged at Mitsuha.

"God, lend me your strength!" she shouted.

B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-BANG!

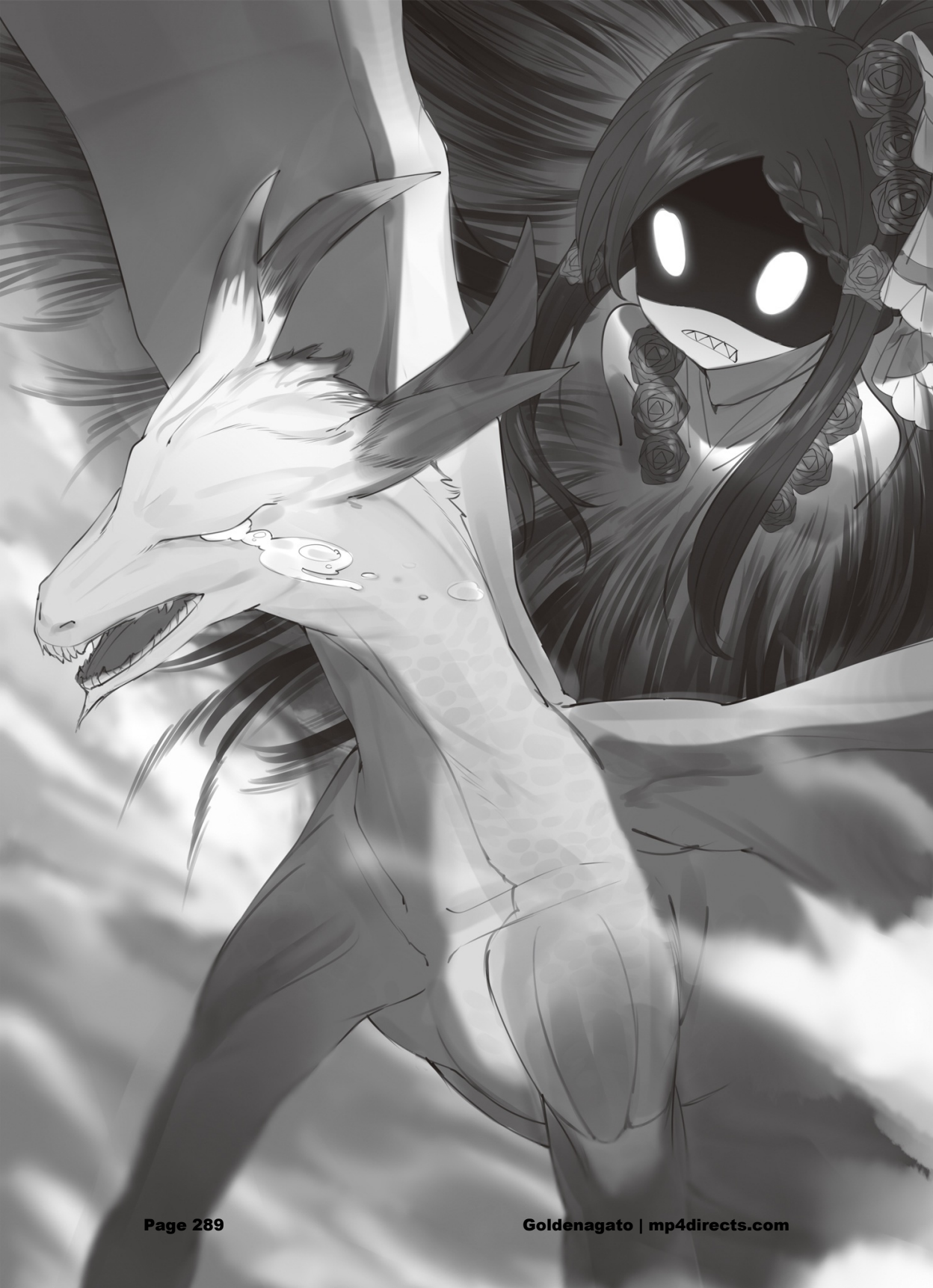
The 20mm autocannon roared, causing the second dragon to grind to a halt in the dirt beside the first.

Their companion was shell-shocked, unable to move. The two smaller dragons gushed blood from their wounds as they began to crawl, inching their marred bodies toward one another. Once within reach, they extended their forelegs and brought them together in an intimate gesture. Shortly after, they stopped moving for all eternity.

"Ahh! Aaahhh! AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!" The adult dragon shook out of his stupor, growing frantic.

"Ahh, aaahhhh, Lewlieu, T'elliiii! They're dead! They're both dead!" he wailed in the dragons' tongue. Mitsuha was the only one who understood him. "They were the first children in two hundred years! They were like a brother and sister to me! It's all my fault! I shouldn't have brought them into this stupid game! Aaaahhhh!"

After crying for a while, the dragon realized that the 20mm autocannon─the hand of God─the heavy machine guns, and several RPG-27s were aimed right at him.



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“AAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

No way! I’m gonna die! These things I thought were so puny are gonna kill me, an ancient dragon! EEEEEK!

The dragon ran away with all his power, trampling and tossing humans aside in the process. Once sure he was far enough away from the death-dealing machines, he took to the skies and escaped straight to Dragon Valley.

His escape had cost the empire a great number of troops. The dragon had taken the smoothest path─the main road─and that was exactly where their army was stationed. He had crushed any forces in the middle or sent them flying.

The main road was, of course, where the enemy’s front-line headquarters had been. A bit further down the road were their supply squads, which carried the army’s food, water, horse feed, and spare arrows, among other things. The supplies themselves had also been in the dragon’s way, since they had been placed at the side of the road for convenience. Losing so many supplies and their chain of command instantly threw the Imperial Army into chaos.

Having lost their flying riders and the support of the ancient dragon─the twin keys to the success of their invasion─and lost control of the monsters to boot, the enemy had no choice but to prioritize retreat with minimal casualties.

The soldiers who could even somewhat communicate with monsters had died, and the dragons, in all their supposed majesty, had been defeated or scared off with ease. This had confounded the monsters, and Mitsuha clinched it by using her newly-acquired orc and ogre vocabulary to say things like, “You look tasty. Me eat you whole.” The monsters all made a run for the hills…sending them straight through the imperial forces.

Well, I don’t really care about the rest, Mitsuha thought, fully intent on

leaving the aftermath and pursuit to the capital forces, the local lords' armies, and the mercenaries.

She soon found out that the other gates had been assaulted by traitors to the kingdom. Their main goal was to keep the nobility and royalty from escaping, but they also had some soldiers try to break in. Instead of the limited resistance they had expected, they were met with machine-gun fire and grenade launchers.

I'm glad the mercs at the other gates got something to do too. I didn't want them to be all sulky with me. Anyway, back to the city we go. Mitsuha turned around to call out to the captain, but he and his men were too busy loading one of the dragons into a truck. *Well, you do you, I guess.*

Exhausted from battle and hardly lucid, Mitsuha entered the town…and a frenzy of people. She could hardly keep up with the crowd that swarmed her, so she answered them only in her thoughts.

"Lightning Archpriestess"? That joke's over; don't beat a dead horse.

A servant of God? Oh, cool, you heard my speech. You fell in love with my words? Must be the suspension bridge effect.

You want me to marry your son? Wait, Your Majesty?! Since when were you here?! And no, I don't need anyone who sparkles too much.

Huh? Leuhen? Well, I wouldn't mind taking him. His presence is pretty soothing.

Ah, please stop jostling me! My left shoulder hurts like hell! You're gonna open the wound—Ahh, it's bleeding!

Hey, Wolf Fang's pretty popular, too! They're getting the "Godsent soldier" treatment. That woman with the baby says she wants you to touch her

child. Go on, do it. Ah, hey! No touching the mother herself! And no, there aren't any women who want you to touch their breasts, you asshole!

It would've been problematic for the mercenaries to stay for too long, so Mitsuha intended to send them home as soon as possible. *Keeping them around could open up a whole new can of worms, and I don't want any of their guns or anything getting stolen.*

She couldn't world-jump in a place like this, however, so she gathered them in the inner courtyard again. After bringing them back to Earth, Mitsuha returned right away. There was still so much to do, after all. Though she did pay a visit to Alexis while she was there; he had been pretty worried about the battle, and was overjoyed to learn that the kingdom had won.

Gonna sleep now, Mitsuha thought. *And I'll take tomorrow off. Probably wouldn't be able to work properly anyway.*

Many long years later, in the valley of dragons, two juveniles were brainstorming how to cure their boredom.

"Hey, wanna play with humans? They die if you just poke 'em a bit, but they make good pawns for games."

The other dragon looked conflicted. "Hmm. But, you know that weird old dragon who lives in the mountain cave? The one who gets really mad and yells stuff like, 'Don't mess with humans!' and 'Don't lay a hand on them!'? What if the humans did something bad to him?"

"Ohh, that old fogey… Well, I guess we shouldn't do it then. Even the grown-ups don't wanna deal with him."

"You're right. See you tomorrow!"

“Yep! See ya!”

Chapter 15

Rewards

Within a few days of the kingdom's victory, the empire's troops had lost most of their supplies and retreated with their tails between their legs. Plagued by run-ins with the kingdom's forces and attacks from various monsters, few nobles and soldiers managed to make it back home. Nobles carried with them an opportunity for ransom, and the kingdom had no reason to spare practiced enemy soldiers. The conscripted farmers, on the other hand, were left to return to their villages and work in peace.

Mitsuha was, as you might expect, once again summoned to the royal palace. This was an official event involving a proper audience with the king, so it was clear as day it would be an award ceremony.

Upon Mitsuha's arrival, dozens of people were already mingling in the hall. Among them were award recipients and bigwigs taking part in the event. Needless to say, Marquis Eiblinger was also present.

Though the fight at the main gate had overshadowed most of the war effort, Mitsuha and Wolf Fang were far from the only ones who contributed. There were people who had uncovered vital information, armies who had fought hard to buy time for the capital's preparations, and those who had distinguished themselves in pursuit of the retreating empire, among others.

Mitsuha was certain victory wouldn't have been possible without them. *What if the empire came a day early?* she wondered. *What if the intel the kingdom had was false or had holes in it? Wolf Fang alone certainly wouldn't*

have guaranteed victory.

During the ceremony, she was the first to be addressed.

"Mitsuha von Yamano. Your contributions in defending my kingdom from the empire have been invaluable. No doubt, you deserve a reward. Is there anything you desire?"

"I want three things," Mitsuha replied.

"Three?" a noble gasped.

"Such greed!" said another.

"That's a commoner for you," added a third.

I can hear you, you know! thought Mitsuha. *And I bet that's what you want!*

"Very well. Speak."

The busybodies quieted themselves, waiting.

"Firstly, there's someone who deserves a reward much more than I do."

"What? Who might that be?"

"The loyal, courageous youth who stood in the way of the bolts that would have hit me and Lord Eiblinger instead."

"Ohhh." The nobles nodded in understanding. Some, when reminded of the brave young man, showed bitter expressions.

"Where is he now?" the king asked.

"Well, the wound on his shoulder was a mere scratch, but the one in his stomach is grave, so he's currently battling death in a medical facility."

"I see." The king looked deeply pained. After all, in this world, such injuries were fatal.

Oh, Count Bozes is here, too, Mitsuha realized upon noticing his face in the crowd. *Sorry.*

“Without his act of bravery, I would have died, unable to lend my aid in battle. Therefore, my contributions are his, and he must be rewarded.”

Those nobles who had initially bad-mouthed Mitsuha were now completely in her favor.

I mean, I’m not being greedy—I’m paying my respects to a dying hero… In their eyes, anyway.

“I understand. Though he is noble by birth, he has yet to inherit his title. I will honor his service and appoint him a proper title of his own. Thus, I grant him the title of baron. Furthermore, it may be passed down in due time to any child who does not inherit his own position as count. In this manner, the young man’s achievements will live on with his title… Forever.”

Following these words, Mitsuha heard faint sobbing in the audience.

Oh man, it’s Count Bozes. This must be a real honor.

“Are there any objections?”

Yeah, right. Nobody would—

“I object!”

Who’s the punk that—Wait, Lord Eiblinger? The one he saved?

The room let out a collective gasp.

Now the center of attention, the man continued. “I could not agree more that the man deserves a title. I merely think that if baron is all he gets, no one else should receive a reward at all.”

Huh? Mitsuha tilted her head.

“Viscount is the least he deserves! Speaking as someone whose life he saved, a lesser honor than that would be a disgrace!”

Ohhh. His reason for protesting was clear.

“I beg your pardon,” the king said. “I meant no injustice. Does anyone object to granting this youth the title of viscount?”

Nobody will, obviously, Mitsuha thought. *If the hero of the hour doesn’t get this, everyone else is getting zilch. Nice work, Eiblinger.* She looked around the room and noticed the marquis profusely apologizing to Count Bozes. *Do they know each other? Oh, of course they do. They’re both in the upper echelon of the nobility.*

With that decided, Mitsuha resumed speaking.

“Thank you for your consideration, gentlemen; I feel a weight on my heart has lifted. Now for my second request.”

And actually the most important one.

“It concerns the soldiers who fought at the main gate.”

Her words caused a stir in the audience.

“Since I was unable to sit idly by while the kingdom was in danger, I sought help from my homeland.”

“Homeland?”

“What country is that?”

“How?”

“Is that where the lightning wands came from?!”

The commotion grew even louder.

“Left with no other choice,” Mitsuha continued, “I used the secret, life-draining art of ‘traversal’ to go to my homeland in an instant. However, getting my country’s army to act on such matters is a long process involving numerous meetings, authorizations, and documents. Getting it done in time would’ve been difficult, especially since it would have been for the sake of a country my

homeland has no diplomatic relations with. Because of this, the only ones who came to assist me were my friends. They voluntarily abandoned their duties, took the country's divine weaponry without permission, and used up a great deal of firepower. I imagine they will face harsh punishments for doing so."

"Ohh, what a tragedy!"

"Egads! Those kindhearted champions!"

Everything was going according to Mitsuha's plan.

"We were in such a hurry that we didn't wait for the stars to align. Due to our lack of preparation, the traversal ended up being imperfect, and some of our men lost their lives in the process."

"Dear me…"

"How terrible!"

I've got 'em now. Mitsuha struggled to suppress a grin. *Time for the final push!*

"If you were to thank my homeland with a monetary contribution, it would justify my friends' actions and show that they helped foster positive relations between my nation and yours. It could also make up for the losses incurred by our use of the divine weaponry, and it may even ensure their punishments are less severe. I must add that families of those who die on unauthorized missions receive no compensation from our government. Perhaps your generosity can support them as well."

There was not a dry eye in the room by the time she finished.

"Treasurer!" the king shouted. "What do we have in our coffers?! No amount is too high for those who saved the capital, if not the whole kingdom, from utter destruction. Wring out as much as we can!"

“At once, Your Majesty!”

All right, that’s Wolf Fang’s payment in the bag! Wait, they’re not about to bring out something like a measly three thousand gold coins, are they? Even if I don’t pocket any of it, I still need at least forty thousand. That’s about a billion yen after conversions! It’s half of the money I need to save for my relaxing retirement—the full amount for one world. On this side, that much is like four billion yen back in Japan.

“Three thousand!”

WHAT?!

“My family shall give them three thousand gold coins!”

Ah, it’s just Count Bozes. Wait, really?!

“I myself will supply five thousand!”

Lord Eiblinger…

“Two thousand five hundred!”

“Sorry, but our household took a real hit during the invasion. A thousand is the best I can do.”

“Three thousand!”

“Two thousand!”

One after another, the nobles came up to offer their own gold. The king was bound to give much more than the marquis, so it was clear Mitsuha would get the forty thousand she needed and then some.

Wondering what I would’ve done if this hadn’t worked out? Welp, I’d just sell pearls in a different country and then make myself scarce. If I went around selling them to nobles all over the world before rumors caused the price to plummet, I could rake in some serious cash. Forty thousand seemed like a pretty,

uh, reasonable limit for that kind of business.

"Thank you so much, everyone. I'm positive my friends will face a lesser sentence, and children who lost their fathers will be able to get the education they need to take over their posts and responsibilities."

Mitsuha pretended to wipe away a tear.

"I also understand that many lands on the empire's route to the capital suffered during this invasion. Orphaned children, farmers whose fields were destroyed, and others will surely need financial support. I will be sure to speak with my little br─I mean, my king, and ask if our homeland can support you in any way."

"You would go that far?!"

"Such benevolence…"

The owners of these lands were moved to tears. While many expressed their gratitude, however, there were some among them preoccupied with her slip.

Was she about to say "little brother"? they wondered. *She was, wasn't she?!*

But it was no mistake; Mitsuha was fully aware of what she had just implied. Though it probably wasn't news to anyone that she wasn't just the daughter of any old noble family.

It was time for her third request.

"Finally, I want you to make me a citizen of this country."

"She wants *what*?"

"I am merely a drifter who came here after abandoning my homeland. But now I want to become part of this city, and this country, and make it my new home."

The nobles were audibly moved. In the end, not a single one of Mitsuha's requests had been selfish, and she had even displayed commendable patriotism. With everything she had done for the kingdom thus far, there was no room for doubt in their hearts.

"Hmm. I must say, I already *do* consider you part of my kingdom." The king thought for a moment, then cracked a smile. Apparently, he had come up with the perfect solution. "Very well. I shall use my authority to put forth a motion to ensure your status as one of us."

Yay, I'll have citizenship now! Mitsuha cheered internally. *That means I'll be protected by the authorities and have an easier time doing business. A total win-win!*

"Mitsuha von Yamano, I bestow upon you the title of viscountess!"

SAY WHAAAAAT?!

Mitsuha grew numb, hardly able to process the rest of the ceremony. Others received their rewards and had their wishes granted, but it all went in one ear and out the other for her.

How did this happen?!

A few days passed after the award ceremony. Mitsuha was running her store as usual, but the many non-paying customers stopping by made her days more difficult. It wasn't as though she had anything against them; what with her outrageous prices, it was to be expected that some people would come again and again before resolving to make a purchase. Mitsuha wanted to treasure them just as much.

Upon hearing of Mitsuha's deeds and newly noble status, Sabine became

even more attached to her than before. However, the frequency of customers─especially the ones only there to speak with Mitsuha─made the princess's blood boil. She now had no chance at all to watch her precious DVDs.

As for Mitsuha herself, she had no real complaints regarding the common folk. Most merely wanted to see the savior of the country and express their gratitude. Nobles and merchants, on the other hand, were much more troublesome to deal with. And although her sales had increased, it wasn't proportional to the customer growth.

Crap, I should really rethink my inventory.

Craving a change of pace, Mitsuha decided to take a trip. Well, you might argue that the word wasn't entirely fitting, since getting to her destination took only a moment─just a jump to Earth and back again.

On this particular occasion, she made her way to Colette's village. It wasn't that she had forgotten to visit. There was simply a great distance between the village and capital, meaning she had to space out her visits so as not to give herself away.

"Hey, Colette! Long time no see!"

Mitsuha was welcomed like one of their own. It could very well have been because of the souvenirs she'd brought along with her, but she wanted to believe that wasn't the case.

The villagers had yet to hear about what had transpired at the capital. While local lords employed messengers to notify them of major occurrences, commoners had to rely on traveling merchants and carriage drivers or passengers to get their information. Even then, it was still too early for any travelers to have

arrived since the invasion. Count Bozes was still in the capital as well, and soldiers sent to fight on the front lines were in the midst of their triumphant return home.

Even if they didn't really fight, they technically won just by being on the winning side. Let them be "triumphant," I say.

Mitsuha went on to tell Colette and her parents─Erene and Tobias─of her exploits in the capital, leaving out everything about the invasion. She mentioned that she had opened up a shop, helped out with a party, and so on and so forth. She made sure to downplay the details, implying her store was small and she was merely renting the building, or insisting she wasn't the host of the party by any means. However, she did her best not to tell *too* many lies. After all, the village could be visited by someone from the capital at any time.

Maybe I'm overly cautious, but it makes up for not being overly tall… Agh, what am I thinking?!

Everyone was immensely happy for her. Even with all the trivializing, Mitsuha seemed to be a great success in the villagers' eyes. She had traveled to the city where she wanted to go, opened up a store there in no time at all, and now made enough money to get by on her own. It was only natural for the crowd of farmers to be captivated.

They informed Mitsuha that a soldier had come asking about her, and it had them quite worried.

Of course they'd look into me, she thought. *I'm a stranger with a suspicious backstory who hangs out with the princess.*

Mitsuha brushed away their worries, and soon had them convinced that the soldier was merely looking to know more about someone renting a place in the

capital.

I guess farmers don't have the sense to question why an actual state soldier would be involved in something like that. Oh, uh, oops. My bad, guys.

She arranged to stay overnight as part of her "weary traveler" routine. After speaking with the villagers, she spent the remainder of her time there with Colette. The younger girl had even been excused from her farm duties for this special occasion.

Mitsuha left the village the very next day. Everyone wanted her to stay longer, but she told them she had merely stopped by on her way to see what the nearby seaside villages had to offer. Once Colette forced her to promise she would come again in their usual ritual, Mitsuha headed for the sea.

If I go there just once, I can easily come back whenever I want. Plus, I wanna see what kinds of products come out of this world's seas.

She briefly contemplated meeting up with Beatrice Bozes, but decided against it. The count was still in the capital, and Mitsuha would surely see him at a later date. If she were to see Beatrice, and the girl then told her father about their meeting, he would notice the contradiction. In order to ward off any strange requests, she had convinced royalty and nobility alike that her "traversal" ability was a life-sapping technique only worth using in the rarest of instances. She didn't want to ruin it for herself.

During her official audience with the king, Mitsuha had claimed to have proficiency in traversal, but added that delivering the kingdom's letter of thanks and the money alone would cost her a great deal of life force. The nobles had been immensely sympathetic, including one who had muttered, "I thought she

was small for a twelve-year-old. It seems this technique is the cause."

Wait, I can barely even pass for twelve?! she'd thought bitterly. *And where were you looking when you said that?!*

It may also be important to note that Mitsuha had explained away Wolf Fang's return journey as part of an automatic effect applied to the traversal when it was first cast.

Eventually, Mitsuha arrived at a small seaside village about the same size as Colette's.

Isn't Count Bozes a powerful noble? Or is every village about the same size? The center of the Bozeses' territory was a bona fide town, but even that wasn't anything to write home about.

Considering the absence of starvation and child trafficking in Colette's village, it was likely a prosperous place. Mitsuha found the fact that the village could easily support a wandering stranger such as herself impressive on its own.

Count Bozes must be doing a great job… And now that I think about it, callin' it "Colette's village" makes it sound like Colette is in charge. Welp, I'm not too good at remembering names, so I might as well keep on using it. I don't even remember the name of the empire that attacked us. Well, that messenger guy we sniped probably said it, but whatever.

"So-and-so's dad" could stay "So-and-so's dad" as far as Mitsuha was concerned. The name was tucked in her memory somewhere, but she wouldn't feel inconvenienced should it escape her. She didn't even remember the names of the shady restaurant owner or the pompous merchant. "Shady restaurant owner" and "pompous merchant" were enough for her. If two people happened to fit the bill, she would simply default to something like "Owner A" and

“Owner B.”

Even the seaside village would be “fishing village” to her, despite the fact that it hosted industries beyond just fishing. She learned soon after her arrival that the fish caught here were either sold locally, exported to nearby villages, or shipped out to stores in the county’s central town. Mitsuha considered telling them to secure a place for direct sales, but it occurred to her that this would take business away from the stores. Merchants were locals, too, and thus fully taxable.

You pickle and dry them, too, huh? And you even sell some of these to the capital? Hmm. These are your fishing ships? Really? I see, I see. All right, that’s enough for today!

Satisfied, Mitsuha jumped to her home in Japan. She checked her email and her mailbox, then went off to stock up on ingredients and daily necessities.

Boy, having a car sure helps when you’re buying a lot!

She also made the rounds of her neighborhood just to put in an appearance. People would worry if they didn’t hear from her for too long; she was a child living all by herself, after all.

Hey, I’m eighteen, and I can pass for a fifteen-year-old in Japan! Oh, that’s still a child? Damn, you got me.

At last, the day for Mitsuha to receive her title arrived. Incidentally, she wasn’t the only one who would be given the honor. While ennobling as a reward was uncommon, a number of nobles had lost their titles for their betrayal or refusal to answer the call to arms, and their positions needed to be filled.

Of course this is a special case. If people got noble titles too often, you’d

have no one but high-ranking elites all over the place.

The eccentric seamstress had finished the dress Mitsuha had asked for right on schedule. After hearing her customer had been summoned to a royal ceremony in another country, the lady had spent an entire night making the dress. She had even prostrated herself before Mitsuha, begging to come along, but of course Mitsuha couldn't take her.

Some other time, maybe. Wondering what happened to my other dress? It was all covered in blood. That a problem? Oh, and my left shoulder is completely healed. There's a bunch of other things I did in preparation for the ceremony. Stay tuned for more details after these commercials!

This event, which also took place at the palace, had even more guests than the award ceremony. Nobles from all over the kingdom had come to the capital despite it not being the ballroom season. Needless to say, Marquis Eiblinger and Count Bozes were among those present.

Mitsuha was last in line. *I guess mine's gonna be the climax? Oh, it's because it'd be tough for everyone else if the audience got all soppy. Got it.*

The proceedings went smoothly, and finally, it was Mitsuha's turn.

What's that? You're all in love with my dress? Why, thank you! I'll be sure to pass that along. Wonder if the seamstress would like it if I took some orders for her? Not sure what she'd think about being paid in gold coins, though.

"Mitsuha von Yamano, I hereby grant you the title of viscountess!" the king proclaimed.

Following his words, Sabine handed Mitsuha a dagger. It was small, about the same size as a kitchen knife, but held a special meaning: "With this, banish

monsters and defeat our enemies to protect your land and your people. If you betray the king's trust, you shall plant it in your own heart."

Man, that's hardcore. Mitsuha gulped.

The others had received their own daggers from the chancellor, but Sabine had insisted on giving Mitsuha's herself. Mitsuha gladly accepted and was about to walk away when the king called out to her.

"Viscountess Yamano. Seeing as he is not present, can you accept the title intended for Count Bozes's son, Alexis?"

Mitsuha looked over at Count Bozes, who nodded silently. She knew exactly how to respond.

"I refuse."

Both the king's and Count Bozes's jaws flopped open, and silence filled the room. Paying them no mind, Mitsuha whirled around and headed for the main door.

"The impudence!"

"Seize her!"

Voices cried out, but no one dared to stop her. Even the king had yet to recover from his bewilderment. As she approached the door, the guards stood paralyzed, unsure of how to react.

Mitsuha then threw the door open, revealing a figure behind it.

No longer a boy, but not yet a man, he ambled toward the throne. His right arm hung from a sling around his neck, and his stomach had been bandaged several times over. He wasn't wearing a shirt, but had his left arm in a jacket with the other side hanging over his right shoulder. The buttons were undone, but it made him exude virility rather than vulgarity.

His footsteps on the plush carpet made no sound, but it was almost as though you could hear them echo throughout the room. Tears slid down Count Bozes's cheeks. Marquis Eiblinger nodded as he patted the man's shoulder. No one said a word as the boy─no, the dignified youth─stood before the king.

It was up to Mitsuha to break the silence. She took a breath and cried out, "Give it to him yourself!"

Roars of joy erupted from the crowd.

"My apologies, Your Majesty. I'm not entirely looking my best," Alexis said.

"It matters not, my boy," the overjoyed king said, then declared, "Alexis von Bozes, I hereby grant you the title of viscount!"

"I humbly accept." The young viscount, inconvenienced by bandages, awkwardly bowed his head.

"You are Count Bozes's firstborn, yes? After inheriting your father's title, you may retain your viscount status and pass it on to your second child."

Alexis shook his head. "I have no intention of doing so."

"What…?"

"Theodore, my younger brother, can have my father's title. I shall take the viscount status for myself. After all, it isn't just something I inherited! It's a title bestowed by the king himself! It's the beginning of a new, honorable noble lineage, and I would be a fool to let it pass by me! Besides…"

"Yes?"

"By the time my father retires, I will have ascended and become a count myself."

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The king shook with laughter, and Count Bozes couldn't help but smile. Once the king had calmed down enough, he gave Sabine some sort of signal. In response, she prepared to take the next dagger.

You know what? I'll celebrate with a little treat, Mitsuha thought.

"Sabine, you already gave me mine. You should let your sister have a turn!"

"Ah, you're right!" Sabine looked at her siblings sitting behind the king, and beckoned her dear sister, the second princess.

Totally blanking on her name, by the way.

After some momentary confusion, the second princess stood up. Realizing he would get his reward from a girl in her late teens, Alexis went from looking dignified to terribly flustered.

Yep! He loves it! Sabine's cute and all, but healthy young men prefer girls their own age.

Suddenly, the first princess─the one in her mid-twenties─stopped the second princess in her tracks. Ignoring her confused younger sister, she took the dagger with a sour expression, and handed it to Alexis without even making eye contact.

Umm, what's going on here? I have no idea, but Alexis, you should stop looking so disappointed. Do you have a death wish?!

Chapter 16
Yamano County

Mitsuha now had a noble title. This made her a bona fide, honest-to-goodness noble. Not a superficial noble in title alone, but a full-fledged noble with her own territory…which came with the responsibility of running it.

How did this happen?!

She decided to meet with the king, the chancellor, and the person in charge of territorial management. The latter─rather than an expert in running noble lands─was merely a human database who knew the kingdom's territories and their locations, sizes, and special features. His job was to assist nobles with acquiring or inheriting new domains.

Mitsuha began by describing the type of land she wanted. "I want it to have a shoreline, mountains, rivers─oh, and I want it to be small."

"You want a *small* territory?"

"Yes. A place that's too big and has too many people can be more trouble than it's worth. I want to have a tightly-knit community that's more like a family. Ah, and keep me as far away from the border as possible! I don't want to be part of any disputes."

The king smiled.

"Then we have to look in the north," said the dominion database. "That's the only part of the country that has a shoreline." It was apparent he knew what he was talking about.

"Please, have a look at this map," he began, gesturing to it. "You have large

rivers flowing into the sea here, here, and here. And these are your smaller rivers. There are vast plains around the big rivers. They're counties, of course─already taken by other nobles.

"If you want a small area close to the sea and mountains, we must look around the small rivers, and if we filter out the lands that aren't open or belong to the king himself, there's this one, that one, and this one here. Picking anything else would mean chasing out some other noble."

Whoa, chasing somebody out? That'd make 'em hate me for sure. Should I just go with it and fight for a better spot? Nah. I bet most of those families have had the same territories for generations. The land's probably part of them at this point, so I'm not gonna mess with that.

"Then…is this one okay?" she asked, pointing.

"Indeed. This land belonged to a now ex-baron who was stripped of his status when he chose to ignore the king's call during the invasion. He planned to side with whoever was the victor once it was all over. Since it's quite a distance away from the capital, it's large for a baron's territory. It would be on the small side for a viscount, but still plausible. There's a small river and a mountain that's not too steep. It certainly aligns with your conditions.

"Are you certain about this one, though? There are lands fit for viscounts closer to the capital. They would be more profitable, at the very least."

Mitsuha declined, since she didn't really want that. Being far away from the capital meant less visits from nosy nobles and meddling merchants, and the distance wouldn't affect her operations whatsoever.

Anyway, I've got my own land now! Wait. It's in the north… Has a shoreline… That sounds real familiar.

Shortly after, she found out that it was right next to the Bozeses' county.

Was this really a coincidence? That database guy… Does he know Count Bozes? I wonder if he set me up.

Mitsuha entertained her conspiracy theory for a moment, but had no difficulty making her decision. The count could help her run her domain, his family was full of good people, and it gave her a good excuse to visit Colette more often.

Huh? Alexis's land neighbors mine, too? It's on the opposite side from the Bozeses' county? Have I been put in a Bozes sandwich? I have, haven't I?! She was now convinced that this had been planned.

You wanna pass through my land so you can visit your parents? Yeah, yeah. Sure.

Huh? One "yeah" is enough? Yeah, yeah. Whatever.

Having an imaginary conversation, she began preparations to visit her territory.

Wondering about the store? Not to worry, I've got no intention of abandoning it. I'll just close up shop for the time being, and reopen once things have settled down in my new territory. Not gonna bring it along with my world-jumping power, either… Not right now, anyway. What about the shampoo? Right, sorry, I'll reopen as soon as possible.

Mitsuha spent the next three days going through territory management training from someone recommended by the king himself. There was a great deal to learn in such a short amount of time, but Mitsuha's modern knowledge made the lessons much easier. She already knew the basics, such as taxation, budget

management, and morale. Her level of understanding surprised even the teacher.

She also captured their lessons on a tape recorder so she could review them whenever she felt like it.

Viva science!

After completing her crash course, Mitsuha was ready to leave. She planned to travel to her lands by a regular coach, of course. She didn't have her own private carriage, wasn't sure where to get one, and had no desire to spend the next few days alone with her driver.

Jumping directly to the Bozeses' county was always an option, but she wanted to take at least one good look at the road between the capital and her domain. Sure, she took the same means of transport on her initial trip to the capital, but her attitude had been much different back then. She now had to think about what she could do for her land: look into the problems with traveling to and from the capital, see the state of the surrounding areas, and so on. Mitsuha could learn a lot from the other passengers, too, now that she knew what questions to ask.

Before she left, a good number of people came to her asking to be hired. It was only natural: being one of the first employees under a new noble was a coveted status. They would be higher in the hierarchy than all those who came after, and since the head was a child─in their eyes, anyway─they had a chance to usurp her or use her power themselves. Perhaps they could even get their own family into her lineage.

And if greed alone did not apply, they could just as easily be spies tasked with finding out more about her homeland's technology, particularly the "divine weaponry." Regardless, Mitsuha couldn't take the risk.

I'm not gonna hire anyone who's only in it for the good stuff. You worked for a noble before? You say you're a veteran when it comes to running lands? A real pro? No way, you're gonna double my profits? And you, you know how to handle the people? I should just leave it all to you, then?

You're all morons. If you were that good, you wouldn't be desperately searching for a job in a place like this.

She refused them all, set the store's security to maximum defense mode, and asked her neighbors to call the palace soldiers if they saw anyone skulking around. After that, she met with Sven's party and requested they keep an eye on the store's surroundings whenever they were in town. She also introduced them to the neighbors, and vice versa.

Both groups informed her that no one would dare sneak into the Lightning Archpriestess's place, but she mostly ignored them. In the end, the king dedicated some palace soldiers to patrol the area.

On the day of her departure, Mitsuha arrived at her stagecoach to find Sabine waiting for her with her bags.

Whoa, whoa, whoa! Sorry, little lady, but I'm gonna have to send you home. The princess's bodyguards─concealed nearby─had planned to take her back by force at the very last moment, and they did exactly that. *So you let her hold onto her dream until it almost came true, huh? Wow, that's harsh.*

Mitsuha's stagecoach was bound for the Bozeses' county. The home of a new viscount wasn't important enough to have a fixed carriage route, so this was her best option.

She wore a dress you might expect to see on a normal commoner girl. It

was plain, but flowy and charming, intended to make her seem more approachable to her fellow travelers.

I learn from my mistakes. I'll also be super friendly and chatty. Sabine's "Paradise waitress" persona will probably be a good reference for that.

Underneath, she wore a Walther PPS on her right thigh and a small knife on her left. The usual Walther was tucked under her arm, but the one on her leg would be easier to draw in an emergency. Both the 93R and the revolver were tucked away in holsters in her bag because they would attract too much attention.

The bag full of weapons was at her side, while a bigger bag containing her spare clothes and other effects sat on the stagecoach's storage shelf. Larger baggage usually went on the roof, but there weren't too many passengers, and the driver hadn't wanted to separate a young girl from her belongings. It wasn't terribly big, anyway.

At present, the carriage had twelve passengers. Since it was outbound from the capital, that number was unlikely to increase. As it went through its stops, there would be fewer and fewer people inside.

Shortly after departure, Mitsuha addressed herself to a friendly-looking young man she presumed was a merchant. She presented herself as a clueless trader heading to work in the domain of a new noble.

No lies there. I am a trader, and I am pretty clueless about this world.

Though she was still a child, the merchant enjoyed speaking with a cute girl. She listened to him intently and offered up some good questions─proof she was interested in what he had to say. The girl understood him and clearly had a good head on her shoulders; during their conversation, he even learned a few

things himself. It was obvious she would make an excellent merchant. So much so that he even thought of talking to his wife about passing his trade on to a daughter instead of a son.

The two spoke naturally, and the whole exchange was smooth as butter. Their positive energy caused the onlookers to join in, and by the end of it, everyone had learned a great deal from one another.

Two days out from the Bozeses' county, the coach was attacked by bandits.

"Isn't this kind of thing supposed to be rare?" asked Mitsuha.

"Oh, uhh… It's happening more often lately because of all the empire's soldiers scattered around. There are the farmers who stayed here because they'd be in for a bad time if they returned, the low-ranking officers who could be executed for the defeat, the washed-up mercenaries who didn't get paid… Many chose to skitter up north because the kingdom hunted down anyone going south."

"Oh, yeah. Guess 'rare' doesn't really mean 'never'… I should remember that."

While just about every passenger was starting to panic, Mitsuha was chatting with a somewhat austere middle-aged man who seemed to be a mercenary, as if the ongoing assault was no big deal.

I can't get enough of these guys. They just have that "dad" aura around them. No, I don't mean that they smell. It's the aura!

Mitsuha was calm because she could jump out of the situation at any moment. The man was calm because of the so-called "right of extraterritoriality," an unwritten agreement of sorts between mercenaries and

bandits. Unlike mercenaries hired for protection, those you happened to come across had no obligation to protect anyone. Putting their lives on the line for someone without a contract involved just wasn't worth it. The same went for the bandits—fighting a mercenary who sat idly by while they pillaged was often to their own detriment.

The mercenaries had no reason to defend bystanders, and the bandits had no reason to fight the tough, penniless mercs. Just like that, their interests coincided. A mercenary's presence in this situation could also reduce the amount of post-battle murders and brutalities, so it could feasibly work out for passengers and contracted mercs as well. However, bandits still wouldn't hesitate to kidnap women and children.

Including Mitsuha, there were nine passengers. Out of these, one was a wife, another a young woman, and two more were young girls. Mitsuha didn't count the coachman—the bandits wouldn't harm him, after all. If too many coachmen were lost, these vehicles would stop traveling altogether. This would be bad for the country and the local lords, and they would have no choice but to initiate a bandit hunt. The lack of transportation would make it harder for bandits to get by, too. For these reasons, the bandits didn't even consider coachmen during raids, and the drivers themselves never interfered. In their minds, giving in to righteous indignation and fighting back would only place a target on the backs of all their fellow coachmen.

"I'll fight," said one of the men.

He was obviously a farmer, and two of the four women were his family members—his wife and daughter. It went without saying that he didn't want to see them kidnapped before his very eyes, even if it meant his death.

The next to speak up was an elderly man. “I’ll fight with you. My children are already fully grown, and in the past I committed many misdeeds in order to protect my family. I’d say it’s high time I lend a hand to someone else. I’ve also brought all my wealth, and I’d quite like to see it survive this journey along with me.”

“Thank you.” The farmer bowed his head.

After glancing at Mitsuha, the young merchant joined in. “I’ll help, too.”

“I want no part in that,” said a man who appeared to be in his early twenties. “We just have to give them our money and possessions and we’ll come out of this unharmed, right? There’s a stray merc with extraterritoriality here, after all. If we resist, we’ll just end up hurt or even killed. Giving up is the way to go here, you fools!”

No one could blame him for his cowardice. Everyone prioritized themselves above all else. Even the farmer probably wouldn’t have decided to fight if he didn’t have his family with him.

The last to speak was the mercenary. He turned toward the farmer and asked, “Hey, wanna hire a bodyguard? I’ll make it one silver.”

“Huh?!” everyone shouted in unison.

Mitsuha grinned. *What a man,* she thought.

“What?! Weren’t you going to use the right of extraterritoriality?” cried the young man.

“That’s a condition for mercs who aren’t hired, young’un,” the merc shot back.

Oh, man. Why are there so many great guys among mercs? You know what, I’ll help too.

“From falling in love to running your land, Mitsuha’s General Store will tell you how it’s done! Want me to get rid of the bandits? Just one silver, please.”

The mercenary was visibly surprised, and Mitsuha beamed at him.

Yeah, I just can’t resist a refined, middle-aged man.

The mercenary had a short sword as his primary weapon. He gave Mitsuha his spare dagger, and she began to feel like the old man wasn’t the commoner he’d seemed at first glance. She dug through one of her bags, took out a hunting knife, and handed it to the young merchant. The look on his face was delicious.

A lady isn’t proper if she’s not into knives! They add to our beauty!

Then Mitsuha took out her gun belt and hung it around her waist. It held the 93R, the revolver, and some spare magazines. The bullets in the 93R right now were hollow points. They were reserved for monsters and humans not wearing metal armor, and therefore fit the situation.

The revolver was loaded with armor-piercing bullets. The “armor” there referred to kevlar vests, not the plate mail abundant in this world, but it would surely work on whatever the bandits were sporting. As far as Mitsuha knew, bandits who wore metal armor were rare, since they preferred mobility over defense.

Once she was completely outfitted and battle-ready, Mitsuha earned a strange look from the other passengers.

As for the farmer, he wielded a wooden plank he’d pried off the vehicle. He was strong, but not used to battle, so this was clearly better than giving him something sharp.

The bandits had blocked the path ahead and behind. There were eight in

total. Three had the look of practiced mercenaries, while the other five appeared nervous and blatantly green. Mitsuha guessed they were ex-farmers who had been conscripted into the Imperial Army.

Four of the passengers left the carriage to fight, leaving the young merchant behind to protect the women from being taken hostage. The coach had no steps or running board, so anyone foolish enough to try to get in would have to pull themselves up with both hands, and even a civilian would have a good chance of fending them off.

Oh, and just so you know, the ones who paid the two silver were the farmer and the young lady. One each.

The first to speak was one of the three merc-looking bandits. “Leave yer valuables here and ya won’t get hurt. And take off your clothes. Ya can keep yer underwear on, though. As fer the women, leave ’em here, too. They don’t gotta take their clothes off… Not yet, anyway.” He grinned maliciously.

God, I hate this, Mitsuha thought, grinding her teeth. *This worm’s no merc, he’s a walking insult to Sven’s party, Wolf Fang, and this refined middle-aged guy next to me. Disgusting.*

The elderly man and the farmer didn’t want to kill anyone, and it was entirely possible they would be killed themselves. It was basically Mitsuha and the mercenary versus the eight bandits. Five of the bandits were obviously new to this, but then again, it wasn’t clear how strong the mercs on either side were.

Mitsuha stole a glance at the man beside her. *Our merc seems pretty tough, if you ask me. I have no idea if he really is, though.*

They were clearly outnumbered, and Mitsuha didn’t want to attack until the bandits made it obvious that they were prepared to kill. She knew it was naive,

but she had to consider all the possibilities.

"So, merc. Extraterritoriality, right? Go on, walk away."

The old merc didn't move an inch. "Me? I'm a hired guard," he replied in his deep voice.

In Mitsuha's mind, the "hired guard" bit was replaced by something else.

Bodyguard, bodyguard, bodyguard…

"Whazzat now?" One of the bandits pulled out his weapon.

All three experienced bandits had swords, while the remaining five were split between swords and spears, three-to-two. Just one of them drawing his sword was enough for Mitsuha's personal rules of engagement.

B-B-BANG!

The man who had drawn his sword was blown away.

"Huh…?"

One of their own had just fallen to the ground in an instant. Unable to process what had occurred, the bandits were frozen in place. No good mercenary could pass up such an obvious opening. And this mercenary was definitely good.

Drawing his short sword, he flew at the bandits and struck one down in a flash, then whirled around and felled another with a single thrust.

He's strong!

Within seconds, the enemy had lost two of their best fighters. The five still standing were panicking, but they didn't let go of their weapons.

You can have some good beginner's luck with spears, so I'll take out the spearmen first.

B-B-BANG! B-B-BANG!

The machine pistol barked out its three-round bursts.

By Mitsuha's standards, the "ex" in "ex-farmer" was very important. They had stooped far too low and were now actual bandits─murderers. Mitsuha was certain they had killed people already, and if left alive, they would surely kill again. For all she knew, those victims could be someone dear to her. She just couldn't let them go.

The mercenary made short work of the three remaining sword-wielders. All in all, it was a victory so flawless you could hardly call it a fight.

Back within the shaking stagecoach, the farmer told Mitsuha everything he knew about the Bozeses' county. He was doing his best to repay their savior with knowledge. The other passengers pitched in, and she ended up with a substantial amount of new information, including some that wasn't readily available.

Mitsuha also asked the merc, the elderly man, and the farmer not to tell anyone about her. They all agreed. The former two seemed accustomed to keeping secrets, and the farmer couldn't refuse someone who had put her life on the line for his family.

The others had stayed inside the coach, so they hadn't seen anything. They heard the gunshots, of course, but had no idea what the sounds were. The four fighters had also agreed to pretend they each had a part in defeating the bandits. Specifically, they agreed to say the mercenary took out five while the remaining three handled one each. Only the first part was true.

The stagecoach was now full of weapons and valuables taken from the bandits. The passengers planned to take them to the local lord, where they'd be checked, then returned to whoever brought them. The check was necessary to know, for example, whether or not the weapons were supplied to the bandits by

another country to let them interfere with local business. There was little doubt that the bandits were remnants of the empire, so they were bound to get the things back immediately.

Since Mitsuha wasn't going to the Bozeses' county, she gave her share of the weapons to the farmer. The man tried to refuse, but she convinced him by saying she wasn't going to the county's main town, and that a normal girl on her way to take up a post had no business having those sorts of things. The farmer said he wouldn't sell his share of the weapons, and would instead use them to become strong enough to protect his family. After the whole bandit affair, his wife and daughter trusted and respected him more than ever.

Before the attack, the man in his early twenties had been speaking with the young woman, but now she completely ignored him or merely glared. He was obviously depressed, but her scorn was rather well-deserved.

You could search everywhere on Earth and *this world, but you wouldn't find a single woman who'd smile at a man willing to hand her over to some bandits!*

Once they arrived at a particular crossroads, Mitsuha exited the coach. She would walk the rest of the way to her domain, which she tentatively called "Yamano County." The other passengers waved goodbye, with the exception of the young man, who sat curled up in the fetal position.

Now, you might be wondering why no one ended up figuring out who she was, but the answer to that is simple:

This was a world with no television or internet, so the spread of information was slow and unreliable. The more it was passed on, the worse it became, like some extreme game of telephone. Because of this, the only ones who knew what

Mitsuha actually looked like and the details of her battle against the empire were the people who were there to see it. Everyone else ended up being misinformed to varying extents.

Not only that, but most of the passengers weren't in the capital during the battle, and those who were had only heard her distorted voice through the speakers. Most of those who had seen her had merely caught glimpses of her in the distance.

As for the gunshots, the sounds heard around the capital were those of RPGs, heavy machine guns, and 20mm autocannons. Compared to these, the firing of a handgun was nothing. The "divine soldiers" had also used what they believed to be long wands of lightning, and Mitsuha's handguns didn't even come close to this description.

Perhaps the bandits, being ex-empire soldiers, realized what they were up against, but as the saying goes, "dead men tell no tales."

After eight days of travel on land and ten seconds on water, Mitsuha finally arrived at Yamano County.

Yeah, I crossed a river. What about it?

Upon seeing the county's capital peeking from between the trees, she felt certain of one thing. *I'm not calling this a "capital," that's for damn sure! It's not even a town; it's a village! Calling it a capital is too embarrassing! Ugh, "town" it is, I guess.*

Before entering, she decided to go back home. She had been away for over a week, so there had to be lots of email and regular mail piled up…and she desperately needed to use the bathroom and take a bath.

Mitsuha walked into the village. Since following the main road would lead to the sea, it was an actual dead-end settlement. Because of this, travelers were scarce, which was probably why she attracted so much attention.

Oh, it's because a little girl in a dress came here all by herself without any real luggage? All right, then.

Mitsuha was hungry, so she first went to dine at the local eatery—if that term applied to a place that only sold meals for locals, by locals. This visit doubled as an opportunity to gather information, which is why she'd skipped eating at home. She ordered whatever they had on offer and asked for the town's name. They simply called it "town."

No name? These really are my people. Okay, so it really wasn't a "village," then. Got it.

Because it was a seaside town, the meal she was given was primarily fish, but there was nothing else noteworthy about it. The eatery was in a small corner of a small town, and it wasn't anywhere near lunchtime, so Mitsuha was the only customer. While chatting, she asked for opinions about the previous lord in charge, and the lady who owned the eatery wasn't too talkative in that regard.

The fact that he was a disgraced noble had brought shame upon them all. There was no telling what kind of person the next lord would be, and it was unlikely that this poor embarrassment of an area would ever know a good ruler. The lady might have been willing to gossip and complain with someone close to her, but it wasn't something she would mention to a stranger. Mitsuha didn't press the issue, however, and merely asked for the location of the ex-lord's mansion before going on her way.

The mansion was on the outskirts of town. Since the town was small and its buildings were sparse, Mitsuha had no trouble finding it.

Yeah, I'm not calling this a "mansion," either. It'd be humiliating. "Residence" seems like the best option. Just "house" or "dwelling" would be kinda sad.

Still carrying all her possessions on her back, Mitsuha went to the front door and rapped on it loudly with her knuckles.

"Yes? Who iiis it?"

The door opened, and there stood a maid who looked no older than seventeen.

Though the previous lord and his family had lost their noble status, the servants weren't at fault. Unless they were personal retainers, one couldn't take servants from one's former holdings. Besides that, the next lord would be in need of servants as well. Most of them were also locals who had family in the area, so they couldn't just abandon them.

But even if they had been gathered from elsewhere, neither the lord nor the servants knew what happened in these scenarios. And so, besides the ones who left of their own accord, the servants stayed at the residence and served the next lord.

Of course, some servants would quit if they decided they didn't like the replacement, and the new lord could fire the servants he had problems with. Servants also increased their chances of being removed if they were caught speaking about how things were under the previous lord.

Anyway, most of the servants still remained, ready to welcome her. Of course, none were the previous lord's retainers or dependents.

All right, these are my servants… For now, anyway.

"Um, I'm Mitsuha," she said.

"Huh? Mitsuha?" The maid looked puzzled.

"Mitsuha von Yamano. Viscountess and new ruler of this county."

"Huh? Oh, I see. Wait, WHAT?!" The girl's reaction was to be expected. Regardless of whether the new lord was a girl who didn't look any older than twelve, it was highly unlikely the ruler would go to their new territory all alone.

"Please gather the servants. I'll greet them all."

"Um, yes! Right away!" The maid hurried off.

Once all the servants had been assembled, Mitsuha addressed them. "Hello, everyone. I am the new local lord, Mitsuha von Yamano. This territory is the same size as before, but it will now be ruled by a viscountess, rather than a baron."

The servants were shocked, and you could hardly blame them. Viscount was a direct upgrade from baron, and it meant a great deal. They could now expect better payment, treatment, and social status, as even the servants were regarded differently depending on what kind of noble they served. "Viscount's servant" was a powerful title, whether in finding work or searching for a spouse. It was like the difference between a table knife and a short sword.

They had been informed that the capital was sending a new noble to rule over them, but they were told nothing about the person in question. Things like rank, gender, age, and appearance had all been a mystery to them.

Of course, that had been entirely intentional. Withholding this information prevented the servants from making unfair assumptions about their soon-to-be ruler. They could draw their own conclusions once they saw him or her in

person.

Because of this, many servants were elated. They now worked for a viscountess─a gentle little girl, at that. If they played their cards right and sweet-talked her, they could make a wonderful life for themselves, and if they manipulated her… The possibilities were endless.

"So, there you have it! I hope we get along. I'm new to this 'ruling' business, so please help me out in any way you can. And like I mentioned before, I will hold interviews with all of you at a later date. Now, please return to your duties." Mitsuha finished her introduction, making sure to appear as gentle and courteous as possible.

Some were relieved that they had received a nice new ruler. Others chuckled as they underestimated her, and others still became gloomy as they lamented the future of this land. The impressions of the eighteen servants were hardly aligned.

Mitsuha ate her dinner alone, as servants couldn't eat alongside their ruler. Though they were in a seaside area, there was a lot of red meat on the table.

Probably the previous lord's tastes, Mitsuha thought.

Praising the food, she ate everything she was presented. It was standard for nobles to be given enough to leave leftovers, so she obviously overate this time.

After taking a bath, she locked herself in her new bedroom and jumped to her house on Earth, then jumped back, bringing along a small cardboard box she had prepared beforehand. Next, she unlocked the door and walked around her residence. She watched the servants work, cheering them on here and there, then returned to her bedroom. Kneeling in front of the cardboard box─which was

significantly emptier than before─she took out various security equipment and set it up around the door and windows. Once she was finished, she went to sleep.

Beep.

Mitsuha was woken up by an electronic noise. It was an alarm set to go off when something passed the security laser at her door. Grasping the Walther beneath her sheets, she looked over and saw the maid who had welcomed her at the door yesterday.

"Good morning. Are you already awake?" the maid asked.

"Morning! I slept so well in here. Is breakfast ready?" Mitsuha let go of the gun and smiled.

After breakfast, she took another stroll around the residence. Once back in her room, she placed a cloth over the door handle to cover the keyhole and took out a bunch of electronic devices. They were extremely small voice recorders she had purchased in Akihabara. They automatically began recording when they picked up sound, then stopped after a certain amount of silence. She had set them up all over the place last night.

"Let's hear what you all picked up, then."

She cracked a mischievous grin.

Mitsuha was a good-tempered, gentle ruler. She always smiled, looked out for her servants, and walked around the fishing, mountain, and farming villages in her area to greet the locals. Many assumed she was in poor health, however, as she often retired to her bedroom at midday.

Thinking they knew what kind of person Mitsuha was, some servants

resumed padding expenses or making secret deals with merchants. They'd refrained from such activities until they had gotten a sense of their new ruler, but now that that was done, they were pursuing them almost brazenly. There were also attendants who ran off during work hours after leaving their jobs to others, butlers who aggressively approached the village girls, maids who snuck goods out of the residence, and so on.

The head butler had noticed the danger and expressed his worries, but Mitsuha just continued smiling as if nothing was happening. Her diligent, faithful servant was at a loss. *If these ingrates are allowed to continue, our county will be in disarray. Something must be done.*

Days went by, and the misconduct showed no sign of stopping.

"It's time," said Mitsuha. *Time to crack down.*

"All right. The six of you are discharged due to conduct unbecoming of a servant," Mitsuha declared, eyeing the guilty parties.

It was so abrupt that the accused servants exploded with indignation.

"What is this foolishness? Why me?!"

"Is this some sort of joke? Viscountess or not, you cannot discharge someone without a legitimate reason!"

Mitsuha looked at them with an icy expression. "Foolishness? And *who* is the fool here?"

"Wh-What?"

"I'm asking, who's the fool here?!" The shouting from what they had thought to be a weak, soft ruler dampened their bravado.

"Hans," she said, turning to one man in particular. "I always praised your

cooking, didn't I?"

"Huh? Uh, yes…" Hans─the head chef─was bewildered.

"Yes, I always said your food was good, yet for some reason, the quality just kept getting worse. Shouldn't praise normally motivate you to do an even better job?"

The chef fell silent.

"Why didn't that happen? Do you know the reason?"

With every word she uttered, he grew paler.

"It's because you thought that a child like me wouldn't notice the drop in taste and so you just chose low-quality ingredients. They got cheaper and cheaper, but for some reason, our kitchen expenses stayed the same. Isn't that strange, Hans?"

By now, Hans was as white as a sheet.

Mitsuha then moved on to the man at his side. "Hey, Gunther, isn't there something wrong with the wheat numbers?"

"Pardon?"

"The amount of wheat we received in taxes from the villages and the amount we sold to the merchants is slightly different, isn't it? Someone's writing down the wrong numbers. And who would do that, huh? Did no one notice? Who's in charge of that, again?"

"Uh…"

"Now, Tilde, the day before yesterday, you pushed your own job onto the other maids and went somewhere, didn't you? You took a lot of our spices, too. Were you visiting that tailor again? The one with a wife and kids?"

The head chore maid half-collapsed into her chair.

“How about the rest? Want to hear what I have to say about you?” It was an intense question from the ruler they had thought was gentle, mild-mannered, and kind.

None of the remaining three knew how to respond.

“Do you know why I’m a viscountess? It’s not because I had a viscount father who died early. I got here by myself. I am the first, the only, Viscountess Yamano! *Don’t* underestimate me!”

Mitsuha’s glare choked the air out of the room.

“Again, you’re all discharged due to your misconduct. It’ll probably be hard for you to find work now. You have one hour to pack up and leave. If you’re still here after that time is up, I’ll consider you trespassers on my property, whereafter I will capture and execute you. Get out!”

Six bodies rushed out of the room. Mitsuha ignored them and spoke to the elderly butler at her side. “Sorry if I worried you, Anton. I won’t be inspecting documents at night anymore. I’ll sleep properly, so I won’t be going to bed at noon, either.”

She handed him some documents from her pocket. “These merchants take bribes. Stop all trade with them. And we have some common folk who interfere with others. Observe and deal with them accordingly.”

“My word… Lady Mitsuha…” Anton’s eyes were brimming with tears.

“Also, the new head chore maid is Kathe. May she make me proud.” Mitsuha held back a yawn. “Anton, you know what I said about not sleeping during the day? I lied! I’m gonna take a nap. Oh, and starting tomorrow, I’m gonna get serious about developing my land. We’ll all be busy from here on out. Good work today, everyone. Dismissed!”

With that, Mitsuha left the room.

The twelve servants left behind were just standing there, completely flabbergasted. They were surprised by her sudden change, sure, but there was something else they felt. Was it astonishment? Amusement? Thrill? Curiosity? Excitement?

That had to be it─pure excitement. They knew they were in for something interesting. Something fun was going to happen soon. At the very least, it was clear that tomorrow would be more enjoyable than today.

One of them noticed another servant grinning. “Lorena, what are you smiling about?”

“Hey, you’re doing it, too!”

The first servant hadn’t even realized it.

While Mitsuha had been playing the mild-mannered good girl, she’d had many opportunities to jump between worlds. She stole these chances whenever she could, whether it was locking herself in her room or while walking around her territory to gather information.

On one occasion, she announced that she was taking a brief excursion to learn more about her county. Leaving unaccompanied, she jumped to Japan to speak with some electrical equipment suppliers about modernizing her life in the Yamano County residence. This was her second time doing so, and she spoke with the same salesmen as before, so the whole ordeal went smoothly.

Then it was time to check her email and mailbox. *Let’s see… Oh, Micchan’s coming back from college for break. Nice! And the crazy dress lady’s asking if I need to doll up another cute girl. Nope, not yet. Maybe I should ask*

for a dress for Sabine? She'll be paid in gold coins, though. Then again, she'd probably like that even more than yen.

A short while later, while browsing the internet, she came across a piece of breaking news.

Huh? "Dragon Finally Discovered"? What kind of clickbait is this? Hold on, is that what I think it is?!

In a flash, Mitsuha jumped to the mercenary headquarters.

The members of Wolf Fang had been paid a few days after the invasion. Since both the king and the nobles had paid more than expected, their compensation ended up growing to 60,000 gold coins. Of course, Mitsuha had taken a cut, which pushed her closer to her goal. Her "deep pockets" were slowly filling up.

As Mitsuha soon discovered, the mercenaries had been so excited about their victory that they wanted to be known as "dragonslayers" and show off their prize to the world. They assured her they would keep her identity a secret at any cost, so she didn't mind whatever else they wanted to boast about. They could spin any number of details in their wild war story without including her.

At this point, the mercenaries were convinced she was a princess from the other world who had the magical power to travel between there and Earth. They believed she had come to their world to learn and absorb all the knowledge she could. Her ability to speak in any language must have been some sort of translation magic, ergo she could use magic, ergo she was from another world. They also assumed she was a few centuries older than she looked. While she might have been older than she appeared, they were a bit too far off.

Mitsuha thought they had bragged about the dragon only to other

mercenary groups, but it went far beyond that. According to the captain, they no longer had the remains, which had been taken to some university laboratory. That scholar who had shown interest in the horned rabbits had left them his contact information, and when the mercs had called him, he'd flown over immediately. Upon seeing the genuine dragon remains, he had been swept up in a flurry of excitement. He'd called his contacts all over the world, and the mercenary base was soon swarming with scientists.

Wolf Fang's mercenaries had an explanation planned out ahead of time. They explained that a princess from another world had summoned them, their weapons, and vehicles, and pitted them against a demon king's army. The mercenaries had won and returned home, bringing back a dragon on their truck. Even they believed in this story to a certain extent, so it was hard for others to doubt them.

While feeding their guests this story, they hid the fact that Mitsuha could go between worlds at will, and that she was a regular visitor. Instead, they insisted it had been a once-in-a-lifetime encounter. As for her name, they claimed it was "Princess Nanoha." Much like this character, Mitsuha was small, had a penchant for cannonfire, and tended to shoot first and ask questions later. Seems like one of the mercenaries must have an obsession with Japanese animation!

Normally, no one would believe such a cliché story, but the dragon corpse was proof enough. A certain fantasy novel publisher assumed it was an unofficial PR campaign for one of their movie adaptations and accused them of copyright infringement. Considering the dragon was very real, however, they didn't have a leg to stand on. Their intervention did make one wonder what would come of a movie adaptation of all this, however. And not only was it a

sensational story, but the analyses of the dragon scales and DNA could be a great boon.

Apparently, the two members who were on vacation during the invasion and therefore unable to participate had been devastated to the point of tears. The rest of the team pitied them so much that the payment, instead of being split among the participants, was deposited into the group's funds and shared among all members as bonus pay. This way, even those who hadn't participated got a piece of the pie, even if it was a bit smaller than that of those who had.

Of course, not all of the payment was given out. They left a couple million dollars in their treasury for weapons and maintenance, as well as potential support for those who might retire due to age, injury, or disease.

The two mercenaries who had missed the event didn't want money. They whined about how they wanted the "dragonslayer" title, to see the other world, and to serve the princess.

Too bad, thought Mitsuha once she was finally caught up. *Not my problem*…

One day, a few guests came knocking at Mitsuha's door. The head butler informed her there were three men. They didn't know her relation to the events at the capital and had simply come to meet the new noble. Mitsuha guessed they were either looking to get a higher position, or perhaps to bribe or threaten her. She considered merely turning them away, but upon hearing what they claimed to be—a scientist, a mercenary, and a merchant—she noted the variety and figured it was unlikely any of them would demand to become her chief vassal or financial officer.

They came all the way to this rural area, so I suppose it's only fair to meet with them. I'll size them up in the reception room. What? Why not a throne room? Don't have one. This ain't a royal palace. Also, a scientist? Here? Is the translator in my brain glitching out?

The welcome party in the reception room consisted of Mitsuha, Anton the butler, the three head maids, three normal maids, and three male servants standing near the walls. She had prepared so many people in case the guests hadn't come to talk and needed restraining, or something of that nature.

Of course, she'd equipped her gun belt for worst-case scenarios. The Walther she always had on her shoulder took too long to take out, after all. The table was large and there was lots of space between her and the guests' chairs, so she would have more than enough time to pull out her gun and shoot.

"This is Her Excellency Viscountess Yamano."

Led by a maid, the three guests stepped inside.

"Forgive the sudden visi—" The one at the front froze and fell silent right after he entered.

"Hey, what's wro—" began the second.

The third one didn't say a word and simply stood in place.

"Mitsuha!" the first two cried out.

"Huh? Well, if it isn't the mercenary and the merchant."

I should really remember their names.

"Why are *you* here?"

"I'm the viscountess here, Mitsuha von Yamano."

"You mean 'viscount's daughter,' right?"

“Nope.”

The three were at a loss for words.

“Then why were you riding in that coach?”

“I had no other option.”

“Why were you alone?”

“Because I had no vassals or subordinates.”

Unable to respond, they awkwardly shuffled in silence.

Mitsuha treated them to some tea and snacks, and they got down to business.

“So, what are you three doing here?” she asked.

“Well, first of all, we just happened to come here together because we took the same stagecoach. We’re all here on our own business,” stated the merchant. The other two nodded.

It made sense that they had visited the Bozeses’ County first. They had to spruce themselves up before coming here, and Mitsuha’s main town had no inns with bath services. Also, it made sense that someone who’d been on that carriage for over ten days had come here because they’d heard of the newly-appointed local lord. They certainly hadn’t looked like acquaintances when Mitsuha was traveling with them.

“I’ll hear you out separately, then,” said Mitsuha.

“Very well. Allow me to begin.” The first to put himself forward was the merchant. Mitsuha’s identity as Viscountess Yamano surprised him, but since she was someone he’d spoken with on his travels, he quickly settled into a rapport with her. “I am Petz. A merchant, as you know. I came here to talk to you about the circulation of goods in your new domain,” he began.

Y'know, I just called him "merchant" in the stagecoach, so this is my first time hearing his real name.

According to Petz, Mitsuha's predecessor had controlled all external trading, banned other counties' merchants from doing business, and prevented local money from flowing out of his land.

Upon hearing that the previous lord was being replaced, Petz had come with the hopes of opening up a new market. Yamano County was so remote that it was hard to make the trip here profitable, but since it was right next to the Bozeses' county, he could incorporate it into trade routes passing through there, making it worth the time and effort. Seeing as he was so young, he declared, he would like to mature alongside the young Yamano County.

Yep, we'll grow, all right. Anyway, I needed a merchant with ties to the capital, and Petz is clearly a trustworthy guy.

Huh? You're saying I'm a capital merchant, too? Hey, I need a guy who sells goods from this world. What's the use of me trading Earth stuff between here and the capital?

"Very well, Petz. You have my blessing. And if you can, please buy our county's goods and sell them in the capital. We have much more than dried and pickled fish, and I have plans to develop new products as well."

"Oh, that would be just splendid!"

"I'm new to this, so do you think you could visit me again in a few days? We'll discuss the details then. In the meantime, I'll talk to the servants and villagers to find out more."

"Very well. I will stay in the vill─I mean, the *town's* inn for the time being."

Yeah, I can totally understand calling it a village.

"Now, Mr. Mercenary, why are *you* here?"

"My name is Willem. A mercenary, of course. I grew tired of the city life and wanted to relax in the peaceful countryside, but fighting is all I'm good for. As I thought about what I could do, I heard about this place.

"This county is even more rural than the Bozeses' land, has barely any people, and lacks a single skilled vassal, knight, or mercenary. It's completely defenseless, so I thought you might hire me until you gather some vassals and a proper defense force. And don't worry, I'm not looking to become an official vassal myself."

Well, that's some honesty, Mitsuha thought. *He's right, though. If I wasn't here, this territory could be destroyed by just a single decently large bandit group. We need some defense ASAP, and for that, we need some key employees. A refined middle-aged man like Willem will fit the role just right. He's a real man among men.*

"Very well. Just as I told Petz, we'll revisit this in the near future."

"I'll look forward to it, milady."

"Lastly, we have you… The one who tried to hand me over to the bandits. I'm all ears."

"Wha─?!" The man was taken aback by her frankness.

Hey, man, that's just how I know you! I don't know your name or what you do, and it's weird to go just by looks and call you, like, "twenty-ish lookin' guy" or something.

Anton and the other servants silently shot daggers his way, making him sweat.

“My name’s Yorck,” he said. “I’m a scientist.”

What a name.

“Well, Yorck, I’m listening.”

“We scientists are seekers of truth. We study and research under Platidus, our teacher in the capital. Upon hearing of the advent of the new lord, he sent me here with the hopes that the young, malleable mind in charge would be open to learning new things and give support to our brand of knowledge. If you could take me on as a temporary guest lecturer, I could bestow upon you fragments of wisdom from Platidus’s school of thought.”

Now *this* piqued Mitsuha’s interest.

“What kind of wisdom?”

He thought for a moment, digging through his mental archives for the right piece to tantalize her. “Hmm… Well, what would you say if I told you that it’s not the sun that revolves around this world, but the other way around?”

Just look at that smug face.

“Oh, the heliocentric theory,” Mitsuha replied. “You’re about to tell me that the world is actually a sphere that spins around its own axis and that’s what gives us night and day. But that’s obvious, isn’t it?”

“How did you─?!”

“Anything else?”

“Then, err, how about the reason rainbows appear in the sky?”

“When light hits water droplets in the air, they’re split into different colors depending on the angle at which they enter, right? That’s why rainbows appear when there’s sunlight after a rain shower.”

“Ngh!” Yorck frantically mopped his brow.

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“Is that all?”

“Why you…! The mystery of the moon, then! Why does it slowly disappear, only to come back later?”

“Oh, it doesn’t actually disappear. It orbits this world, and it only *looks* like it vanishes and comes back because you just see the part of it that’s not blocked off, right? That’s enough, we’re wasting time here.”

“This can’t be!” Yorck grasped his head and fell to his knees.

“Honestly, even if there was something I could learn from you, I’d refuse because you’re the kind of person who’d abandon women and his other fellow passengers just to save his skin. As long as it came from you, I feel like it would defile me.”

Mitsuha called for a maid.

“You can go now. Take him outside.”

“I can tell you know a great deal. It boggles the mind, in fact.” Willem trembled with agitation. “But you…you’re a merciless devil!”

Petz nodded in agreement.

Hey, flattery will get you nowhere!

Mitsuha had her guests wait a few days because that was how much time her servants needed to properly clean up. Once they were done, she sprang into action.

First, she issued an order that no one could enter her room under any circumstances. She would use her office for normal paperwork and for giving orders to her servants and other subordinates, but she needed a more secure environment for handling more important documents and working on the PC

she'd brought from Earth.

Mitsuha also had to consider her own safety. She had chased out the six malignant servants, but there were now six people out there somewhere with a grudge against her. They could easily assist bandits or spies by leaking information.

And though the remaining servants hadn't betrayed her so far, they could always be bribed or threatened into doing so—for example, if their family members were taken hostage. Because of this, Mitsuha stored all her top-secret items in her bedroom, which was outfitted with maximum security. With that, she was able to sleep soundly at night.

Letting anyone in there is gonna be a big no-no. The maids insisted I let them clean my room, but they relented when I told them I can do it myself.

Next, it was time to make her habitat more enjoyable. For that, she wanted to bring her own bath, cookware, and water tanks with pumps from Japan. At present, cooking and drawing water were tasks handled by servants. As she reflected on this, something occurred to her.

Should I really bring that stuff over? If I do, the servants in charge of those things would lose their jobs, right? They're good, diligent people. I don't want my land's unemployment level to rise just because of my own selfishness.

In the end, Mitsuha had decided to only set up her security system, an AV system, a mini-fridge, an LED light stand, a fan, an electric heater, and a generator to power it all. She gave up completely on air conditioning.

Now it was time to restock her staff. With a third of them getting discharged, she needed replacements, as well as a defense force.

I'll probably have to hire people from my own county. After all, I can't just

pull them out of other counties, and the free people in the capital would take too long to get here. Hmm, let me chat with Anton about this.

Mitsuha wanted to start off by hiring a few people she could trust, then expand from there. After all, she was planning to have her hand in all kinds of operations. She even planned to search for the relevant specialists in the capital when the time came.

Mitsuha had chased out the head chef, but she was satisfied with the young sous chef they still had. Under the previous ruler, the head chef had taken care of the noble family's cuisine, while the sous chef handled prep and the servants' meals.

Honestly, I'm fine with just one chef. The servants don't eat at the same time, they take turns. Plus, I don't need any big, fancy meals with all kinds of options I'll probably never eat. He'll do just fine by himself.

Huh? Someone's at the door?

Oh, it's the merc and the merchant. No, of course I haven't forgotten them. Probably.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting for so long, I really am. 'Time is money' is especially true for mercenaries and merchants."

"Oh, no need to worry. Considering what the future holds, I didn't mind waiting a few days," said Petz.

"Same here," added Willem.

Well, that's good to know. Time to talk business.

Petz consulted Mitsuha about merchandise and taxes. Taxes differed depending on the county; key trading locations and sparsely populated regions

were radically different, so that much was obvious. Since her county had similar conditions to the Bozeses', Mitsuha decided to make her trading climate similar to theirs, except a bit better─twenty percent of the sales price seemed reasonable in her mind. A remote land like hers already meant an increase in travel expenses, and the local purchasing power was still pretty weak.

Afterward, she and Petz devised a trade route. It would begin at the capital, go to the Bozeses' county, then head to Yamano County before going back again. Petz would also stop at towns and villages along the way, and by the time he arrived at Mitsuha's territory, he would have sold the capital's best wares. The locals would have to choose from the remaining supply, or whatever he had purchased during his travels.

Petz would pass through the same towns on his way back and buy up goods to sell in the capital. This would minimize the distance he'd have to transport anything, reduce decay on perishable goods, and lower the damages in case of a bandit attack.

To lure the trader into bringing good merchandise to her territory, Mitsuha had to make it profitable, whether by allowing price flexibility or by lowering taxes. Taxes couldn't be too low, however, as that would obviously reduce the county's revenue.

I also have to keep a good balance with the other counties. Hmm…

"What if I taxed your goods at twenty percent, and you handed over any items you didn't want to take back with you so we could sell them on consignment? We'd handle that at our local store, so you wouldn't need to buy any space or hire workers. There'd be zero financial burden on you.

"Also, I'd send some crafts made in our secret workshop along with you.

They're bound to make a killing, trust me. We could also do those on consignment, if you'd like to handle the commission."

"Huh?"

Petz almost couldn't believe Mitsuha's lucrative offer. The low tax─lower than in the Bozeses' county─was one thing, but the idea that he could turn all his excess goods into cash without spending anything was even more enticing. After all, wares that didn't sell on his first visit to a town weren't likely to sell during his second. A merchant would prefer to have more space for the things he could sell at the capital. No point in carrying back things he bought there in the first place.

If someone was willing to buy his entire stock, he wouldn't have to worry about goods going unsold and could lay in a larger supply in the first place. This would allow him to leave the capital stocked up on enough of the fancier, better goods to supply both counties. And a free consignment agreement was like a free shop for him.

"Um, yes, please!" he replied immediately.

The "secret workshop" was a lie, of course; Mitsuha was merely planning to resell goods from discount stores on Earth─avoiding any currently for sale at Mitsuha's General Store. This would surely increase her profits and the value of coming to Yamano County, and hopefully entice more visitors.

However, all of this was only a temporary solution. She needed to act fast and make sure things could continue without her.

This is great and all, but ultimately it's a band-aid fix. I've gotta act fast and make sure things can continue here if I disappear or whatever. So, I've got to think of something that can be made in my county and sold for a profit.

First things first, though, I need to set up a store run directly by the local government: me.

Mitsuha and Petz had yet to discuss what goods he should bring and how frequently he should visit, but as these required the opinions of Anton, the servants, and the townsfolk, they decided to fine-tune it later.

Next up is the merc, Willem.

"Any idea what size defense force we'll need?" Mitsuha asked.

Willem cracked a strained grin. "Well, that depends on the enemy, so I can't tell you much. Geographically, though, this isn't a place that could be easily attacked by another country, so you could probably expect anything from small packs of monsters to large bandit gangs."

Yamano County had 676 people: 260 in the main town, 290 total in the three farming villages, 79 in the two mountain villages, and 47 in the fishing village. For a viscount's territory, the population was quite low.

I wanted this, though. It used to be a baron's land… But what should I do to protect it?

"Should I bring someone from outside or look among my own people?"

"Hmmm. This place is remote, so hiring someone from the capital would be expensive. Anyone who has family there wouldn't want to leave, either. And let's not forget about loyalty."

Outsiders might choose to desert when backed into a corner, or perhaps even decide to become bandits right after being hired. This area was so obscure that killing a lord's family and escaping with their wealth wouldn't be impossible. Worse yet, the murderers could very well end up not getting caught.

This was a world without photos, newspapers, or TV, and you couldn't hope for a proper investigation.

Guess I'm going homegrown! It'll help me look for potential hires, too. I'll just have to get Willem to train them. But how long would it take for a recruit to be somewhat useful?

Ah! I've got it!

"Willem, I'm hiring you as an army commander for Yamano County. I plan to have a maximum of five career soldiers, you and four other officers. Next, I'll round up thirty-six of my people and make them juggle work and military service. We'll periodically pick new groups until we've got around two hundred men at least somewhat capable in battle. Once all that's done, we'll pick out the ones with potential and make them into permanent soldiers."

"What?"

"You *are* capable of readying men's bodies, minds, and equipment for battle, yes?"

"Err, yes."

Mitsuha had decided to take the universal conscription approach. With so few people at her disposal, she couldn't support a large permanent army, but a small one wouldn't be enough for simple patrols, let alone a defensive battle. That was why she'd decided to enforce mandatory shifts of duty, during which many men would have to balance their professional and military obligations. She wanted to target able-bodied men who had no illness in their families and who could afford to step away from their work without much consequence. And once one group's time was up, they would switch.

This wouldn't damage her county's productivity too terribly, and since they

would come from their own homes, the burden on the domain would be minimal. She would at least make sure they were fed hearty lunches, however.

The thirty-six worker-soldiers from each shift would be split into four squads of nine each. Those nine would be split either into three groups of three, or four pairs with the ninth acting as squad leader. There would be four officers above them all and Willem at the very top.

Mitsuha would allow women to learn to wield a weapon, too. Even if they didn't end up in battle, she felt it would be good for them to have a means of self-defense.

Now, universal conscription might have seemed like the device of a warmongering nation, but even permanently neutral Switzerland, often considered to be a symbol of peace, had universal conscription. Swiss men were required by law to learn how to use weapons, nearly every household owned a gun, and the people were prepared to assemble at any time into an army of one hundred thousand. For a "symbol of peace," the country was actually quite militaristic. It took part in a military-industrial complex as well, exporting lots of lethal weapons.

You occasionally get weirdos saying Japan should become as neutral and peaceful as Switzerland, but since their neutrality's armed, it's basically like saying, "Screw with us and see what happens!" If Japan wanted to be like them, it'd have to enact forced conscription, allow the possession of firearms, and start growing a defense industry. If you ask me, things are pretty peaceful as is.

Mitsuha also realized that she had to create a census. One was absolutely necessary when it came to matters of conscription, taxation, and welfare. Keeping a population of less than seven hundred in check wouldn't be too hard,

however, especially not with the laptop she'd brought over. She planned to make print copies, too, just in case.

I also gotta return to the capital, check on the store, and take care of that one thing. Then I'll return to Japan and get cracking on that other thing. Oh man, am I busy! I was supposed to have it easy! Why's this happening?

Yeah, yeah. I know I pretty much asked for this.

Chapter 17
The Blog

Around 9:30 PM, two men sat in the night shift prep room of Otsuki General Hospital in Japan.

"What? You're looking over a case when the night shift's about to start? It's good to be studious and all, but you might get a patient at any moment, so you should find some time to rest. It's part of your job."

Shuhei Nishimura, head of the internal medicine department, lightly tapped the shoulder of Yuta Ishii, an intern intensely comparing a medical photograph and the contents of a textbook.

"Ah, Mr. Nishimura. Actually, someone I know is looking after a sick child, and they sent this photo my way."

Nishimura slapped the back of Yuta's head. "That's not the kind of joke you make in a hospital. It's in poor taste!"

"Huh?"

"There's no way that's real. You don't know this disease?" He gestured to the photo, which showed part of a small child's body. "We're in Japan. There's no way you'd find a patient in that state who's not being properly cared for."

Nishimura half-laughed as he spoke, but Yuta was completely serious.

"What disease *is* it, then?"

"Telling you won't teach you a thing."

"Please! I mean, look." Yuta pointed to a manga magazine in the bottom-left corner of the image. "This magazine is from yesterday."

“Come with me!” Nishimura’s expression changed as he grabbed the intern by the arm and pulled him into his office. “What’s going on here?! Explain!”

Normally, Nishimura’s menacing attitude would have terrified Yuta, but this time was different.

“It’s from a blog, okay? It was posted on a blog I like to read. The blogger wants to know about the symptoms, and they included a new magazine as proof that this is real.”

“Show me on this, then,” said Nishimura, handing Yuta one of his personal devices. “It’s completely detached from the hospital’s shared network. I only use it to keep records and email suppliers and researchers. It’s even got anti-virus. I don’t mind you using it, so go ahead!”

Yuta took it from him, opened a browser, and filled the search field with the usual keywords.

“So, about that disease…” Nishimura added, looking at the screen. “It’s anthrax.”

The blog finally loaded. It was titled **Help Me Out! Running Your Land as a Viscountess**.

What a tasteless title, thought Nishimura. *“Viscountess”? Really?*

“Where are the photos?” he asked.

Yuta clicked the flashing red **Emergencies** section of the blog’s **Consultation Corner** and opened up the page. It contained a photo of a child’s skin, flushed with a wide, acne-like rash and marred by a black scab. The description read, “Other symptoms: high temperature, coughing, trouble breathing,” and the newest update was just two hours ago.

Nishimura’s mood darkened. *Damn it! If this is a joke, someone’s getting*

punched!

"Can we contact the blogger?"

"Yes, provided they're in front of a PC and either waiting for new emails or using an alert software. You don't get replies if you don't give them your own email address. Personally, I only comment on the blog. I haven't given out my email yet, since I didn't want my info to get leaked or something."

"Do it. Use this address. Hurry! I'll write the message."

The reply came in no time.

EVERYTHING WRITTEN HERE IS TRUE. I'LL COME RIGHT AWAY, SO PLEASE TELL ME WHERE YOU ARE. AND HAVE THE MEDICINE READY.

– THE VISCOUNTESS

"'Right away'? We don't even know what prefecture this person's from."

Grumbling, Nishimura typed in his address and the name of the hospital.

Another instant reply.

I HAVE YOUR LOCATION. I WILL BE AT THE FRONT DESK OF THE ER IN FIVE MINUTES. PLEASE TELL ME HOW TO ADMINISTER THE MEDICINE.

"What? Five minutes?! How is that even—"

I'm being fooled, aren't I?! But if I'm not…

"Crap, crap, crap! Ishii, get some penicillin and tetracycline! Right now!"

This has to be a lie. Someone's just messing with me. I know that. But if another child is in danger…

"What are you waiting for? Go!"

Yuta ran off as fast as he could—much faster than you should ever run inside a hospital.

Seven minutes later, he and Nishimura arrived at the ER, panting.

A girl stood waiting for them.

“I am Viscountess Mitsuha von Yamano,” she said.

If she could get here that fast, then the patient had to be close by, too. Is this a miracle or a coincidence?! Nishimura thought.

However, when he asked the girl to take him to the child, she stubbornly shook her head.

“Don’t be absurd! The patient’s life is in danger! It’s a race against time! And I can’t give medicine to a layman without seeing the patient. Unauthorized injections are against the law!”

“Don’t worry about that. This is beyond Japanese law.”

“What?”

The girl refused to yield, insisting he tell her the amount of medicine to use and how to administer it. She clearly had no relevant knowledge.

Can’t expect much from a middle schooler.

After a few minutes of arguing, the girl claiming to be “Mitsuha” noticed tears in Nishimura’s eyes. She took a deep breath, righting herself.

“Can you keep a secret?”

“I can.”

“And you swear on…?”

“Myself?”

“Okay. Let’s go together.”

A moment later, the three of them vanished, leaving only a quiet *whoosh* as air filled the space they left behind.

“Where are we?” Nishimura asked.

I was just in the hospital, wasn’t I? Did someone bring me here while I was unconscious? But I’m still standing, and Ishii and the girl are with me.

“This way,” said the girl.

Nishimura stopped thinking. This was the time for doing. He grasped the medical bag in his hand.

They followed her as she led them to a shabby-looking house. Inside, there was a worn bed and a little girl sleeping within it. There was also a woman sitting on a nearby chair, her top half resting on the girl’s bed. Nishimura assumed she was the girl’s mother, exhausted from looking after her child.

“Ishii, let’s go!”

I’ll save her. I won’t let this one die.

Some part of him still believed that the prior events had all been a dream. Nishimura moved the cursor on his computer and clicked.

Help Me Out! Running Your Land as a Viscountess

Click.

There were no flashing sections.

Disease Help

Click.

MY BODY IS HEAVY AND I RUN OUT OF BREATH QUICKLY.

– BORIS THE MEAT VENDOR

Nishimura scoffed. *This guy again? I’ll bite.*

EAT LESS. MOVE MORE. RUN.

– MCCOY

He's way too fat. I thought it was a disease at first, but the guy weighs almost three hundred pounds, goddamn it. Says he eats orc meat, too. That's practically cannibalism.

Nishimura went back two pages and saw the topic he'd clicked on dozens of times by now.

Click.

Gratitude Corner

SHE'S SLOWLY RECOVERING. THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

The post contained a photo of a little girl.

I'll just go back to work. Ah. But first, one quick comment on the "I Caught Something Straight Out of the Cambrian Period" post. The cooking method I thought of last night will be perfect for it, I'm sure!

Mitsuha had set up a blog. It was called **Help Me Out! Running Your Land as a Viscountess**.

Like the title says, it's a blog I use to get help from all the nerds—I mean, people who are knowledgeable about land management and who'd never get to use their knowledge otherwise.

No matter how much Mitsuha knew, there was a limit to how much an eighteen-year-old like herself could do. She could use the internet, of course, but in her opinion, relying on text-based information of questionable validity was too risky, and no amount of mere knowledge could replace actual experience.

And though you could search the internet endlessly, it didn't mean much if you hadn't the faintest idea of what to look for. How would you search for something you didn't know the name of, or didn't even know existed? This line

of thinking had led her to create the blog. It was a site where visitors would help a new viscountess in another world run her land.

Nerds─I mean, smart guys will definitely wanna flaunt their stuff and give just the right advice. I'll use their words as a starting point, confirm their validity myself, and put it all to use in the other world. It's perfect!

Naturally, everyone thought it was just an act─a joke blog just for the heck of it─so you wouldn't find anyone who believed it was real. However, since many people took fantasy settings and simulation games very seriously, you could expect some really productive answers. Playfulness brought sincerity.

You can't have any real fun in video games if you just take it easy!

Recently, Mitsuha had been thinking of bringing some of the more productive blog regulars to her territory. Four of them were particularly smart, sincere, and friendly. She hadn't leaked a single piece of personal information, and even if they went on to say that they had been in another world, no one would believe them. It was absurd to begin with, and the existence of the "joke" blog made it even less believable.

The four also weren't the kind of people who would risk being branded insane or untrustworthy. They seemed like the sort who would keep her secrets if she simply asked them to. Even if they weren't, Mitsuha just had to forbid them from taking photos or objects with them as proof, then ban them from the blog.

Wondering why I'd need to show them the other world? Because I'm starting to want people who'll help me out on a deeper level. I need something beyond the online act─help that'll take actual time and effort. I'll think of rewards for them, too. Maybe I'll do it on the next three-day weekend.

TOO BAD, THAT'S JUST FOOL'S GOLD! NO JACKPOT FOR YOU! MAYBE YOU'LL WIN NEXT WEEK IF THERE'S A ROLLOVER!

A man left that disappointing comment in the **Mining Help** section, on a post entitled "I Found Something That Looks Like Gold!"

Leave mining and forestry to me! he thought.

A while ago, he had discovered this strange blog, **Help Me Out! Running Your Land as a Viscountess**. The site description simply read: "I suddenly became a viscountess and now have to manage a territory. Please help me out!" To this man, it seemed to be an imaginative teenage girl's fictional diary about the complexities of ruling her domain. It covered such subjects as rice agriculture, the fishing industry, and mining of precious metals.

This man found it well thought out and strangely realistic. Many netizens were having a blast with it. If experts provided some valuable advice, the blogger's result reports would read as ridiculously authentic, impressing those who had contributed. The rookie mistakes, for instance, would be so on-point that the commenters would feel as though the viscountess had followed their instructions. The photos that came with the posts were quite well done, too, and everyone praised the CGI artist behind them. At this point, everyone was commenting as if the county was a real place. There were even emergency events like "Help This Sick Girl!" and "Help! Pests on the Rice!"

One day, the man─a regular poster─received an invitation.

"Thank you very much for helping me cheat my way into being a great ruler. We have a three-day weekend in two weeks, and I would like to invite you and three of my other reliable advisors for a small IRL meet-up in my county. I hope that seeing it with your own eyes will help you continue to advise me in the

future. We will be there for all three days of the weekend. All you should bring are personal hygiene products and spare undergarments. I will prepare everything else. However, for the clothing, I would like to know your preferred sizes.

Starts: Saturday, 1:00 PM

Ends: Monday, 1:00 PM."

What the hell?! Damn right I'm going! I have no idea where this "county" is, but it's a free three-day trip, so why pass that up? Will there be hot springs? Does this blog belong to some rich old retiree doing some farming in a depopulated village? That's the feeling "my county" gives me, anyway. Also, I'll get to meet three other regs! That alone makes it worth the trip.

He assumed someone who could cover all the expenses of a three-day trip for five people would have to be rich. The CGI work alone had convinced him that some good money was involved, and he found it hard to imagine the person would waste so much money on a boring excursion. In his mind, there was no way going to the meet-up could be a waste of time.

Is it an old lady? Or a retired middle-aged man with too much time and money to spend? What kind of person is this "viscountess"?

By 12:55 PM on Saturday, four people had gathered at a rooftop playground above a department store. The group included "McCoy," a middle-aged man and regular of the **Disease Help** part of the blog; "Mountain King," a twenty-six-year-old man and **Mining Help** regular; "Dry Fish," a twenty-seven-year-old woman and **Maritime Help** devotee; and "Greenpeas," a twenty-three-year-old woman and frequent contributor to **Farming Help**.

They had quickly come to the conclusion that all four of them were fellow participants. Some assumed that one among them was the viscountess, but it turned out not to be the case.

A few minutes later, just ten seconds before the clock struck one…

“Thank you all for coming. I am Viscountess Mitsuha von Yamano.”

“CUTE GIRL ALERT!” someone cried. Everyone besides McCoy, AKA Dr. Shuhei Nishimura, was already swooning over Mitsuha.

“I’ve called you here because this place is almost always empty, and the large equipment can hide us well,” said Mitsuha before beckoning them closer.

McCoy had a sense of what was about to happen, but the other three were clueless and followed her instructions with a little hesitation. They were soon completely hidden, and then a gentle breeze was all that was left where they had been standing a moment before.

“Welcome to Yamano County!” exclaimed Mitsuha upon their arrival in the other world.

“WHAAAT?!” The three besides McCoy were initially stupefied, but once they had calmed down, they began firing off questions.

“Um, are the fields I told you to make actually here? Like in the reports? Y’know, those pics with the CGI?!” asked Greenpeas.

“There was no CGI. I took the photos with a standard digital camera. But yes, the fields are on the plains near the mountainside,” Mitsuha replied.

“The ship, then!” cried Dry Fish. “Where’s the mini all-purpose fishing ship?!”

“It’s still being tested, but it’s in the temporary shipyard in the fishing village. We’re a bit at the end of our rope with it.”

“What’s the problem?! Where’s the ship?! WHERE?!”

The women, giddy with excitement, aggressively approached Mitsuha.

“Hahaha.” Mountain King, whose real name was Tomoya Aoki, chuckled in self-derision. “I’d help with your mine, but doesn’t seem like there is one. And logging is too hard without heavy machinery.”

McCoy─Shuhei Nishimura─patted the dejected man’s shoulder.

Suddenly, a young girl nearby ran away from her mother and up to McCoy, embracing his leg.

“Uhm, hello?”

Mitsuha smiled. “This is Margaret. She’s the one you saved, Dr. McCoy.”

The girl’s mother caught up, and bowed to him over and over.

“Aah… Aaahhhh!”

He tilted his head up for a moment, but it didn’t stop the waterworks.

“WAAAHHHH!” He crouched and wrapped his arms around the little girl.

My daughter, he thought, sobbing uncontrollably. *I couldn’t save her, but this girl, I…*

“Man, am I the only one who’s got nothing?” muttered Mountain King.

“Mountain King, please head to the mountains. Inspect them, and examine the trees,” said Mitsuha.

“Huh?”

“I’d also like to know if we can build a house for charcoal production and a Japanese-style furnace. Y’know, a *tatara*.”

“You want to do *what*?”

“I’m interested in steel made of iron sand, too.”

“You serious?!”

Mitsuha wanted to be considerate of these visitors from afar, so she planned to have everyone arrive and split up for work on the same afternoon. With everyone preoccupied with their tasks, evening would come quickly.

Greenpeas went around the fields, checking for problems. Dry Fish railed at the shipwrights building her new ship while Mitsuha acted as an interpreter. She also checked on the town's methods of processing seafood and inspected shellfish and seaweed. McCoy and Mitsuha went to Boris─the 260-pound man─so the doctor could speak with him directly. Mountain King went into the mountains.

By the time the group returned to Mitsuha's residence, it was completely dark. They bathed, changed into the clothes they were provided, and started to make a night of it. Everyone tried to stop Mitsuha from drinking, but she insisted that adulthood here started at fifteen, so they had no choice but to back down.

She probably drinks on the regular, anyway, they thought.

Seeing the county with their own eyes had lit a fire inside the participants. They chatted and argued about what they'd discovered, had lots of laughs, and quickly became drunk─an obvious outcome of the alcohol and good atmosphere.

McCoy, however, drank slowly and spoke little. He seemed to be lost in thought. Mitsuha understood this, but she didn't want to miss an opportunity to consult a doctor about something that had been bothering her.

"Doc. Can I ask you something?" she asked, sitting beside him.

"Of course. What is it?"

"Umm, if someone could slowly but surely heal from any wound and even regrow lost body parts, what would that mean for the rest of their body?" She

had been thinking about this a great deal lately.

McCoy could still think through his boozy haze, but his mind was a bit jumbled. “Hmmm. Everything totally heals? Even lost parts? Does that mean that even bones and nerve cells come back? There’s no oxygen decay, faults in DNA transcription, or telomere shortening? That’s crazy talk, haha. But I guess they’d never get older. Or maybe they’d even regrow a new head once it came off. Hahaha.”

Upon hearing his theory, Mitsuha collapsed.

“That’s why a child like you shouldn’t drink,” McCoy hiccuped, shaking his head.

Mitsuha was in a state of mild alcohol-induced delirium. “Hrmmm. That means I’m gonna need a lot more than eighty thousand for my retirement.”

Huh? Is that really the most shocking thing about this? And is it really “retirement” if you never get old?

A short time ago, Mitsuha had begun to think that she wouldn’t grow any more. Even at the ripe old age of eighteen, she’d hoped to grow a bit─to gain a few inches on her breasts, boobs, and bosom, for example. There wasn’t a single sign of growth, however, hence her question to McCoy about regeneration. The answer left little room for hope.

No! That’s just conjecture! I’ll still grow! There’s no need to panic!

The truth is, she had been prepared for this eventuality ever since she stopped growing at seventeen. Ultimately, she was fine with staying young forever. It wasn’t as though she was immortal; losing her head would probably kill her, as would a pierced heart, or a jump into a blast furnace.

Oh well, no point in thinking too hard about it. I’ll have fun until I’m bored

of life. Also, there might come a time when I meet that "thing" again.

In the morning, everyone awoke with severe headaches. Mitsuha, on the other hand, was perfectly fine.

Does my auto-heal work on hangovers? Diseases, too, maybe?

They planned to go to the capital in the afternoon. Until then, everyone made whatever preparations they deemed necessary. Around 1:00 PM they changed into clothes that would allow them to blend in with the capital's crowd, then jumped to Mitsuha's General Store. Mitsuha had recently resumed business, but with extremely limited hours.

She had a particular place in mind for lunch: the Paradise diner.

Upon hearing that people from Mitsuha's homeland had come to visit, Anel, Aleena, Bernd, and even Marcel wanted to try their hand and see what the visitors would think of their Yamano Cuisine.

"We're in a whole different world, but we're going to eat normal Earth food?" whined her online advisors, but Mitsuha paid them no mind. She also planned to have them come to Paradise for dinner.

Anyway, what the hell's with all these people? Sabine, the whole Bozes family, the king, the chancellor, and especially you, first princess! Well, whatever. Guess I've gotta introduce them.

"Mitsuha, you're a viscountess, right?" Greenpeas asked. "Why is the count's family treating you like one of them? Why are you talking to a princess so casually? And…the king? Really?"

"Please, don't ask." Mitsuha just didn't know how to answer.

The Yamano Cuisine received passing marks from the travelers, and the

Paradise crew cried tears of joy.

Next, it was time for a tour around the capital. They would go sightseeing first and foremost, but Mitsuha told them to give her a shout if they noticed any lucrative business opportunities.

"Hey, why is everyone watching you with sparkling eyes, waving at you, and shouting? What are they saying?" asked one of the members.

"Again, just…don't ask."

There wasn't really much in the capital worth seeing. The royal palace was the highlight, but it wasn't as though the guards would allow them inside. Besides that, there were European-style cobblestone roads and old brick buildings, both of which were similar enough to what they'd seen in photos or on TV. At the very least, the outer wall was somewhat impressive. As Mitsuha considered how to improve her tour, she heard someone say, "Very well, I shall show you around our palace."

Goddamn it, royals!

At dinnertime, they were served meals from the kingdom's cuisine. Despite that, there wasn't anything terribly interesting.

If this were a manga, you'd have a dragon steak or something. Funnily enough, you're more likely to have one back on Earth right now. They probably froze the damn thing.

Later, after everyone had gotten drunk once again, McCoy approached Mitsuha. He looked really serious.

"Viscountess… Would it be possible for me to live here?"

Oh, so that's what's on his mind.

"Yeah, it's not impossible, but what if I die or lose my world-jumping

power? What if you're left here all alone? You're a doctor, sure, but what can you do without medical equipment or medicine? You'd have to learn the language, too, and even if you did that, there aren't any words for more advanced concepts. Imagine yourself explaining CT scans to a medieval person using only words they can understand."

McCoy once again descended into his own thoughts and walked away.

I feel like I just bullied him a bit. It's unlikely that I'd die before him, and I don't think I'll lose my world-jump. But that's not impossible, and I don't want anyone planning their life around me and my power. Even I'm preparing a safety measure on the off chance that I do lose it: my plan to save eighty thousand gold coins for my retirement.

With no sobriety in their steps, they reconvened at Mitsuha's General Store before jumping to her Yamano County residence. There was no point in them staying at an inn, and the third floor of the store was Mitsuha's private space.

While passing through, everyone caught a glimpse of Mitsuha's prices.

"Holy crap, that's expensive!"

"These prices are criminal!"

"Insanity."

"This is a store straight from hell."

Augh! Shut up, you guys!

The next day, everyone slept in. The only item on their agenda was to return home, after all. The clothes her guests had been wearing during their arrival had been cleaned while they were at the capital. After waking, they changed back into their normal clothes, had a late brunch, and did some final inspections. They

looked at the ship, then checked the fields.

Too bad! That's not real gold, but fool's gold!

McCoy received another hug from the little girl.

Mitsuha returned the four of them to the playground on Monday at 1:00 PM sharp. Their otherworldly weekend was over, and it was now time for them to return to their everyday lives.

Chapter 18
Gathering Personnel

"So, how would you like to work for me?" Mitsuha asked.

The four mercenaries opposite her froze. All five of them were sitting at a table in Paradise.

"Err, you mean you want to make us your army's, uhh…"

"Founding members and officers, yes. You would answer directly to a commander, and lead thirty-six soldiers. Your initial salary would be five gold."

"Well? What d'you need us to do?"

"I can't believe this!"

"Five gold?! That's more than twice what we'd get in a busy month before getting the trailer!"

"Even now that we have it, we can hardly hope for more than four gold. It doesn't seem like there's any way to get more. When you consider that we might get hurt or sick, and that we'll get older, a stable source of income sounds very attractive."

Wow, my offer's so good, it even got Ilse to talk!

"Five gold per month would be enough for all of us to live comfortably."

"Huh? Oh, I meant five gold for each of you."

"EACH?!"

Now that I think about it, isn't that about what officials in the Japanese Self-Defense Forces make? Well, whatever. I got them to work for me in one go, so that's good.

The mercenaries had gotten their start in a small rural village, so they didn't mind working somewhere similar. They dreamed of saving enough money to open up a shop in the capital, which seemed like a pretty tangible goal, especially with the raises they might get in the future.

"So, wanna work for me?"

"Work for you?!"

This time, Mitsuha was in Colette's house.

I mean, I can't let her talents get buried in this backwater village, right?!

"Mitsuha, you became a viscountess?"

"Yeah. The king himself just went and made me one."

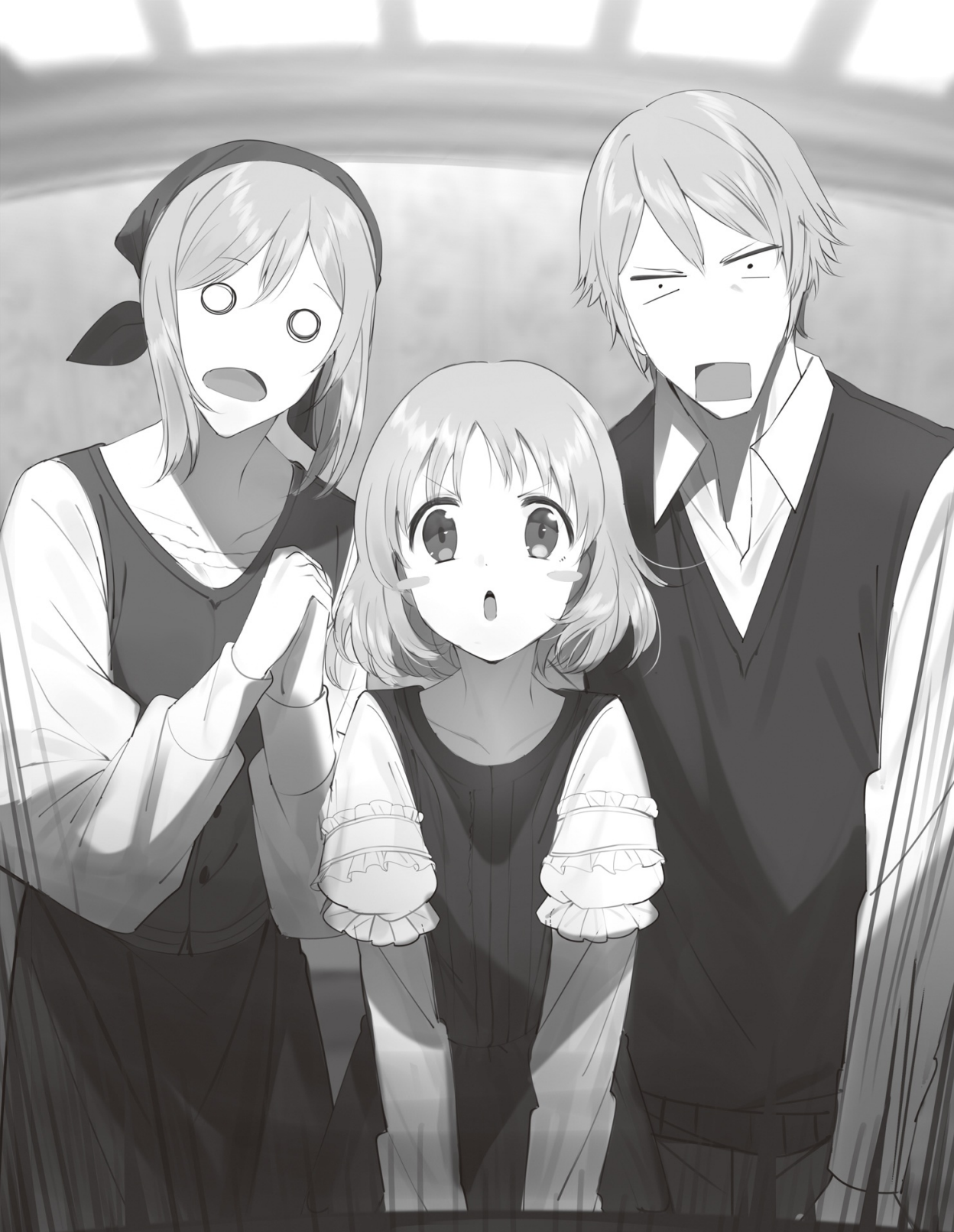
Tobias and Erene shivered.

"But Mitsuha, Colette is still a child. If you take her away, we might never see her again!"

"Right, I forgot to mention that my county is right next to this one! From here, it's even closer than this county's capital."

"Oh, you don't say…"

A village girl getting to work for a noble was a real-life rags-to-riches story. That night, the village threw a lavish party to celebrate Colette rapidly rising in the world. Mitsuha was also ascending into the local pantheon as a goddess of earth-shattering changes. During this extremely unusual event, simple villagers partied alongside the lord of a neighboring county.



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It should also be mentioned that the villagers had heard of the battle at the capital, but they only knew that the star of the show was someone called the "Lightning Archpriestess." They hadn't the faintest idea that the Archpriestess had gone on to become a noble─a viscountess, at that─or that her land was right next to theirs. The people of Yamano County were just as clueless, despite serving the Archpriestess herself.

"Hey, wanna take me as a servant, too?" asked one of the villagers.

"Ahaha, well…"

"To think Colette's gonna serve a noble," marveled another. "Life sure is full of surprises!"

"Huh? Oh, I'm not hiring her as a servant. I'm thinking of teaching her all sorts of things so she can become my vassal."

"Your WHAT?!"

After leaving Colette's village, Mitsuha gathered people in the capital. She didn't mention her name, however; she merely said there was a demand for tradesmen in a rural county. She needed skilled blacksmiths, carpenters, shipwrights who could build at least small fishing ships, healthcare personnel, and so on.

She even went to Yorck the scientist's teacher, Platidus. Pushing Yorck's general aura of failure aside, she noted that his teacher seemed insightful and had an agreeable stance on matters of science. Platidus turned out to have keen senses when it came to inference; by now, he had already concluded that the Archpriestess and Viscountess Yamano were one and the same. He went out of his way to speak with her personally. His people were wary of her, likely

because of whatever Yorck may have told them.

"That's why the moisture levels in the air change a lot depending on temperature."

"I see."

"As you go higher, air pressure decreases and so does temperature. That causes this to happen…"

"What about when conditions are…"

"Oh, then it goes like this, and…"

"Mhm, mhm."

Mitsuha and Platidus hit it off within minutes. She was impressed with how much the scientists of this world could observe and discern without any advanced equipment. She even donated ten gold coins to aid their research, telling them to contact her if they planned to use their findings to develop something practical.

As word spread of Mitsuha seeking new hires, the number of self-aggrandizing jackasses and scheming swindlers who aimed to become head vassal or treasurer increased. She dismissed the former by asking for recommendation letters from the king, and chased away the latter after testing their math skills.

Sigh. They couldn't solve a single one.

Luckily for her, there were no such offenders among those who came in for technical positions, and she even held a few interviews. However, each came with their own problems. Some were blatantly unskilled, others didn't take the interview seriously because the interviewer was a little girl, and others still were aware of who she was and couldn't control their giddiness. In the end, she didn't

find a single person who was fit for the job.

Well, if you think about it, experts who are both skilled and likable wouldn't be looking for a job in the first place. Guess I'll try my luck in my own land. Oh, and I should open up the store and sell some shampoo.

A few days after she returned from the capital, her butler approached her with a complicated expression.

"Lady Mitsuha, you have a guest."

"Who is it?"

"Erm, it is August, the first son of the previous lord."

Oh, jeez. That sounds like a headache and a half. I can't just send him away without meeting him, though.

"Take him to the reception room."

Once they had assembled, her unwanted guest introduced himself.

"A pleasure to meet you. I am August von Tomsen, Baron Tomsen's firstborn."

"Huh?"

He can't be serious, she thought.

"And what brings you here?"

Mitsuha looked thoroughly unimpressed, catching the composed August a bit off guard.

"Well, you see, I caught word that our land had been inherited by a young lady, so I made my way here with the intent of showing you the ropes. It must be difficult without vassals, after all."

Oh, I get it. He wants to become a vassal, then marry into the family to

become a noble again—a viscount, at that—and bring his family back to their former glory.

"I mean, I don't really need your help. I get more than enough from my servants."

"Erm, pardon me, but you must be mistaken. There are some who have proved quite useless, no? Surely you need to learn how to use the trustworthy ones, like Gunther, to control them properly."

"Huh? You trusted that snake? See, this is why your family was so hopeless. That guy was so blatantly corrupt, it's not even funny. I fired him with the five other undesirables a long time ago."

"You…what?" August was at a loss for words.

"Also, the Tomsen family lost their rank. You're just commoners now. Why are you calling yourself a baron's son and putting 'von' in your name? Falsely claiming to be a noble is a crime, isn't it?"

"Oh, I merely said that to help you understand my role as the previous—"

"Silence!" Mitsuha cried. "Willem! Arrest this treasonous faker! He's a criminal who has willfully wronged His Majesty the King and all the nobles of this country!"

August tried to fight back, but a pampered noble boy like him stood no chance against a seasoned mercenary. He was quickly captured and tied up.

"Let go of me! Who do you think I am?! Anton! Do something!"

The butler replied to him with a tone as cold as ice. "You must be confused. You are but a commoner named 'August.' I am a loyal servant of Her Excellency the Viscountess Mitsuha von Yamano."

"Huh?" August's eyes darted around the room. What he saw were the

people who used to serve his family, looking down at him with no expression at best, and outright disdain at worst.

His body went limp, and the servants dragged him out.

"Hmm, I don't have any soldiers yet," murmured Mitsuha. "What should I do with him? Oh, I know. Anton, send a messenger to the Bozeses. Tell them we have a treasonous commoner on our hands, and need soldiers to escort him to the capital."

"It shall be done. But…"

"But what?"

"Would the count really do something like that without compensation?"

Oh, he still doesn't know.

"No need to worry. He and I are close acquaintances. Just send a messenger."

"Certainly. I apologize for my impertinence."

The messenger returned two days later, reporting that the escorting soldiers would be here the following day. The count had also offered to send some of his people to act as her bodyguards to prevent future unwanted visitors, but she politely refused.

"Lady Mitsuha, you have a guest." Anton looked exhausted.

I have a bad feeling about this.

"Who is it?"

"He claims to be the previous lord's second son, Burckhardt von Tomsen."

My head hurts.

“Willem, let’s skip the formalities. Just go tie him up.”

The mercenary flashed a smile. “Well, at least we’ll get to send both of them off at once.”

In that moment, it occurred to her to ask one particular question.

“Hey, Anton, how many children does the previous lord have?”

“Three sons and two daughters, milady.”

You’ve gotta be kidding me!

At last, Sven’s group arrived. Mitsuha had assumed that they would have sold their bike trailer by now, but they had actually dragged it along with them the whole way. All things considered, however, this feat wasn’t nearly as impressive as Count Bozeses’ soldiers traveling to the capital and back in full battle gear.

Mitsuha began by introducing them to Willem, then gave them the roster of the first thirty-six recruits.

You guys can handle the rest! Good luck!

She didn’t really believe that a bit of training would be enough for the villagers to win against bandits. Her makeshift army of two hundred might be able to defeat a few dozen thugs, but it would be a Pyrrhic victory resulting in numerous casualties, with the potential to destroy the morale and economy of her entire county. While arming them with guns could prevent this outcome, ammo and maintenance would depend solely on Mitsuha, and the guns would soon become useless if she was no longer present.

Mitsuha decided to teach a select few how to handle SMGs and change their magazines. They would only use the guns as learning tools; she would withhold them otherwise unless they became necessary. She already had an

emergency arsenal inside Wolf Fang's base, so she would simply have to transport it. Mitsuha even considered hiring Wolf Fang again if circumstances called for it. She decided to consult the captain about such possibilities in the future.

Crossbows were also an option. Mitsuha wondered whether it would be possible to make simple ones in this world.

Man, I want a skilled blacksmith. I need farming implements, ship fittings, and tools to be made in-house. That'll definitely help us develop. I could probably get iron by bringing it from Japan. I don't need all that much, and I don't wanna harm the environment. As usual, I'll go with quality over quantity. I'll definitely want that Japanese steel that's made of iron sand. I'm also gonna need a tatara *furnace and lots of wood, right? Hmm, what about titanium? Nah, you probably can't work with it in this world.*

Soon, Colette arrived in Yamano County. To be specific, Mitsuha herself had been her escort. The girl could have easily been attacked by wolves or bandits, so Mitsuha couldn't allow her to make the journey all by herself. Instead, she had taken Willem along with her to Colette's village to pick her up.

As for Sven's group, they were busy training the villagers.

"Wow, so you really are a viscountess!" Colette chirped, eyes shining.

What the hell, Colette, you didn't believe me?!

Their county now had guards that doubled as trainers, plenty of recruits, and an innocent smile to cheer them all up. Satisfied with this, Mitsuha shifted her attention to cheating her way into reforming her land.

Should I use the three-field system? Crop rotation? Norfolk four-course

system? The three-field system is better for transitional periods, so maybe I should just start with Norfolk? No, no, no. I'll just ask a professional. Greenpeas, was it?

Mitsuha was quite sad that they hadn't found any natural resources worth digging for. She also had the fishing industry to consider, but they needed proper ships to improve in that area. Right now, her top priority was acquiring knowledge and information. She decided to dedicate more time to reading books and scouring the internet.

Before I make any real moves, I'm gonna need more servants.

Mitsuha was thinking about who to get for her county and how. Bribes and forgeries were rampant in this world, so referrals and recommendations were generally unreliable. As far as she could tell, she could only rely on recommendations from trusted parties and her own judgment during interviews, but even that could be subverted if the interviewee had good acting skills.

The count offered to lend Mitsuha his own vassals, but she refused. He already had Alexis to support, and Mitsuha was likely to do a number of things the vassals would find…unorthodox. Additionally, while she did trust Count Bozes, she didn't feel entirely comfortable letting him know everything about her territory.

Mitsuha needed a treasurer, an overseer for fishing and agriculture, a welfare manager, and two maids. She assumed Anton and the other servants would know one or two promising maid candidates, but didn't want to miss out on potential applicants from the rest of her county.

The treasury, fishing, and agriculture had been managed by three of the six

servants Mitsuha had discharged and one of those still remaining. However, they had all primarily focused on things like taxation and liquidity or policing illegal activity; they had known nothing about how to make industries grow. It was quite difficult to find the right person for those jobs.

She had hoped she could find candidates among the craftsmen in the capital, but her search hadn't proved fruitful. She needed people who weren't just skilled, but also had an open mind and a wide perspective, and she knew full well that no one like that would be out of a job.

I wouldn't care even if they were kind of weird. There could be some really talented people out there who're a little too strange to be hired by normal establishments. If only there was a place where I could find people like that… Wait! I know exactly where to look! A real hive of well-rounded wackos—Platidus's school of scientists!

Their fields of research may have been somewhat off the beaten path, but their abilities were legitimate, and Mitsuha was certain they would know where she could find people as keen and kooky as they were. "Birds of a feather" and all that.

I'll go talk to them right away. I'm already on good terms with the old man in charge, so it'll be a cinch.

The results were almost instantaneous. Her first candidate was a metalworker who had been kicked out of his apprenticeship for not listening to his master in favor of conducting some off-the-wall activities. He was now half-broke, working day in and day out to make ends meet while attempting to do research on the side. Platidus had told her he often came to order things he needed for his

independent studies.

He showed Mitsuha the man's inventions and told her a little about him. She quickly concluded the metalworker was a stereotypical tech fanatic—skilled, and with some actually good ideas. Mitsuha asked Platidus to arrange a meeting between them.

The other person Mitsuha felt would be useful was one of Platidus's disciples. The girl stood out among his students due to her interest in sociology over science. She didn't quite fit in because of it, but she was good with numbers and would definitely make a good advisor. According to Platidus, she wasn't a bad disciple, but it often seemed like they weren't on the same wavelength, and he believed Mitsuha could help her shine. Nothing had been said yet to the girl in question, but Mitsuha requested an interview with her as well.

The day of the interviews came quickly. The metalworker was Randy, twenty-three years old. Platidus's description of him was accurate, and Mitsuha had no problems with his personality. He was just a bit of a tech maniac who didn't work with others well. Most importantly, he was genuinely good at what he did.

This one's a definite hire, Mitsuha thought.

While she didn't feel she could trust him with management roles, he was bound to excel as a craftsman. In fact, he seemed completely open to new ideas, perhaps making him an even better pick for Mitsuha than the average master craftsman. She could even count on him to make products using Earth's technology.

Next up was Platidus's disciple, Miriam. She had an infectious personality and was a fast thinker with great perception. With her interest in sociology, she

would be a good candidate to be involved in matters of county policy. Her proficiency in mathematics didn't seem to fit with the rest of her personality, but it made her a perfect treasurer.

Yep, she's got the job.

Platidus was as happy about their hiring as the two interviewees themselves. They had been at a stagnant point in their lives, and though they would now have to travel to the countryside, they would be using their best skills under the employ of a viscountess. Their joy was to be expected. Mitsuha told them to head to Yamano County as soon as possible, and the two of them rushed off to prepare.

They probably have to explain everything to their parents, Mitsuha thought.

Platidus suggested she also take Yorck, but she immediately refused. He was unsure as to why, however; Yorck had told him he was kicked out because Mitsuha hadn't been able to understand what he was saying. Platidus mentioned this to Mitsuha, and implored her to give him another chance.

Oh, no he didn't, Mitsuha thought before telling Platidus the truth.

She explained everything from what had happened in the carriage to all the theories Yorck had brought up, noting just how basic they were and assuring Platidus that she already knew them herself, and she could've elaborated further if she so desired.

Mitsuha also couldn't trust a scientist who distorted reality for personal gain. No matter how rich she was, she wouldn't give him a single piece of silver. Also, if he had tried to sell out his fellow man to save his skin once, he would definitely do it again. In a bandit raid, he'd be more dangerous than the bandits themselves.

Additionally, Platidus had revealed that he hadn't sent Yorck to become a guest lecturer, but simply to ask that she become a patron and donate to their school. Upon realizing that the viscountess was just a little girl, Yorck had decided to take advantage of his position.

So, he also misrepresented his teacher's intentions and lied to a noble… That's a double yikes.

Mitsuha asked Platidus not to use even a fraction of the money she had donated on Yorck's research, and the old man, feeling somewhat uncomfortable, simply nodded in response.

After their conversation, she world-jumped back to her county, proud of the progress she was making in her hiring endeavors. She *was* beginning to worry that careless use of her power would eventually lead to someone finding out about it, but it was just too convenient.

Also, with there being a whole week's worth of distance between her land and the capital, it was hard for anyone to keep track of where she was and when. In all likelihood, no one gave it much thought beyond "Oh, she's here again," or "Oh, she's back."

I'll just try not to think about it too much.

Even if someone realized she had traveled instantly, she had ways of brushing it off. She could simply say something along the lines of, "Going the normal way was a pain, so I just used traversal." On the other hand, Count Bozes and Lady Iris would inevitably scold her for not taking care of her life force.

Was that lie a mistake? But if I didn't say something like that, I'd have nobles and merchants all over me asking for access to my country every waking

hour. That would've been way worse.

By the time Mitsuha returned to her county, the servants had made a huge list of maid applicants, along with their own recommendations. People from all over had heard what a good ruler she was. Attracted by the prospect of being a viscountess's maid who wouldn't have to deal with a lord's abuse─or worse, become his mistress─they had applied for the role.

In a large county with tens of thousands of people, getting to work in the ruling lord's home would be like winning the lottery, but that wasn't quite the case when there were only a few hundred. While a typical viscount's land would host several thousand citizens, this land had previously belonged to a mere baron. With a comparatively small pool of people, chances of becoming the viscountess's servant were much higher, and so people had flocked to apply.

Even some people from Colette's village wanted Mitsuha to hire them. However, she couldn't allow herself to take too many people from other counties. Colette was a dear friend to whom Mitsuha owed her life, and she had actually gone to Count Bozes personally to ask if she could take the girl under her wing, although she kept Colette's true talents a secret. Any leader would want to keep talented people for the betterment of their own territory. After all, who would want to see valuable human capital leave their borders?

Heheheh. Count Bozes, a few years from now, you'll really regret letting go of Colette!

Anyway, Mitsuha had a ton of candidates to choose from. The maids she had discharged included the head chore maid and the ex-baroness's personal attendant. The latter had thought her role was proof of being an "elite maid," and

that it gave her impunity. Her transgressions had included taking home food and supplies as though they were hers, as well as acting as though she was above Mitsuha. She had once even gone so far as to say, “I’ll let you off with a warning!”

According to the other maids, she had been a favorite of the baron and baroness. They had even allowed her to scold and discipline their children. But under Mitsuha’s rule, none of this mattered, and the baroness’s housepet had earned her eviction.

Hell, I’m the ruler here, not the ruler’s kid! She thinks she can look down on me?! Damn it! Well, at least I got to enjoy the look on her face when I fired her. It was priceless.

Mitsuha contemplated hiring two standard maids. She also considered doing away with maid specializations. Simply put, she didn’t see the point of splitting them into attendants, chore maids, and whatnot; the system only seemed to create a needless hierarchy among them. It wasn’t a very specialized trade to begin with, so it seemed best to get rid of the differentiation and let all of them do various tasks.

As Mitsuha had no family, she had no need for an attendant. If anything, she wouldn’t be able to have peace of mind with someone taking care of her all the time. The attendant maids would be upset to lose their “superior” positions, but Mitsuha saw no reason to maintain the illusion that maids taking care of the ruling noble and her guests were better than any others.

Mitsuha assumed that the prettier maids had been assigned as attendants so they could double as the lord’s concubines. If this had been a viscount’s land to begin with, the role would’ve been filled by barons’ daughters or girls from

major merchant families looking to “learn high society etiquette.” However, this had merely been a rural baron’s land, and commoners were the best he could do. There weren’t even any major merchants to be found.

Anyway, I need two or three “normal” maids. I’ll see if anyone seems good enough for the job.

Soon, the day of the maid interviews arrived. Some had been recommended by those already working for Mitsuha, but she had no intention of showing favoritism. She asked that the referrers screen these applicants’ documents for any false information. Naturally, it would be bad for them if they ended up recommending someone who had lied on their application, so Mitsuha felt she could trust the integrity of these applicants a bit more than the rest. It was nothing more than that.

Unexpectedly, there weren’t all that many recommendations. While the current servants likely *wanted* to help their friends get a good job, they would be responsible if said friends committed wrongdoings after their hiring. The only upside if all went well would be the new hire’s gratitude. There was also the possibility that the recommended person could rise above their status, which would be unpleasant at best. Beyond their own siblings, they weren’t likely to recommend anyone else.

There were a total of 47 applicants. Yamano County had 676 people in total, 322 of which were men, and 354 of which were women.

Are there more women because men tend to get into accidents or die while hunting? Was there a war recently? Are the local women stronger, and so they’ve come out on top? Or did it just happen to end up this way?

Jeez, is every single woman between her teens and her late thirties here, or what? At that age, they should already be working or helping out with the family trade. Are they really willing to quit for this? I guess working for a viscountess is just that attractive. Hmm, now I feel like there was no point in asking my servants for recommendations. Time to weed out the no-gos!

"I wish to learn many things here, become the best me I can be, and—"

That seems commendable at first, but I'm not paying you to polish your maiding skills. Colette's an investment that'll probably benefit me in the future, but I'd gain nothing from investing in a maid. Are you planning to improve here, then just switch to a better place? You're supposed to show off what you can give to the employer, not what you might gain. You gotta make hiring you seem worth it. This isn't a job training program or some school.

"I've heard enough. Next!"

"Please, wait! I've got so much more to say about myself!"

You're supposed to do that while the interviewer's asking you questions, and answer them in the best way possible. To say whatever you want after the questioning ends is against the rules, like throwing out rock, paper, or scissors a second late. I don't need anyone who wants to talk when things have already ended.

"I want you to know how ambitious and motivated I am."

Hey, I don't need anyone who comes to an interview without those things! Everyone here wants to be hired! Do you seriously think you're special?

“I once had an important role working for a merchant family in the capital and—”

“Huh? Then why did you quit? If there was a reason to release you from an important role, didn’t you think it would be difficult to get hired here?”

“Err, what? No, I mean…”

“A count’s family is also interested in hiring me!”

“Oh? Then why come to a viscountess? You should accept that offer, no?”

“Well, um, I turned it down.”

“Really? Well, if you’re not satisfied with working for a count, a viscountess would surely be devastating. Here’s hoping it’s a marquis’s family next time. Next!”

Mitsuha felt she would soon have a database of every woman in Yamano County along with their traits, such as “liar” or “untrustworthy.” She was taking notes, as well as recording every single interview.

“…I’m number twenty-six. My name’s Noelle.”

The girl who stood in front of Mitsuha looked to be Colette’s age, but she must have been older, given that the minimum age to apply was ten, and Colette was eight. The girl even looked slightly smaller than her. She had silver hair and an aura of meekness about her.

“Why do you want to work for me?” Mitsuha asked.

Noelle’s answer was brief but impactful.

"I'll be sold off otherwise."

Whoa, that's heavy, thought Mitsuha.

Finally the interviews were over and all the candidates had left. The results would come at a later date. Mitsuha still had to check if they were all telling the truth.

All the candidates' interview techniques left Mitsuha thinking there must have been some sort of maid interview crash course she hadn't heard of. She had encountered a variety of responses over and over again, including─but not limited to─"Please hear me out," "I want to convey my enthusiasm," "I was once such-and-such," "I've done charity work," "I already quit my job," "I want to improve myself," and so on.

Every time she had heard one of these stock replies, she'd had to hold herself back from saying something along the lines of, "You're the sixth person to use this technique!" Anyone could pick such low-hanging fruit, and it was to be expected that an interviewer would see repeats after speaking with dozens of people.

Personally, I don't want to hear their shabby techniques and strategies, but their own, honest words, no matter how awkwardly they come out. Fronts and lip service won't help you get a job from me. I'm gonna choose from the ones who spoke with nothing but honesty. I mean, that could be a character flaw, but I prefer 'em all the same.

In the end, Mitsuha hired four maids: Noelle, who was ten years old; Ninette, twelve; Paulette, seventeen; and Rachel, twenty-seven. The majority being in their teens was easily explained─most girls over seventeen were already

married, so most of the applicants had been that young.

Mitsuha had contemplated hiring five in total─a lot more than originally planned─as she wanted all the good people she could get. However, during the post-interview investigation, one of them turned out to be lying and had instantly been dropped. The truth she hid wasn't something that Mitsuha couldn't tolerate, but she failed just because she'd tried to lie to her.

While Mitsuha did feel sympathy for Noelle, it wasn't the only reason why she had chosen the young girl: Noelle had shown she had the skills the job required. Even if she hadn't, Mitsuha would have stepped in to deal with the girl's problem as the local ruler. Noelle was quick-witted, perceptive, and had an excellent memory. She clearly had the makings of a good maid, and Mitsuha hoped she and Colette could become friends.

Additionally, Noelle's words about being "sold off" had spurred Mitsuha into a frenzied investigation, looking for potential human trafficking within her territory. However, she discovered that Noelle wouldn't have been sold as a slave, but rather shipped off as an apprentice to a merchant in a county some distance away, her parents receiving twenty years' worth of her salary in return.

Honestly, that's pretty much human trafficking. I can understand why she said that. Noelle's a smart girl.

In Yamano County, even children had ownership of themselves and the fruits of their labor. Parents couldn't simply sell them off. Thus, the money from the apprenticeship contract would be due to Noelle, not her parents, and trying to take it away would be a crime that warranted arrest. Once Mitsuha explained this to her parents, Noelle's apprenticeship was miraculously called off. Of course, there was also the fact that she would earn more if she worked in this county.

Whether the money she earned from Mitsuha would go to her parents was an entirely different matter. Mitsuha wondered if the girl would really give her hard-earned money to people who tried to sell her. Her servants had their own deposit system, and their money could even gain interest. If Noelle's parents tried to take it by force, they would have to go through the Yamano defense corps.

Ninette was a blonde twelve-year-old who looked her age. In Japan, people might have guessed she was in her mid-teens; here, she was assumed to be eleven or twelve…much like Mitsuha.

I think she's a bit above me, though…in all the places that matter. Ugh!

She was Mitsuha's only servant who hailed from the fishing village, so Mitsuha was interested in her input on the improvements she was considering in that area. She also hoped that Ninette would get along with Colette and Noelle.

Seventeen-year-old Paulette had come from a mountain village. Despite how it may have sounded, there was much more going on there than hunting and gathering. While her father was a hunter, Paulette, her mother, and her siblings actually worked the fields.

As Paulette was approaching adulthood, she had run into a problem: there were no men in her small village she liked enough to marry, so she wanted to try her luck in a larger town. The offer to work as a servant for the viscountess had been a godsend.

She's basically a modern young girl, really. I'll chat with her when I'm improving the mountain villages.

Then there was Rachel, the twenty-seven-year-old. She was a widow from the nearby town whose husband had passed away from an illness, and she was

struggling to raise their four-year-old daughter on her own when she heard about the position. Her plan was to leave her daughter with her late husband's parents during her shifts.

Mitsuha had selected her because of her personal history. Rachel was the third daughter in her family, and her parents owned a mid-sized shop in town. From the time she was a child until her marriage, she had helped manage the store, take care of day-to-day business, and purchase stock to fill the shelves.

What a gem, Mitsuha thought.

Mitsuha didn't want to separate her from her child, so she offered Rachel a position as a live-in employee, meaning she could bring her daughter along with her. Rachel was dumbfounded by the offer, and burst into tears before accepting.

Pity? Favoritism? Whatever. I do what I want!

She also gave Rachel the option of making her daughter an apprentice maid, a position that would come with a small salary. After a bit of thought, Rachel agreed. Mitsuha felt it was the right choice; both mother and daughter would be together, paving a secure future for themselves. If the girl wanted to move out once she came of age, all doors would be open for her. No employer would turn down a fifteen-year-old veteran maid who had worked for a viscountess─Yamano, at that─since she was four. Working for, say, a count in his capital manor would be no mere dream.

I'd write a recommendation, when the time came. She'd have to swat potential employers and suitors away like flies.

With the twelve original servants, Colette, the army folk, the two Platidus had recommended, the new hires, Rachel's daughter, and Mitsuha herself, the viscountess's household now had twenty-six people, and that was without

counting the specialized blog advisors.

Now it's time to make this county shine…via shortcuts, of course!

Mitsuha felt as though she had gone off track somewhere on her way toward a peaceful retirement, but the life of a retired viscountess could prove just as relaxing. In order to get there, she needed to increase her county's wealth and stability.

Y'know, it just hit me: now that I've got so many people, I should assign another chef. If I don't, the one we've got is gonna have to work so hard he won't have any time off. He couldn't even rest if he got sick. That's exploitation of labor!

Guess I'll have the maids take turns helping him out. It'll prepare them for the homemaker life, and the chef can catch a break. Imagine the market value of a maid who knows how to make Yamano Cuisine! Not that I'd want anyone to take them.

Chapter 19
Viscountessing for Beginners

Soon after, Platidus's disciple, Miriam, and the metalworker, Randy, arrived from the capital. Thus, the main force of Yamano County was complete.

Time to cheat in the game of politics! thought Mitsuha. *…Uh, I mean, I'll just improve the situation little by little. Right.*

Mitsuha started by changing the servants' roles. Under her new system, there were no personal attendants or chore maids. The head attendant became a normal head maid, and the head chore maid became her second-in-command. All the others were now regular maids with the exception of Rachel's daughter, Leah. A four-year-old could only be an apprentice.

Gunther and the other discharged staff had directly handled some taxation during their employment, but from now on, those types of responsibilities would be assigned to "public officials." Only one servant who had been in charge of taxation remained. Mitsuha didn't feel he was terribly trustworthy, but he showed no signs of corruption thus far, and removing him would be a detriment to county affairs. She decided to leave him be, but made a note to learn the entirety of his responsibilities so she could seamlessly discharge him if he decided to go criminal.

The soldiers would simply be called the "Yamano County Army." That made them sound more important than they were, but Mitsuha felt a bit of inflation was necessary every once in a while. Major Willem would be the commander, while Sublieutenants Sven, Szep, Gritt, and Ilse would be leading

officers. Four of the thirty-six civilian soldiers under their leadership would be sergeants, but they would rotate out every month or so. Even if the sergeants were not on duty, they could be summoned in times of necessity.

There were a total of 216 potential soldiers in her county, which would make six platoons of thirty-six. They would have to juggle their trades and military service for two months out of the year, which Mitsuha felt was acceptable. While it sounded like a lot of responsibility, any squads that weren't training or on guard shifts could simply go back to their homes.

Miriam would be in charge of financial affairs and welfare, and act as Mitsuha's advisor. She would also make suggestions on how to captivate the masses or boost public morale. Mitsuha even planned to have Miriam read psychology and sociology textbooks from Earth. Well, she would read them *to* her─just once, though─seeing as Miriam wouldn't know the language and Mitsuha couldn't be bothered to do written translations. Miriam seemed intelligent enough to get a good grasp of the content this way. Additionally, Colette would be a trainee acting as Miriam's assistant.

As for Randy, he would be assigned to a workshop owned by Mitsuha herself. He would also be a member of the management team, as he was skilled and eccentric enough to provide out-of-the-box opinions, some of which could prove quite valuable.

On certain occasions, the more distinguished maids, cooks, soldiers, and other servants would be chosen to temporarily take on a more managerial role, with a chance of permanently securing the position. Mitsuha didn't know the process by which the previous lord had selected his servants, but they seemed like normal people to her─probably picked from the locals. Those she picked

herself, however, had the potential to be something more.

At least, that's what I wanna believe.

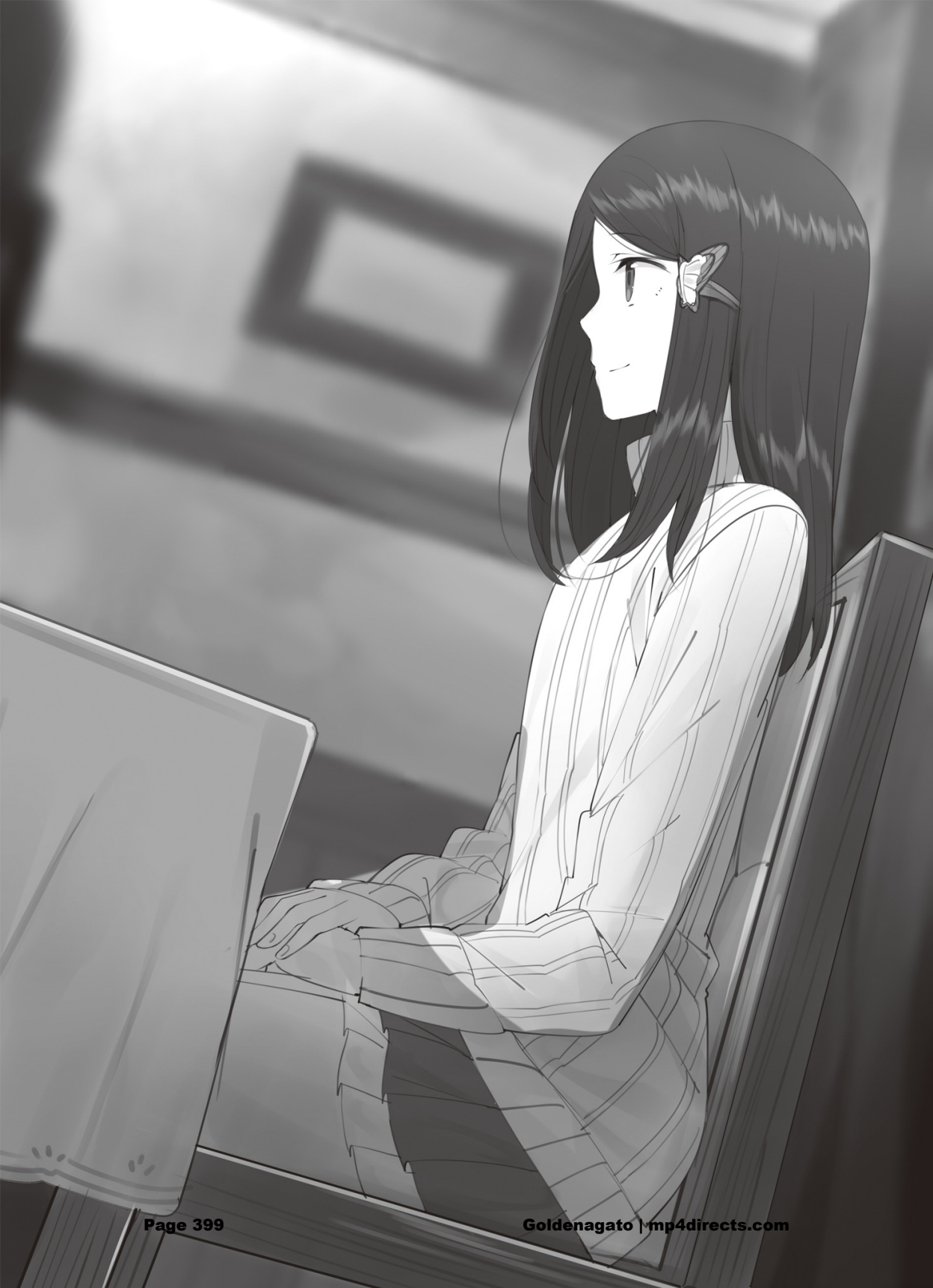
As Mitsuha had expected, the maids serving as personal attendants didn't take the removal of specializations too well. For them, it was something like a loss of status. They weren't outraged enough to defy Mitsuha, however, and soon came to accept it. Their leadership had essentially stayed the same, so the transition was easier on them than they had expected.

Upon finishing the reorganization of the servants, Mitsuha decided to hold a meeting to unite all her people as one.

All the key players in Yamano County were gathered in the viscountess's meeting room. It goes without saying that one of them was Viscountess Yamano herself. Then there was the butler, Anton, the management committee, and the five leaders of the army. This group consisted of everyone who served Mitsuha directly.

Besides them, there were representatives of the common citizens: the heads of the three farming villages, two mountain villages, and the sole fishing village. They appeared to be on edge. While it would be natural for them to feel nervous in the presence of their lord, Mitsuha had exercised a sort of "Hey, I'm your friendly neighborhood ruler" campaign when she had first arrived, making her presence seem less intimidating. Rather, the main source of their anxiety was the information about Mitsuha that had finally reached their county.

They had found her unusual from the start. It was unthinkable for a young girl to start a noble lineage. After all, what could a child accomplish to earn such high status?



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Furthermore, she was often visited by a young lord of the neighboring county─a new noble himself. It wasn't strange for two new, young viscounts to be on good terms with or consult one another, but it was certainly unusual for the viscount himself to stop by every few days. From what they had heard, he was also the eldest child of Count Bozes─ruler of the county on the opposite side.

Finally, there was the visit from the entire Bozes family. It was understandable for a new viscountess to go and greet the neighboring counts, but they couldn't comprehend why the opposite had occurred. They also wondered why he had brought his entire family. Was he planning to annex the county? The family's attitude towards Mitsuha made that unlikely. They treated her like a daughter or sister, and the villagers couldn't help but notice the way the two sons behaved around the viscountess. In the end, they had come to understand that there was something unique about these circumstances.

That was when various details about the happenings in the capital began to seep through their borders. The townspeople had heard rumors slip from the lips of passengers and coachmen on shopping trips to the Bozeses' county. Inflated gossip oozed from major merchants, officer hopefuls, and noble messengers from the capital and beyond who had traveled to this county on a whim. It didn't take long for them to realize that Mitsuha was the one and only Lightning Archpriestess, and that she had chosen this county as her territory despite having better prospects as a viscountess.

This was a poor, dead-end, backwater land at the edge of the country, which had lost its previous ruler when he committed the equivalent of rebellion. It was barely sustained by mediocre agriculture, forestry, and fishing industries. Most of their products were used locally, and they had to buy other necessities from

the Bozeses' county at a relatively high price.

It didn't take someone like Platidus to see that this land had no chance at a bright future or even a good ruler. Many had believed that at worst, the next person in charge would be someone who received it as a punishment or joke, and at best, someone with no other choice. The county didn't operate at a net loss, but it also didn't make enough profit for the local lord to maintain a capital mansion or have a place in high society.

The citizens had cared little about who would rule them next, believing nothing would truly change. Someone like Count Bozes, who was said to be a man of good and honest character, was nothing but a dream.

You could only imagine their surprise when the new ruler was a viscountess who had willingly chosen their land. She was a young, powerful, and talented foreign princess. There were also rumors that she had fought off wolves at the cost of grave personal injury just to save a single village girl in the Bozeses' county, and that tale alone spoke volumes about her nature.

Up until now, the citizens were never given explanations or opportunities to ask about anything regarding the domain—they had always been given orders. But now, they had been called to a meeting regarding the future of this land. Perhaps, they dared to think, this could make all their lives better. Their new leader was a star of hope. Disappointing her was unacceptable, and they wouldn't tolerate anyone who did so. They clenched their fists as resolve filled their hearts.

Yes, the representatives gathered here were tense…and no one could fault them for that.

“Thank you very much for coming here, everyone,” Mitsuha said softly.

Her way of speaking was incredibly dynamic. She was capable of having polite conversations with those above her, speaking like a normal high school girl with her friends, and spouting any number of bizarre things with her inner voice. Mitsuha also had a tendency to talk coldly when angered, and “borrow” lines or grow increasingly theatrical when she got on a roll.

Then again, altering one’s way of speaking based on the situation and the conversational partner was only natural. No one would be dumb enough to speak to a work superior as though he were a close friend. Some moronic middle-aged new hires might talk down to long-standing employees simply because they were older, but age only mattered when all other conditions were equal for the involved parties. Perhaps it was for the best, as fools who prioritized age over the workplace hierarchy tended to slip up early on and were fired as a result.

Regardless, Mitsuha was always changing her style of speech. As both a noble and these people’s lord, she could have chosen to emphasize that she was above them. However, this meeting wasn’t about dominance, but about listening and encouraging harmony, so she chose a gentle, polite tone for the occasion. The servants were already used to her quirks, and found it to be a good way of discerning whether she was in her normal, angry, or dispassionate work mode.

“I have summoned you all here so that every single one of you understands what I will do to develop Yamano County. I will also hear you out if you have any suggestions. Status holds no weight here, so please be as honest with your opinions as possible. If you stay silent and end up unhappy with what we decide, I must say it will be no one’s fault but your own.”

The citizens’ representatives nodded seriously. It was hard to ignore status

in such a situation, but they intended to try.

“First, since it is already being put into practice, comes our current defense structure. Are there any objections?”

A hand made its way upward. It belonged to one of the three heads of farming villages. He cleared his throat before speaking.

“Things are much better than they used to be, when our boys would be taken away and almost never return. I also hear they’re well-fed during lunch. But now we have a number of second, third, and younger sons asking if they can become permanent soldiers.”

“Oh, I see,” Mitsuha replied. “Well, after everyone has been conscripted at least once, I intend to hire a few promising volunteers. But since it’s impossible to keep many standing soldiers in such a small area, most will have to stay in rotation. Please tell the youths interested in permanent positions to give it their all.”

He nodded in understanding. The others seemed to share his opinion on military affairs.

“Next,” said Mitsuha, “allow me to explain the changes to our agriculture.”

The heads of the three farming villages lost a bit of their composure. “Heads” might have given the impression of importance, but the men were merely representing small, clustered settlements. The farming villages were made up of twenty to thirty buildings each, while the mountain and fishing villages had somewhere between ten and twenty.

She began explaining such factors as repeated cultivation damage and nutrient deficiency. Dumbfounded at first, her audience soon leaned in to listen intently. This wasn’t merely some little girl chattering away. She was their ruler,

and the foreign sage known as the Lightning Archpriestess. No one undervalued her words.

Mitsuha wanted to experiment on a few select farmlands before moving to full-scale crop rotation. She couldn't just force these people to adopt a new farming method right away—she had to gradually introduce it. After all, a single mistake here could be fatal to the entire county. Of course, Mitsuha could always use her own money to buy food from Japan and save everyone, but that wasn't the point.

Instead, she began with simple, foolproof ideas, like spreading decaying leaves or ash to create a compost layer. Besides that, she told them to mix poultry manure and straw and let it ferment for a few months. She gave a hard pass to the idea of using human excrement instead. It took years to ferment, and the potential hygiene issues from such an operation were far too frightening to consider.

Mitsuha also decided to try a tiny bit of fertilizer she had brought from Japan. She wanted to explore all her options, and she knew that morale wouldn't rise unless at least one experiment yielded more crops.

In the end, the farming village heads agreed to devote areas of farmland to each of the different methods. And of course they agreed to try crop rotation, as, unlike spreading compost, it was pretty much an infallible approach. It was also decided they would all simultaneously grow four types of vegetables, as well as increase the amount of cattle in the fields. Animal husbandry and crop rotation went hand-in-hand, after all.

Apart from that, Mitsuha asked them to dedicate a small portion of farmland to rice cultivation. Success wasn't guaranteed, but Mitsuha said she

would buy the plants regardless of quality, so they gladly agreed. She felt it was a pleasant example of contracted cultivation.

The next item on her agenda was forestry. Her main goal here was to make wood profitable. Mitsuha was troubled, as she didn't really have a specific plan in mind. There were forests all over the kingdom, so one county's lumber didn't have any particular value; it was an extremely common local product. The same applied to woodworking. Anything that could be crafted in these villages could be made anywhere else.

She told the heads of the mountain villages to start planting new trees to replace the ones they cut down, but this wasn't something that could lead to profit in the near future. Having heard her elaborate farming plans, the mountain village heads had been hoping for something revolutionary for their own industry, and her minimal response left them feeling disappointed. Seeing their crestfallen faces, Mitsuha panicked a little.

I've got nothing else? Really? Oh! What about shiitake mushroom cultivation?

She asked if anyone knew what shiitake mushrooms were, and everyone shook their heads. Naturally, they couldn't cultivate the mushrooms if they didn't have any to begin with.

Mitsuha had no solutions for hunting, either. Fresh game decayed quickly, but even if they had some way to preserve it, hunting down enough game to make large amounts of smoked meat or jerky would reduce the wildlife population until it was no longer a viable source of food.

To make the situation less awkward, Mitsuha promised to examine the possibility of charcoal mining and bellows-based furnaces. She also ordered

them to inform her right away should they find any potential ore veins, handing out enough documents with photographic examples for every villager.

The smelting method she had in mind involved a *tatara.* The *tatara* was a traditional Japanese furnace similar to other primitive bellows-based furnaces from all over the world. It used iron sand to produce a high-quality steel called "tamahagane," which was used to craft katana blades. It generally made up a third or less of all smelted iron, and the other two thirds, which were of lower quality, were used either for other parts of the katana or for daily necessities.

Maybe I can create something brand-worthy with that, Mitsuha thought. *That's what I'll do if someone finds valuable ore veins in my area.*

Lastly, she covered marine production. The head of the fishing village was hopeful. Due to the village's small size, and because fresh seafood rotted too quickly to be sold or stored, it hadn't been a very profitable place. The previous local lord hadn't cared for it one bit. But Mitsuha, the new ruler, visited the village regularly─more often than the other towns, in fact─asked many questions, and gladly ate the fish cooked by the fishermen's wives. She even had an interest in things such as boats and fishing tools.

Not only that, but for the first time ever, a person from the fishing village─Ninette─had been hired to work in the ruler's residence. Suffice it to say, the head of the fishing village was justified in his expectations…and of course, he got just what he wanted.

"First, we will intensify salt production and start selling dried seaweed in large quantities," Mitsuha declared. "We will increase the amount of fish we catch, and either smoke or dry them in multiple ways to slow down the rot."

"Ohh!" The fishing village head had a sparkle in his eyes.

Mitsuha was far more talkative than she had been during the forestry discussion. The two mountain village heads slumped dejectedly.

“As I said, to sell dried fish in large quantities, we will need to increase the amount of fish we catch. For that, I’m thinking of improving the nets we use and creating new fishing ships.”

“Ahhhhh!” Now the fishing representative was elated. Mitsuha’s decree was everything he had hoped for and then some. At this rate, the fishing industry would become lucrative in no time, and even Mitsuha herself would be reaping the benefits.

They could use any number of nets, including casting nets, gill nets, and even seines. The water was free of pollution, so seines could catch migratory fish at a steady rate. As the fishing industry had been heretofore underdeveloped, allowing the fish to populate as they pleased, they could anticipate major net hauls a short distance away from the shoreline. With a marine gold mine like this, even simple angling could bring in serious catches.

Mitsuha thought it acceptable to bring the first nets and other fishing equipment from Japan. Even if she didn’t, net preparation wouldn’t take too long. Once the people saw the effectiveness of the nets, they could examine them in detail in order to create something similar. The same applied to angling equipment.

As for the boats, Mitsuha decided to have them made locally. A small, secondhand boat would only cost her about two to three hundred thousand yen in Japan, but Mitsuha wasn’t sure she felt comfortable bringing something made of fiber-reinforced plastic to this world. While they would need boats to start seine fishing, the ones they currently had were at risk of capsizing under the strain of

the net, multiple weights, and the people aboard.

In order to increase salt production, Mitsuha devised the plan of setting up vertical salt farms. There weren't many people in the fishing village, nor did it have a great deal of space, so this was the most practical solution. They also required fewer people to oversee them than flood-based salt ponds.

Mitsuha would recruit people from the farming villages to help construct the vertical farms. The mountain villagers would prepare the timber needed for the finishing touches. Upon hearing that she would need a lot of wood for fuel, the heads of the mountain villages finally smiled.

For her next order of business, Mitsuha turned to address the local shopkeeper. Yamano County was a dead-end territory with only the sea beyond it, so no travelers passed through. Anyone who had business in the area would simply go to the Bozeses' county instead. Nearly every imported product sold in this town had been brought from the Bozeses' county, so their prices were inflated. Because of this, the only ones who would buy anything in Yamano County were locals.

"Can you close your store?" she asked.

"CLOSE IT?!" the audience exclaimed.

And who could blame them? Without the only shop in the county, most of its 676 citizens─170 households─would be at a loss. It was the only place where they could purchase imported items, and even local goods would then have to be bought directly from the producers themselves. Would they have to walk all over the county just to do their daily shopping? They were firmly opposed to the idea.

"Oh, that doesn't mean we won't have a store anymore. We'll simply have a bigger one with a better selection. We'll stock it with goods from Petz, a

traveling merchant, unique items from my home country, and the new products we'll soon be making here in Yamano County. I can't leave all that to a private store, so I'm thinking of opening one myself."

"And if I refuse?" the shopkeeper asked.

"I won't mind, but I still intend to open a new store, which will probably buy and sell at better prices than yours."

The storekeeper gulped. "But then I'd go bankrupt…"

"That's why I suggested you close up shop. You won't be out of a job, of course. The new store will need someone to go around to each village and stock up. Plus, I'm even considering direct trade with the Bozeses' county and beyond. I'll need someone who's used to these kinds of things."

After thinking about it long and hard, the storekeeper nodded. To be fair, he hadn't had much of a choice to begin with.

Much like her store in the capital, Mitsuha wanted to sell Japanese products─at cheaper prices, even. That way, people would flow in from the Bozeses' county and their other neighbors, which would stimulate the economy. Once she had reached this level of patronage, Mitsuha planned to improve the local inn and eatery. The inn would be open at all times, and the eatery would grow larger and become a proper diner with cooks who could prepare Yamano Cuisine.

I want to make it so the county can get by with what they have, but I won't feel bad about cheating a bit to get a jump-start on it.

Mitsuha then directed her attention to the village heads once more. She explained in greater detail her plans for the store, workshop, and salt farms, asking them to send people to help with construction. They initially thought it

would be mandatory unpaid work, but were surprised to find out she would be paying each worker a daily allowance. It was a rare chance to earn some quick money, and the villagers were sure to jump on it.

She inquired as to whether they knew any good cooks, and she was told that the owners of the eatery had a son working as one in the Bozeses' county. Mitsuha would decide whether or not to summon him after talking to his parents.

Finally, Mitsuha brought up children's education. She felt it was absolutely necessary in order for their county to prosper. Without at least minimal reading comprehension and math skills, a person could only hope to work by way of physical labor. They were also at risk of being deceived, as there were a multitude of malicious merchants on the lookout for fools who would sign their unfair contracts.

Children were already part of the workforce, so her people were hesitant to agree, but they did once Mitsuha assured them it would only be every other morning and they would be fed lunch before leaving.

With that, she had covered every topic on her agenda. When she opened the floor to questions, however, she was asked if the tax rate would stay the same. The highest tax rate that could be implemented here was seventy percent. This was beyond the limit at which the populace could make ends meet and would only be used in emergencies. If it stayed that high for too long, people were bound to flee, or the ruling family would be targeted.

The highest *sustainable* tax rate was sixty percent, the lowest in the kingdom was forty percent—found only in affluent, well-ruled territories—and the standard rate was generally around fifty percent.

Percentages didn't always mean the same thing, however. After all, there

were counties that earned ten thousand gold coins, as well as those raking in a hundred thousand. The tax rate in the Bozeses' county, for example, was fifty percent─not because of greed, but because a rural, agricultural territory such as theirs couldn't expect much revenue from traveling merchants.

Yamano County's tax rate was at sixty percent─again not because of greed, but because it had been set by the previous lord, and she simply hadn't changed it yet.

"Oh, sorry, I forgot," she said. "Our tax rate is now thirty percent."

"D-Did she say *thirty* percent?!" Neither the citizens nor her own subordinates could believe their ears.

Mitsuha wasn't the type to pour money into lavish meals or fancy clothing, nor did she host parties. She didn't bribe the capital's high nobles or clergymen, nor did she buy any jewels. She could get by with just the money she earned from opening her capital store every now and then. Because of this, the taxes would only be split between the king, the payments for servants and other officials, upkeep of her residence, public works, education, and welfare. She hoped to make an independent profit via trading, salt farming, and other operations.

Mitsuha couldn't set the taxes too low because she had to consider the balance with the other counties, and she needed at least *some* semblance of a budget, so she figured thirty percent was a decent sweet spot.

To the citizens, however, this was life-changing. They were no longer entitled to just forty percent of their wealth, but a whopping seventy. This didn't mean they were merely seventy-five percent wealthier. Assuming that thirty-five percent of their wealth was used on food, fuel, clothes, and other bare

necessities, they would only have five percent left to pamper themselves with.

If that forty became seventy, the people of Yamano County could now spend thirty-five percent of their wealth on personal luxuries, so they would be *seven times* wealthier. The local purchasing power would skyrocket. This would increase spending, which would increase profits from purchased products. In turn, this would improve the producers' own financial circumstances, which would increase *their* spending, which would again increase profits from purchased products.

Until now, money in this rural county had only flowed one way. But soon, their economy would flourish.

A month had passed since the first meeting, during which time Yamano County citizens built the store and the workshop. Almost none among them had any experience, and Mitsuha hadn't hired any professionals from the capital, so they had gone with the safest option of constructing one-story buildings. The plots were large, however, so the builders had made them spacious enough to fulfill their functions.

The metalworker, Randy, had already brought the bare essentials he needed for metalworking, so he took to setting up the furnace and everything else he had. There were still some things he required, and Mitsuha would have to order them.

That's how it is officially, anyway. I'm actually just gonna transfer them over here with my power. Heavy loads take way too long to transport.

"Randy, I brought some materials. I hope these will work for you?" Mitsuha asked as she barged into the workshop with a package. Randy was a bit

baffled by her sudden appearance.

Well, I'm the one in charge here. Nobody would expect someone as important as me to come to a place like this all by herself, let alone carrying something heavy.

Though Randy wasn't exactly what you'd call a people person, he had enough common sense and decency to jump up and help her.

"Uh, I'll get that! Please, allow me!" He pulled the load in Mitsuha's hands away from her. It was heavier than he had expected, however, and his knees buckled under the weight. The whole thing was a recipe for a slipped disc, but somehow he managed.

"Those are materials from my country," Mitsuha explained. "Let me know if you want anything. You can ask for something harder or softer; these aren't the only ones I can get for you."

Randy opened the package and found various metal ingots inside. They were just for reference, so they weren't very large, and each was inscribed with a code for differentiation. He took a few out and examined them closely. Engrossed by the metal, he didn't even realize he had left Mitsuha to stand there and wait for him.

"Huh? That's odd. What's this? These ingots look similar, but they're completely different. Judging from how they feel when struck, they have their own degrees of toughness, but they're all pretty hard. And then there's this unusually light metal. It *is* metal, right? Wait, I need more time to examine them and…"

Randy was lost in his own world.

It didn't seem as though he would be done anytime soon, so Mitsuha

walked out. She had hoped he could make something for her right away, but she decided to come back later. Having once shared a house with her father and brother, she knew that if men got into that state, it would take a while for them to snap out of it. Randy would surely panic once he did, but that much was his own fault.

The salt farm was still a work in progress. It would be a vertical farm that used supports, so it would require little labor to run, take up a small amount of space compared to other methods, and be mostly unaffected by changing seasons or inclement weather─there was simply no downside to the structure. Mitsuha wanted to enter the salt industry as a competitor to rock salt producers, but first she would focus on spreading it among her people and kickstarting the local pickled food industry. That alone would have a strong effect on the county's economy, which had never really thrived.

As for the school, it was already in operation. Since the local population was small, the number of children was, too, and one room in Mitsuha's residence was more than enough to teach them all. Plus, it made it easy to handle their lunches. The location also proved beneficial because Colette and the other children weren't the only ones learning─there were servants and other adults who had joined willingly. The illiterate servants had been quite embarrassed about their inability to read and write, and everyone was dedicated to fixing that shortcoming.

The classes were taught by Miriam, Rachel, other people who could read and write, and by Mitsuha herself. She taught well-received lectures on money-making and ways to thoroughly crush your enemies. One of her lessons, which

incorporated a science experiment kit she had bought at a Japanese department store, was particularly popular. Even her butler came to watch.

Maybe some of the things I teach aren't good for children, but whatever!

None of the children minded going to school. Quite the opposite, in fact. They loved being able to have fun with other children their age while learning things they felt they would need in life. Plus, they were able to eat delicious food at the end of every school day. Many even complained that once every two days wasn't enough.

Then there was the store. Its total area was several times larger than Mitsuha's General Store back in the capital. It was stocked with the same types of things as the previous local store—wild game, foraged plants, seafood, vegetables, grain, cloth, metal farming tools, and other daily necessities.

Besides selling all of these products, however, it also bought fish for traditional retail. This hadn't been the case until the new store was built. Fish rotted quickly, so the previous shopkeeper, who had wanted to avoid wasting money, only made deferred payments for fish he ended up selling, while returning those he didn't.

If he hadn't done that, his only way to avoid severe losses would have been buying miniscule amounts of fish, so no one could really blame him. Consignment had allowed him to stock up on as much fish as possible, and if luck was on his side, he would've been able to sell a lot. If not, the fishermen would get meager payments, and they would bring the fish back to eat it before it went bad. The storekeeper had never discounted fish, even toward the very end of its shelf life. If he had, no one would have purchased it until the last minute.

The new store, however, bought fish outright. So, unlike the previous store, they were able to sell it for cheap. Staff at the store also cooked some in-house, increasing both its market value and their profit ratio by aiming for bachelors who couldn't be bothered to cook for themselves. Boiling and frying also postponed the fish's expiry date, essentially making it into a new product.

Any fresh fish that wasn't sold would be dried or pickled right after the store closed. That was all that was needed to make buying the fish viable, and the fishermen were highly motivated by the fact that every fish caught meant more money in their pockets.

The store also sold Japanese fishing nets and angling tools, and Mitsuha had already showed everyone just how effective they were. She had even traveled to a Japanese fishing village and asked a random elder how to properly throw a net.

I sure drew a lot of old people's attention. Ugh, I threw that thing so many times, I thought my arms were gonna fall off.

Mitsuha had also prepared a place to dry seaweed and shellfish. Besides the standard kelp, they also gathered sea lettuce and other local varieties of edible algae. Women and children also took part in the process, even doing some fishing around the rocky areas, contributing to the local income just as much as the men.

Everyone in the fishing village was more enthusiastic than ever before. Meanwhile, the people of the farming villages knew full well that agriculture was a more time-consuming process than fishing, but upon seeing the effects their new lord's work had on the fishing village, they couldn't help but be excited for the results of their experiments and the harvests that would follow.

And Mitsuha, unable to look at the gloomy faces of the mountain village people, gifted them a whole bunch of Japanese axes.

Besides selling much of the same stock as the previous store, the new one also sold things Mitsuha bought from Petz or brought over from Japan. This included goods she had sold in the capital, like two-in-one shampoo, disposable lighters, CalorieMates, or bagged ramen, but there were also ultra-cheap canned foods, long-lasting snacks, iron farm equipment, tableware, LED flashlights, writing supplies, and other useful items.

The locals now had enough purchasing power to afford such things, but Mitsuha's sights were set on customers from the neighboring counties. Her goal wasn't just to sell things, but to create an influx of people coming to Yamano County, which would in turn create a steady flow of products and money. The products aimed at these travelers wouldn't sell for a while, but none of it expired quickly, so there was nothing to worry about.

Rumors soon began to spread throughout the neighboring areas.

"Ya hear 'bout that store in Yamano County?"

"The Lightning Archpriestess herself is selling stuff from her country."

"It 'as more things than 'er store in the cap'tal, an' they're cheaper, too!"

"If you're lucky, you can meet the Archpriestess herself."

"There's even a guy who bought somethin' from the Archpriestess 'erself an', uhh, touched 'er finger!"

Yamano County was a seaside territory, so it wasn't strange for products "brought from her homeland by ship" to be cheaper there than in the inland

capital.

Mitsuha prepared for the gradually increasing number of visitors by remodeling the inn and eatery. She changed the hours so that it was always open, staffing it with enough employees to support that change. To top it all off, she even installed a bath.

The son of the eatery owners had been called back from the Bozeses' county. Mitsuha had taught him how to make Yamano Cuisine and created a moderately expensive menu.

My county's development is going great…if you ignore the mountain villages, anyway.

Not having many options, Mitsuha brought over some shiitake mycelium from Japan. She ordered the villagers to create numerous small holes in unprocessed logs, mix the mycelium with wet sawdust, and stuff it inside. She then melted some wax onto a sponge and used it to seal the holes. That would keep the mycelium-sawdust mix from drying up and prevent insects from getting inside. All that was left was to line them up in a dark, damp place.

The folk wisdom of mushroom farming!

Shiitake could be fried, boiled, used for soup stock, and more—they were as useful as mushrooms could be. If dried, they would even weigh less and last longer. Mitsuha intended to let the new visitors try them out, after which they would inevitably spread the word. Shiitake would be Yamano County's specialty product, and they would have a total monopoly on it.

Maybe I should get bamboo shoots, too? They last a long time. Wait, no… There are bamboo groves in every county. Same with yams, nuts, and fruit. I guess I don't have much else besides charcoal and metal production. I'll get

started on gathering the iron sand, then. Wait, you need magnets for that, don't you? I'll have to pick up some of those neodymium ones. I wanna see how strong the "apex of permanent magnets" really is!

Mitsuha then had to decide whether to look for placer deposits on the coast, in the river, or seek out iron sand veins in the mountain. She figured it could be a good way for children to earn some extra money, though it would likely go to their families. The villagers still had it rough, as the blessings of the tax cut would only become apparent after the next harvest.

For now, I'll just get those magnets.

Chapter 20
Agents

Mitsuha visited the mercenary captain for the first time in a while. Developing her county had kept her far too busy to stop by. Besides grenades, which somehow always managed to end up behind her, she was already capable of using most of the weapons she carried.

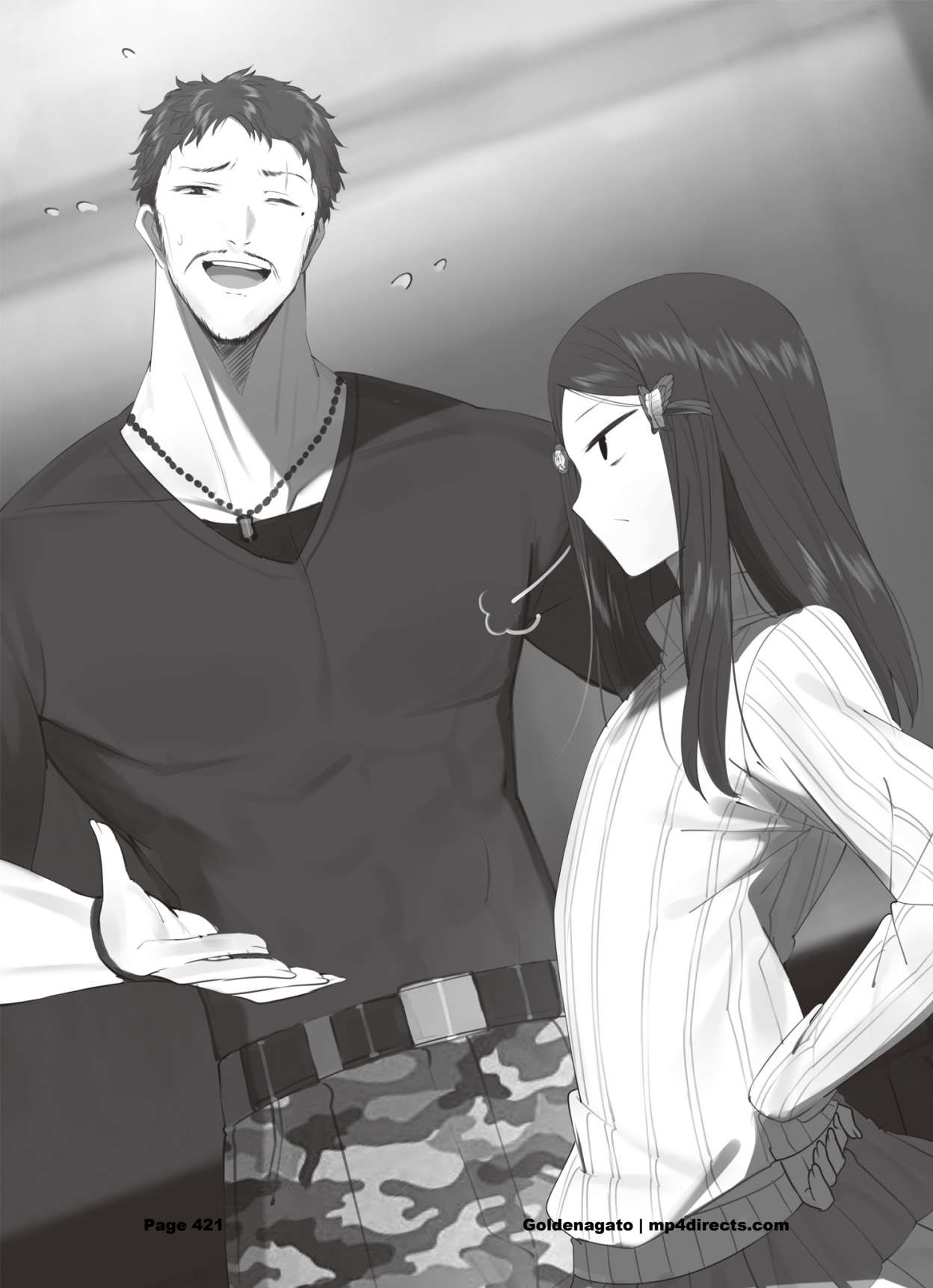
That doesn't mean much, though. I know how to shoot, yeah, but my accuracy is still really low.

The mercs had made a nice sum of money from the dragon scales, meat, and other parts. To keep some degree of fairness and prevent anyone from monopolizing the samples, they'd set limits on how much one country could buy. Calling their prices "expensive" would have been an understatement. Any countries that complained, however, had their shares put on auction or sold to megacorporations.

That's just nasty, Mitsuha winced.

They had also secured some of the rights to discoveries, inventions, and products born from research into the dragon material. All in all, Wolf Fang was now filthy rich.

"Whoa, you'll get your share, too. Don't look at me like that," the captain said. Mitsuha had narrowed her eyes, and it was enough to spook him a little.



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“So, will you still do merc work?” she asked.

“Well, it’s the only thing we’re good at,” he replied. “Sure, we could divide the money and split up, but then we’d have nothin’ to do. We’d probably just waste our cash, get hassled for it, or get tricked an’ go back to being broke. Just keepin’ the team together’s safer. I mean, what kinda moron’d pick a fight with us? Though, yeah, it’s nice that we don’t have to take ball-bustin’ jobs just to make ends meet anymore. We’re not plannin’ to fight anytime soon.”

Makes sense, Mitsuha thought. *Why would anyone risk their lives for money if they’ve already got it made?*

“Oh, by the way, I told you that I’m running an entire county now, right? Would you help me out if we had a bandit problem or something?”

“You bet. Yer jobs get special treatment. People over there ain’t got guns, so it ain’t likely that any of us’d die. But if someone did, then that’d be all they were worth. I’m damn sure everyone’d volunteer for whatever job ya gave us.”

“Uhh, I’m not in a place that can be invaded by other countries, so I doubt I’d ever need as much firepower as last time.”

That’d be way too excessive.

“That aside, do you know where I could get a wooden ship that only needs a crew of about ten to twenty people?” Mitsuha thought that, unlike Japan, the countries around Wolf Fang’s base might still use wooden ships without engines, but…

“A galley? What, yer place still got slaves or somethin’?” the captain asked, his eyes wide.

I guess I won’t get one here, Mitsuha concluded.

She had no training planned for the day, so she just loitered around the

base. That was when she was struck with the idea to buy a tank or an autocannon.

Wolf Fang's "God" had performed well during that fight… It was some damn good advertising. I'll buy one once I'm richer, though. LAVs with 5.56mm guns are too weak. An infantry tank with a 20mm autocannon is where it's at. Wait, just who am I planning to fight?!

She decided to leave for now…but before returning to the other world, she would go shopping. Not in Japan, however; she could shop in this country just fine. She could get many things that were inaccessible in Japan, plus they were cheaper. In some stores, she was already a regular, so they often gave her extras or pieces of candy.

Yeah, I know I look twelve, damn it!

"Yer goin' out to town?" the captain asked.

"Yeah. I've got some shopping to do," said Mitsuha.

The captain lowered his voice. "There've been some weirdos sniffin' around lately. I'm thinkin' they're spies from another country."

"What're they after?"

"A way to get to the other world, prob'ly. Or materials an' tech we don't have here. One of our morons uploaded your photos to our homepage, an' since you an' I started doin' business, we'd exchanged those gold coins a bunch'a times before the big reward from the princess. Any pro who takes a good look at us would realize that you've gone between here an' the other side tons'a times by now."

"I understand materials, but…technology? From a world of swords and bows?"

“Ya know what I mean. Magic. Witchcraft. Voodoo. Whatever you wanna call it.”

“Ohhh.” Mitsuha now understood.

These people─or their nation─wanted to secure the rights to the other world and maybe even occupy it with their armed forces. They probably thought they could exchange some twenty-four-dollar piece of junk for a large plot of land, or a lighter for uncut diamonds.

Little did they know that Mitsuha’s world-jumping power wasn’t anything scientific, or some dimensional tunnel between the worlds. Even if they captured her and ordered her to take them there, she could just jump by herself, or jump with them to the peak of a freezing mountain while leaving their clothes and weapons behind─the possibilities were endless.

As long as she wasn’t killed instantly, she could world-jump to escape at any time, so people who were forbidden from killing her couldn’t do anything to her. Even if they put her to sleep somehow to interrogate her later, she could jump away from them the instant she regained consciousness. They could only get something out of her if she was willing.

Great. Now I’m mildly interested in seeing what’d happen if I escaped while taking all the supports of the building with me. That potentially gory idea aside… They all think I’m from the other world, and even if they find out my real name, I don’t have any close family members. Oh, how I’d laugh if they tried to take my uncle and aunt hostage. All in all, this really isn’t a big deal.

“All right. I’m sure it won’t be much of a problem, but just keep my name consistent with the story you told everyone. It wouldn’t be good for me if my *true name* spread too far.”

“Uh, yeah… Got it.” Her emphasis on “true name” had caught the captain off guard.

Just ask that anime fan on your team, cap. He’ll probably know what I’m talking about.

One of Wolf Fang’s members drove Mitsuha to town. The mercs had even argued among themselves over who would be the one to do it, which made Mitsuha feel like she had finally blossomed. She could’ve gone to town by world-jumping, but since that always came with the danger of being spotted, and because it was less than half an hour away by car, she’d decided to accept the ride. Thirty minutes of idle road chatter didn’t seem like time wasted, either.

The road had no traffic lights along the way, so the distance between the base and the town was a pretty straight shot, about 31 miles. A mercenary hive couldn’t be too close to a civilian settlement, after all.

Once the merc had dropped Mitsuha off, he simply turned around and drove back to the base. He knew that once she was done shopping, she would just jump back to “her world,” so there was no point in waiting for her.

For some reason, the mercs seemed to assume that, although Mitsuha could jump *from* any place on Earth, she could only jump *to* their base from the other world. They probably believed that anywhere was good for the jump’s initiation, but the destination needed some sort of marker, which she had set up in Wolf Fang’s base.

Let them think whatever they want, I say. Could end up keeping me safe somehow.

As Mitsuha walked around town shopping for ingredients and the like,

someone called out to her.

"Excuse me, young lady, do you have a moment?"

She turned to see a blond-haired, blue-eyed man in his forties with a pleasant aura about him. He looked to be just short of six feet tall and wore a dark suit. Alongside him stood two younger men who were also clad in dark suits.

Is that a rule for this crew or something?

"Yes. What is it?"

As she spoke, knowledge of the Russian and Chinese languages flowed into Mitsuha's mind. The Russian was fluent, while the Chinese was slightly less perfect. He'd spoken to her in English, but she had already mastered that, so there were no changes there.

I guess he's a Russian who learned both English and Chinese.

Needless to say, Mitsuha had replied to him in English.

"I would like to talk to you about something. Is that all right?" he asked.

"Huh? Well, sure, if it doesn't take too long."

The man smiled. "Excellent. What do you say we chat over some lunch? Let us bring you somewhere."

A car as dark as their suits sat idle behind them.

There's no way a frail girl would just hop in there alongside three fishy-looking men and their driver. Do they think I don't know that much 'cause I'm "not from this world"?

"I'll have to pass. I was told that in this world, you shouldn't go anywhere with people you don't know, or get into their cars."

They furrowed their brows in frustration, clearly wondering who had told

her such a thing.

"But I wouldn't mind talking with you over some tea in that place over there," Mitsuha added, pointing.

Left with no choice, the men nodded and followed her.

I doubt they're planning to kidnap me right away. They probably just wanted to establish contact this time. Still, you can never be too careful.

"Err, this place is…" one of the men trailed off, bewildered.

Boy, we're sticking out like a sore thumb. Any secrecy they wanted is out the window, Mitsuha thought.

The establishment was full of young girls, and they were three men in suits. As you'd expect, this made them the center of attention. They had come to a café that specialized in sweets, and it enjoyed decent popularity among the local girls.

I chose it on purpose, obviously. They can't pull anything shady here. Hahahaha!

Mitsuha walked to a corner table and sat with her back against the wall. Generally, she believed it was best to avoid situations that had no clear escape route, like interactions with pyramid-schemers, cultists, or ex-classmates surrounded by friends she inevitably didn't know. However, this time she was willing to forego her caution because of her world-jumping power and the nature of this establishment.

She called for a waitress and ordered a cake set. Two of the men went for coffee, while the third asked for a banana sundae topped with chocolate and whipped cream. The first two glared at him.

Oh, I get it. He wanted to try it, but didn't have the courage to come in here by himself. Well, mister, I hope you enjoy it.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” Mitsuha asked, making no effort to keep her voice down. She intended to emphasize the fact that she wasn’t acquainted with them; she was just a girl who had been approached by some strange men she didn’t know.

Her tactic was super effective. A group of women around twenty years old gaped at Mitsuha’s table in shock, then glanced at them repeatedly while taking their phones out of their bags. The men didn’t notice this, as they were looking at Mitsuha─who had nothing but a wall behind her─and their backs were turned to the other customers.

Just as planned.

Looking a bit uncomfortable, the man who had first addressed her began speaking in a hushed voice. “I’ll get straight to the point. Are you the princess from the other world?”

Yep, he’s not beating around the bush at all!

“Yes. How do you know that?”

“Oh, most excellent! We are from a country that wishes to form a diplomatic relationship with Your Highness’s kingdom. We can even dispatch our army to fight against the demon king!”

Yeah, yeah. You just wanna get a foothold in there and then take it all by force. But what d’you want from that world, anyway?

Modern weapons became useless without supplies and maintenance, and no matter how powerful they were, they’d be fighting on far too many fronts. The constant night raids would deprive their soldiers of sleep, and someone could sneak in and poison their food and water. They’d also have problems stocking up on those supplies, so they’d quickly burn through what they had and starve to

death.

“Oh, but that matter has already been dealt with by heroes from this world,” Mitsuha lied. “All that’s left now is to take care of the remnants, and that’s something people of my world should do by themselves.”

The men’s surprise was written all over their faces. “Err, really? But what if a dragon attacks you again?”

“Oh, ancient dragon attacks are a once-every-few-centuries rarity. The mature ones are gentle and intelligent creatures, and the ones that do attack humans are just juveniles being naughty.”

That’s what I’ve been told by a scholar from that world, anyway.

“Is…that so?”

At this moment, their orders arrived. As Mitsuha looked up at the waitress and saw the state of the café, she almost choked. The hot spot for young girls was full of people who didn’t belong. There were groups of men scattered throughout the café, all wearing plain, dark suits that wouldn’t have stood out anywhere else. Not a single table was open, so these men had been forced to share with the female customers. They appeared to feel quite awkward about it.

The men at Mitsuha’s table had also noticed this, but they prioritized the conversation. If they were to leave Mitsuha, the other agents would surely jump on the opportunity to speak with her themselves. Turning a blind eye to the situation, they resumed talking to Mitsuha.

“Wouldn’t it be best for the future of your motherland if we established diplomatic relat—”

“Лояльность к Родине.”

“HUH?!” The three men looked absolutely flabbergasted.

“I’ve been told those are the words often said by Ivanov, a renowned hero celebrated in my country. He’s known for saving my great-grandfather’s life, among other things. Supposedly, it means ‘Loyalty to the Motherland.’”

The three men blinked, their cheeks flushing.

“H-He’s from our country!” one of them yelped. Everyone in the café turned to stare at him.

Now this is getting interesting.

“What? Ivanov is from this world? *The* Ivanov?”

“Yes! That name… Those words… He *must* have been from our country!” The agents were ecstatic.

“Well then, um, do you know of his legendary divine weapons? The Avtomat Kalashnikova Forty-Seven, the Tokarev, and the Arrpeegee Seven─God’s Lightning?”

“Yes, yes, YES!” They were nearly crying by this point.

“This meeting must’ve been determined by your ancestor and our hero! Our countries should definitely establish a good relationship!”

The older man tried to lean forward and take Mitsuha’s hand, but another man abruptly cut in.

“May I have a moment?” he asked.

The agents Mitsuha had been talking to glared at the buzzkill and his associates. The newcomers seemed to feel the conversation was taking an unfavorable turn and had decided to intervene before their competition got ahead.

“Your Highness, would you be willing to talk with us as well?”

Mitsuha beamed at the intruder. “Yes, of course! I don’t want to say the

same things over and over. I'd like it very much if we can settle this all at once."

The men who had gotten to her first clenched their teeth in anger. Every other man in the room stood and walked over to their table, gathering around Mitsuha. Unable to stand by and watch as a large group of men surrounded a young girl, the other customers all took out their phones. They were going to call the police, of course. Some of the girls even prepared to save Mitsuha, gripping cake knives and forks in their hands.

The men, however, were too focused on Mitsuha to realize what was going on around them. They also assumed normal citizens wouldn't go out of their way to get involved in something like this and would instead merely pretend they weren't seeing anything.

Additionally, the men didn't feel they were doing anything illegal. Equipped with this mentality, they had forgotten where they were and how the situation might have looked. Surrounding a girl who looked no older than twelve made them more than suspicious enough to warrant a police call.

"Well, now, this is a lot of people," said Mitsuha. "Too many for this place, if you ask me. I think we should talk at a later date, and in a better environment. I'll make sure to keep in touch, so can you give me your contact details?"

Her audience quickly whipped out their business cards or scribbled down their info, then handed these over to Mitsuha. The agent who had first approached Mitsuha looked extremely agitated, but he still believed they had the upper hand. He figured he could talk to her again once all the other agents were out of the way, or make an agreement to meet up in secret. After all, her ancestor's benefactor had been from *his* country.

Just as that thought went through his mind…

“Is this where all the reports are coming from?!” someone shouted.

It was one of the *twelve* policemen storming into the café. There had been so many calls about a girl being surrounded by men that a whole bunch of patrol cars had arrived at the scene. After scanning the room, the officers became aggressive.

“Don’t move! Little lady, do you know these people?”

Mitsuha replied pleasantly, “No, I don’t. They called out to me in the middle of the street, and told me to get into their car so we could have lunch and talk, but I had a bad feeling about it, so I said I wanted to go here instead.” Not a single word of this was a lie.

The other customers were impressed by the girl’s tact, and relieved that they had made the right choice in reporting the incident. All of the agents around Mitsuha were at a loss for words, mouths agape. The officers were glaring at them something fierce.

If looks could kill…

After all the agents had been taken away, Mitsuha was questioned and then released. The girls who had reported the incident warned her not to walk around by herself, then treated her to a parfait.

The agents were thoroughly investigated. They had their IDs checked and their fingerprints taken─suffice it to say, they weren’t having a very good time. The only agents who had called out to Mitsuha and brought her to the café were the first three, so those who came after insisted they were merely concerned bystanders wanting to intervene. However, they were still suspicious, and so had been reported to public safety.

As for law enforcement, they were overjoyed at having acquired so much data on foreign agents all at once. Because they had been captured, the detainees had essentially lost their value as agents. As bad as it was, however, it was still somewhat better than keeping their identities at the cost of looking like they had intended to kidnap a little girl.

Some days later, all the agents received a meeting invitation via email.

Oh, so the princess was serious, they thought.

The invitation surprised them, as they believed she had been spinning a story to buy time until the officers arrived. Looking back at it, the princess hadn't lied to the officers, nor had she been the one to call them.

Maybe she was just being honest? Perhaps there was no malice in it at all, they reflected.

Obviously, that was not the case.

The three agents who had first approached her were also thinking something along these lines. Nothing the princess had said was technically false, after all. They believed she was just unaware of the ways of this world and had no idea about the implications of her own words. Most importantly, they shared a country with the great hero of the princess's homeland. There was no reason to doubt they had the upper hand.

"In three days at the mercenary base, huh?"

Three days had passed since the invitations had been sent. The strategic meeting room in Wolf Fang's base was almost completely full. It had enough seats for all of Wolf Fang's members, but the ones sitting there now were representatives

from countries all over the world. Among them were mercs acting as Mitsuha's bodyguards. The parent countries of the agents from the café were not the only ones being represented─Mitsuha had invited many others.

The meeting was sudden and unofficial, so there were few big shots among the participants. Most of them were leaders of information agencies accompanied by their most trusted subordinates. Naturally, they had been given broad discretionary power; the high-ranking officials actually in charge of foreign affairs wouldn't put in an appearance until things had progressed.

Once everyone had gathered, Mitsuha began.

"Thank you for coming all this way. We're here to negotiate diplomatic relations between my territory and yours. As I mentioned in the invitation, we will start with a rite of tribute."

A tribute was normally something a weaker country gave to a more powerful one, which would then repay them with something several times more valuable. However, Mitsuha was warping this tradition in her favor.

The representatives would all give their tributes to her, but she would only respond to the one who gave her what she liked the most. Her payment in return would be mostly symbolic and worth little─the main point would be the honor of being chosen. It also wouldn't give the winner any advantage in the negotiations─she was playing them like fiddles.

Though there was little value in the material reward, they were all hell-bent on getting in the alien princess's good graces. Jewels, dresses, honorary titles… The things they had brought were endless. To prevent preconceptions and keep things fair, the participants didn't say which countries they represented. Even so, Mitsuha *did* know some of them without anyone having to tell her.

The representatives stifled a laugh when they saw one particular country smugly present her with an AK-47 assault rifle, a Tokarev pistol, and an RPG-7. Their laughs were justified, as these were all weapons that had seen their peak popularity come and go a long time ago. They were barely worth anything, but the man who handed them over was nothing if not confident. Yet even that wasn't enough to faze Mitsuha.

Finally, it was the turn of a certain developing country.

"These are the deeds to two old, wooden, oar-propelled ships. Both are forty-two feet long and ten feet wide."

Guffaws echoed around the room.

"Really?!" Mitsuha cried.

The laughter was cut short.

"Oh, my… How did you know I wanted that?!"

"Ours is a country without money or specialties, but we still wanted to please you, so we asked the mercenaries about what you'd like, and they mentioned that you wanted a wooden ship."

"Yes, yes I do! I really do! Oh, we can finally start seining. They'll do the job until we can start making our own ships!"

Instead of showing off their wealth or technology, these representatives had simply given her something they thought she'd like. Mitsuha greatly appreciated their consideration.

Small or not, sincere countries sure are great!

Upon seeing her excitement, some of the representatives from major countries began to panic and attempt to offer her "bigger and better" ships, but she refused. She told them she didn't need any ships her citizens couldn't run,

maintain, or use as a reference during construction.

In the end, the winning country was the small nation that had presented her with the ships. Their prize was a breeding pair of horned rabbits, a decoration made of a strange metal unlike any on Earth, and two tickets for a three-day trip to the other world. The prizes were worthless to Mitsuha, but the people in the room stared like they would kill to possess them.

They had all realized that jewels and dresses weren't the right strategies, but it was too late.

It's not like I don't like jewels. I can sell them for a pretty penny. I just feel like developing my land is way more important than money right now. Anyway, time to end the ceremony and get down to business.

"Now, let's talk. Why are you all so keen on forming a diplomatic relationship with us?"

"Err, what?" Her audience didn't quite understand.

"First of all, though I did have noteworthy status in one country, I'm now under the wing of another. They gave me a small territory to run, but that's it. I basically only have real power in my own land. I can't negotiate with other countries, form contracts, or allow a foreign military into our lands without express permission from His Majesty the King."

They had all been under the impression that Mitsuha was the current princess, so her words came as a shock.

"But…what about the battle against the demon king's army?"

"Back then, we were short on time and options, so I had to hire some volunteers… Heroes from this world. Their reward was nothing but gratitude. Right now, I'm nothing but a low-level local lord."

“Th-Then what of diplomatic relations?!”

“Again, I have no right to make such decisions, and I can’t invite foreigners to visit us just like that,” she replied matter-of-factly.

They were all beginning to realize that circumstances were completely different than they had imagined.

“Then, could you make an effort to introduce us to the king?”

“What do you intend to talk to him about?”

“Why, things like diplomacy, embassies, and trade, of course.”

“And how would you do that?”

“Huh?”

“I truly have no idea how you plan to trade or dispatch your ambassadors. Do your countries have many people with world-jumping abilities? And do they have the skill to retain their life force when transporting objects or other people?”

The room fell silent.

“Oh, did you think I would carry everything for you? That would kill me in no time. And what would you do if I died?”

After a few moments, someone spoke up.

“Err… Does anyone else have the power?”

“My power was given to me by a wandering god who happened to pass through my world. I’m the only one who can do this, and it’s not the kind of thing I can pass on to someone else.” Mitsuha’s response left no room for hope.

“Umm, you can have this back.” Upon hearing of the troubles surrounding large-scale world-jumps, the representative who had given her the boats tried to hand his tickets back.

There's no way he's an agent, she thought. *He's too good for that.*

"Don't you worry about that. Over time, I should recover from the toll of taking one or two people with me. And the ships are more than valuable enough for me to sacrifice a bit of my life force."

Upon hearing this, one man stood up. "Then please, take us to your country! As a man from the hero's motherland, I want us to establish contact and form an alliance!"

The others had no idea what he was talking about. He ignored them and continued, "That is surely what is best for the sake of your motherland and Russia both!"

"'Russia'? Is that your country's name?" Mitsuha asked.

The man realized he hadn't yet said it. *He must work in intelligence. He probably made it a habit to avoid saying his or his country's name lightly,* she thought.

"Yes, sorry for not saying it before, but my country is called the 'Russian Federation'!"

"Wait, what?" Mitsuha feigned surprise. The Russian representative didn't know what to make of her expression.

"You tricked me! That's not where the Great Hero Ivanov is from!"

He flinched at her sudden outburst, awaiting her next words.

"Ivanov's country was called the 'Union of Soviet Socialist Republics'!"

"Ohh, yes, that is the Russian Federation's old name. It was simply changed," he said.

"Huh? You just changed the name? You didn't have an invasion, a rebellion, or a usurpation or anything?"

“No. Our country was Russia at first, but then it merged with a few others to become the Soviet Union. Then it went back to being Russia again.”

Mitsuha faked relief. “Ah, so that’s it. Our hero said he was from the ‘Ukraine’ area of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. So now it’s the Ukraine area of the Russian Federation… I see, I see.”

Immediately, representatives here and there either choked on their drinks or spat them out. Then came the whispers.

“Ukraine…”

“Crimean invasion…”

Mitsuha pointed at one of them. “You there! Please tell me what they’re talking about!”

The man held back a chuckle and did his best to explain. “Well, Ukraine is a country that has a history of oppression at the hands of Russia. There was a major massacre back in the day. Even recently, Russia invaded Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula, bringing the country into a state of war.”

The Russian representative glared at the speaker while Mitsuha looked at the Russian with stone-cold eyes. It was just an act, of course.

I already knew about Ukraine, duh.

“You lied to me.”

“Err, no! That’s not what I…” His voice trailed off.

Now that she had publicly shamed him, she could completely ignore everything he said. In the eyes of her audience, he had tried to fool the princess, and he belonged to a nation that had oppressed her hero’s motherland.

It looked like the Russians would be the most persistent of the bunch, so I went and made a reason to ignore them. And my plan worked out perfectly. Yay

me!

"Now, back to the matter of diplomacy. Even if we started trading, we couldn't exchange anything in large quantities. I'm sure you think you could make a profit off something insignificant, but I know this world's market, so selling something like disposable lighters for a gold coin each just wouldn't fly.

"Then there's what *we* have to offer: small-grained, low-quality wheat, meager amounts of fish, raw game that probably doesn't meet this world's safety standards… There's no demand for any of this here, is there?

"I can't allow uncontrolled trade of this world's goods, or bleeding my world of its money and gems. It could destroy industries or the economy as a whole, and you could hardly call that trade. There's no guarantee I won't get into an accident or fall ill somewhere down the line, so I don't intend to take up the heavy role of mediator and cart-horse, going around linking entire countries.

"With all that said, what is it that you want me to do? Please make it something that isn't a detriment to me or the nations of my world."

A few whispers danced around the room, but otherwise, no one seemed to have any ideas.

It was then that the representative of another small country piped up.

"Umm, would you be able to give us ore and animal samples?"

The others lit up. Unknown animals, undiscovered metals… These alone could generate immense amounts of wealth. Even the dragon Wolf Fang had brought to this world was still a gold mine of discoveries.

"Oh, I can agree to that much," said Mitsuha. "Very well, I shall give some samples to both your country and the one that gave me the ships. Please return to me if you discover anything."

“Y-Yes, certainly!” The two who would receive the samples were overjoyed, leaving the rest feeling bitter and perplexed.

“Please wait!” said the American representative. “You need advanced technology to handle the animals properly! You should give them to the larger powers. Our epidemic prevention infrastructure could handle any potential foreign bacteria or parasites they may have!”

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about that. I always make sure to jump without any malicious bacteria, viruses, or parasites. You would only have to keep the animals from escaping and multiplying in the wild.” Mitsuha revealed this fact as if it were inconsequential.

This was the reason she never worried about spreading pathogens whenever she jumped. The world-jump manual the “being” had installed in her brain covered that subject in detail.

“She can do *what*?” a few people blurted.

One of the audience members─an elderly man─stood up. He didn’t look to be part of an intelligence agency. Mitsuha’s best guess was that he worked in foreign affairs.

“Your Highness, umm… If someone suffering from infection, viral disease, poison, or a toxic substance jumped to another world with you and you made it so that the pathogens and everything harmful stayed behind…what would happen to them?”

“What?” It was Mitsuha’s turn to be surprised. She hadn’t even considered it.

The sick person would jump to the other world, leaving their pathogens and harmful substances behind, right? Ahh! I should’ve thought of that when

Margaret was sick!

Mitsuha gripped her head in her hands, and an uncomfortable air enveloped the room.

Oh no! If this spreads, it'll be earth-shattering! I'm not so dumb I can't see the potential implications of my world-jumping on sick people. I need to make sure they don't say a word to anyone! But how? They're intelligence agents from all over the world!

"Everyone, listen!" Mitsuha said, her voice cracking. "Nothing happened just now, okay? You didn't hear a thing!" Beads of sweat were breaking out on her brow. "I forbid anyone here from mentioning this to *anyone*, even if it's your superior or someone even higher than that!

"If I *am* approached by any one of your countries' elites about this, I will put your nation on a worldwide blacklist so that it can't receive any technology or information related to the other world from other nations. And any country that tries to obtain it regardless will be treated likewise. You will not be allowed access to any research regarding the dragon or anything else, nor will you be allowed to interact with me. Anyone trying to mediate for you will receive the same treatment. However…"

Mitsuha took a deep breath.

"…if you all keep this secret safe, and something happens to one of your family members, I promise to try the world-jump treatment on them. But if the secret is leaked, I will retract this promise, as there won't be any point to your sworn silence after that. If that happens, I will never, *ever* use my world-jump to treat any of you, your families, your government officials, or information agents."

She stopped to think for a moment.

"Oh, but I wouldn't mind starting to reward your silence again under one condition: the leak's culprit and all those who heard the secret died, and I received concrete proof that there were no records or anything left."

Silence followed.

The representatives exchanged glances. They knew they were all done for if any one of them reported this to their superiors, and all of them held their families dear. While the seasoned intelligence agency veterans would be able to keep quiet, the desk jockey higher-ups and politicians─who would be nothing but civilians if they lost elections─would jump on this in a heartbeat, and perhaps not even for their families; they would just smell the money in it.

And if the secret leaked… These people here could kill with ease. If not for themselves, then for their families.

I'm confident they'll all keep their mouths shut. Considering the warning I gave, it's also in their countries' best interests.

Afterwards, Mitsuha held a private meeting with the two representatives to whom she had promised samples, and they had a hearty chat about spinning wheels and other things that might be useful to her county. Just as she'd expected, she got more out of her interactions with people from developing countries than first-worlders. She was glad she'd gone out of her way to invite them. Their nations had even sent foreign affairs workers and ministers instead of intelligence operatives. The smaller countries had been more than willing to spare them for the visit.

Next, Mitsuha told everyone to contact her strictly through the mercenary

captain and to stop trying to meet or keep tabs on her in town. She followed up with a warning that countries who defied these orders would be completely ignored from that moment on. Now she felt she could travel around Earth's cities in peace, and because they were convinced that she was from another world, Mitsuha Yamano, the Japanese girl, would be safe, too.

She wasn't convinced the major world powers would behave, but for now, her position on Earth was secure, so she decided to shift her focus back to her county and its financial affairs. By now, she had separated her earnings as a viscountess and the money she earned herself, treating the former as her county's budget and using only the latter toward her goal of saving 80,000 gold coins for her retirement. They were essentially separate accounts.

Yamano County wasn't in a position where it would get involved in a fight with a neighbor. It also lacked notably fertile soil, underground resources, or military value, and to top it all off, it was quite small. Mitsuha didn't have to worry about outside dangers, so she could focus entirely on making money.

All right! I'm gonna get closer to my goal!!

At least, that's what she thought.

There's no end to this, is there?!

Bonus Chapter

Family

Colette was fast asleep in her bed. Careful not to wake her, Mitsuha sat on the edge and looked at the girl's face.

To Mitsuha, who had lost her parents and brother and been left all alone, Colette was her only family. But she knew thinking this way was idle fantasy, of course. Colette had her own parents, and though the two of them were good friends, she was only here because they were employer and employee.

That makes me a villain, since I took this young girl away from her parents for my own sake. Then again, it didn't look like they were sad to see her taken away. In fact, they were all very happy for her. And with Colette being just eight years old, you'd expect her to feel lonely after being separated from her family, but that's not the case, either.

Mitsuha recalled how excited Colette had been to see a noble's residence for the first time, how she ran around exploring all its corners, how she played with the things Mitsuha brought from Japan, and how she clung to her, not out of loneliness or worry, but simply because she was happy to be with her. It didn't look like she cared one bit about being away from her parents.

Uh, that's kind of a problem in itself!

Of course, as the one who had taken her away, Mitsuha was in no position to comment on that. Mitsuha had lost her own family and been separated from her friends, so Colette was now the only one Mitsuha could trust not to betray her. She used the girl's talents—which greatly surpassed those of the average

eight-year-old commoner─as an excuse to bring Colette to her side.

If Mitsuha had to guess, her parents were okay with parting with their daughter because it was this world's equivalent of sending their child off to boarding school. Not only was Mitsuha the one in charge, but the village was only half a day away on foot, and their little village girl would be a candidate to become a noble's vassal. To them, it was unbelievable. It was about the same as a prince on a white horse appearing before them and saying, "You're really the princess of such-and-such country. I'm here to take you away." Even winning the lottery couldn't compare to this, so perhaps the only obvious choice had been to let her go.

Colette was the first person Mitsuha had met in this world, and she had literally saved her life. She was strong─strong enough for Mitsuha to worry about her own spine and ribcage when the girl came in for a hug─bright, honest, sincere, and adorable. Colette was Mitsuha's friend, and she would protect her no matter what. Mitsuha even felt she could kill thousands of people for her, if need be, though she would probably just jump to Earth with her before she had to do something like that.

Then there was Sabine. Mitsuha would give her all to protect her, too. But since the girl was a princess, she would have tons of guards around her at all times. The only way Sabine would be in any real danger would be if the country was invaded and the capital fell. Of course, if the girl so desired, Mitsuha would save her by taking her to Earth.

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Knowing Sabine, she'd probably say that royalty can't abandon family─no, the people─and run away. I wonder if I own any anime series that explain what it means for royalty to continue their lineage.

Mitsuha's mind also drifted to the Bozeses' girl, Beatrice. She had promised the girl she would throw her her very own debutante ball. Letting her die was out of the question.

Same goes for Leah, the little apprentice maid; Noelle, the youngest of the new maids; all the other young maids; and the old─I mean, mature maids… I won't lose a single one of them.

Mitsuha stroked Colette's hair, and it flowed between her fingertips. The power of two-in-one shampoo.

Ngh… What's so heavy…?

Colette woke up to find something on her legs.

Mitsuha…

It was her dear friend, sleeping with her upper body resting on Colette's bed. She gently stroked Mitsuha's head.

I'll protect you no matter what, Mitsuha. I'll carry you to the village if I have to, or to another country if that's not good enough. I feel I could easily kill ten or twenty people for your sake.

Feeling Mitsuha's weight on her, Colette peacefully closed her eyes once more.

Bonus Chapter
The Mysterious Girl

Months had passed since the mysterious girl began visiting Wolf Fang's base. She always appeared out of nowhere, and disappeared just as abruptly. That was no exaggeration─the girl literally vanished each time. But she wasn't a ghost─she ate, used the bathroom, and got beet-red and angry when teased, making it clear she was very much alive.

At first, the captain had thought she was just a clueless noble girl from some tiny country. It wasn't unheard of for ladies from dangerous places to want to learn how to use firearms, after all. That was usually the job of their bodyguards, but the bodyguards themselves could be attacked, and there were places where they couldn't accompany the lady, such as ballrooms, changing rooms, or bathrooms. Ballroom defense was generally the responsibility of the ball's organizer, and the captain's take on that was that they couldn't complain if it got them killed, by terrorists or otherwise.

For this reason, it made sense for the girl to learn how to use handguns. He wasn't sure about the short sword, since it probably wouldn't see any use, but if she wanted to learn how to use one, that was her prerogative. The captain didn't care as long as he got his money. For all he knew, it could've been her way of exercising for a diet, which was all well and good.

However, the word "firearms" had given him the impression the girl would only want to learn how to use handguns, assault rifles, and maybe flashbangs and stun grenades to scatter her enemies, but she had actually insisted they teach

her how to use dangerous frag grenades, light machine guns, heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, mortars, recoilless rifles, and rocket launchers.

Some of that stuff's way outta the realm of "firearms," an' deep into the field of artillery! the captain thought.

Even if she learned how to use such weaponry, transporting and loading it wasn't something that could be done by one person, especially not a little girl. Still, it was business, and the captain didn't mind teaching her as long as she paid.

I don't give a damn if somethin' happens. I warned her enough. Our work here is done.

They'd had to ban her from using grenades, however. She couldn't throw past the danger zone, and the ones she swung above her head always went behind her.

It ain't a joke, damn it! If those weren't fake, five people would be dead! Her included!

He had found himself sighing constantly.

Though it had taken three times longer than usual, they had somehow finished the training.

We deserve a whole lotta praise for bearin' all that crap!

He had believed it was all over, but now he knew how naive that had been. The previous captain had told him, "Always imagine the worst-case scenario and prepare for something three times worse, 'cause that's exactly what you'll get," but it wasn't until now that he had really taken that advice to heart.

Finally, the day had come.

“I want to hire *all* of you. We’d move out in the morning, day after tomorrow. There are about twenty thousand enemies, including monsters. I’ll pay you forty thousand gold coins, guaranteed…if not more. You up for it?”

WHAT IN THE ACTUAL FUCK?!

That had been the start of their fight against the demon king’s army and its dragons─a battle for the fate of the world.

We’re heroes. We got sixty thousand gold coins, the title of “dragonslayers,” an’ a whole goddamn dragon, which got us even more money! Li’l lady, can I call ya an angel? I’d go for “goddess,” but you don’t have the cans fer th─OW! Did you just kick me?! Wait, I’m sorry, c’mon, put that ashtray down, will ya?! It’s heavy, expensive, and it hurts like hell.

Anyway, the mercenaries now had no trouble with funds. In fact, they were filthy rich, and they had a guaranteed source of income from the patents that would come from research into the dragon parts.

They could divide the money and split up, but they all knew it wouldn’t lead to anything good. They were self-aware buffoons who knew their place in the world and their own limits, so they had decided to just keep the team together and relax without taking any dangerous jobs. Those among them who were thrill-seekers could volunteer for whatever gigs they liked.

There was something else on the captain’s mind, however.

Just who is that girl?

“So yeah, I want all your guesses,” he said. “We’ll start with… Okay, Sparks.” He pointed at a mercenary who was holding up his hand.

“She’s a Magicannon Girl from the Dimensional World!”

“Next!”

“An elven princess! Look at that flat chest! She’s gotta be an elf!”

“You moron! What if she shows up while yer sayin’ that?! Yer gonna be eatin’ the sole of a kids’ size thirteen!”

“That’s her shoe size?! Holy crap, that’s tiny!”

“They don’t sell adult shoes in her size, so she either buys kids’ shoes or gets ’em custom-made… Boy, did she bitch about it.”

The mercs made a silent vow never to talk to her about shoe sizes.

“I think she’s a sorceress from the other world─a lady of noble birth who can travel between worlds and use translation magic! She came here a while back and spent lots of time studying, and that’s why she knows almost everything about this world!”

Well, that seems ’bout right, the captain thought.

“Oh, I think she also knows healing magic. Whenever she got hurt during training, there’d be no sign of it in just a few days.”

I had a similar hunch, an’ it sure seems possible. That’d mean she ain’t from Earth at all. She’s native to the other world, an’ her East Asian appearance has gotta be a coincidence. The country we went to was fulla white people, but she did say that she was from another country, which’s prob’ly a place inhabited by Asian types.

Well, it doesn’t matter to me whether she’s Asian, Black, or white. Best way to look at it is not her bein’ an alien, but that she’s from an Earth with a different history. The humans there’re too much like us for it not to be. Honestly, with horned rabbits an’ goddamn dragons an’ all, it wouldn’t be weird for the

people there to have horns, too… Or, like, six arms or somethin'.

"Okay, to summarize, the li'l lady's a magic girl from an Earth-like planet in a dimension kinda like ours. She started out as a princess in one country and is now a viscountess in another one. It's confirmed she can use three kinds of magic: world-traversal, translation, an' healing. There could be more. She came here a while ago, an' though there's some holes, she knows a whole lot about this world. Anyone seein' a problem here?"

No one said anything.

"All right, then. Nothing changes. If anyone asks, say her name's 'Nanoha,' an' don't ya dare leak any other info. Don't even upload photos of her to the Net!"

Some boys just looked away. Don't think I don't see ya.

They had all reached a conclusion they more or less expected. Mitsuha had brought stability to their lives, and they had no intention of betraying her. They also felt like they'd be doing even more business with her further down the line. Their lives were now safe, their pockets full, and their days calm. For the mercenaries, this kind of life had always been a dream they never thought possible. But now that they had it, their hearts were filled with a yearning for something else.

Was it alcohol? Women? Gambling? Travel? No, it was none of those.

It's that world, the captain thought. *We got a safe, clean life lined up fer us now, but all I can think about is that crazy, dangerous world. All those monsters, man. Goblins, orcs, ogres, an' tons of others… Shit, they had dragons. DRAGONS!*

I wanna go back. I need to go back! But I'm not a damn battle junkie! At least, I don't think so. But I really, really wanna go back to that world.

"Shit! Why do I wanna go there so bad?!"

"Patience, young Grasshopper."

The captain turned around to see the young lady smiling at him. She swelled with pride, like she had just said something she'd always wanted to say.

Uh, should I ask her? Nothing'll change if she says no, but if it's a yes, then it's a goddamn godsend!

"C-Can ya take me there?"

"No."

"DAAAMN IIIT!"

The captain ran out, ignoring whatever the girl said to stop him.

All I can do right now is run away!

"UUUGGGHHHH!"

He looked to his side and saw two others running and shouting alongside him. They were the ones who had been on break when Mitsuha called, and hadn't gotten to become dragonslayers.

I see. You guys asked too, huh.

"Ngh!" One of them wiped his nose, sobbing. "Wah… Waaah!"

Don't cry! Don't cry, damn it…! Waaah…

Afterword 1

Hello, my name is FUNA. Thank you so much for reading this book!

This is my third work to get published, with *Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?!* (Earth Star Novel) being the first, and *I Shall Survive Using Potions!* (Kodansha's K Light Novels) being the second. However, this was actually the first work I uploaded to the web novel site *Shosetsuka ni Naro* (I uploaded *Potions* alongside it, but *80K* started a day earlier).

Just like *Potions, 80K* concluded without anyone ever coming to license it. But right when I thought these works would be forgotten by society and live on only within my heart, I suddenly got an offer to turn both into light novels and manga! That even led to me resuming the web novels…

The works that were the foundation for publishing *Average Abilities* have now caught up and stand beside it… I don't have words to express just how moved I am. This is all thanks to everyone who supported these works while I was still uploading them and during the year after I was done. Thank you so much!

Now, I can only hope that you, dear reader, can become the reason the next volumes see the light of day…

Please watch K Light Novel for new releases from both *I Shall Survive Using Potions!* and *Saving 80,000 Gold in Another World for My Retirement.* Do it for the new volumes… And my ambitions…

And please check out the webcomic magazine *Suiyobi no Sirius* for both!

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(http://seiga.nicovideo.jp/manga/official/w_sirius/)

New *Potions* chapters come out on the first and third Wednesdays of the month, while *80K* comes out on the second and fourth! You basically have a "Weekly FUNA" thing going on there!

Welcome to FUNAFUNA World!

Afterword 2

Hey, I'm FUNA. Thank you very much for reading *Saving 80,000 Gold in Another World for My Retirement*!

In this volume, Mitsuha fought without restraint, unwittingly became known as the Lightning Archpriestess, and got a noble rank. What went so wrong on her journey to casually make money for her retirement?!

Mitsuha's running around the capital to develop her county. She tries to focus on her land, but then─OH, NO! A BACK ATTACK!

Mitsuha: "Save back attacks for volleyball, damn it!"

Please look forward to Mitsuha's endeavors in volume two! (Which will surely come out… I hope it comes out… It'd be nice if it does… It all depends on how well this volume sells!)

Also, volume one of Keisuke Motoe's manga adaptation of this series is out! Get up and go to wherever you can get it!

Oh, and check out the newest chapters on the webcomic magazine, *Suiyobi no Sirius* (http://seiga.nicovideo.jp/manga/official/w_sirius/)! A new chapter comes out every second and fourth Wednesday. (*I Shall Survive Using Potions!* gets a new one every first and third Wednesday.)

My sincerest thanks to my editor, the illustrator, the binding designer, the proofreaders, the printing, publishing, distribution, and sales staff, the administrators of *Shosetsuka ni Naro*, the comment section where people pointed out writing errors and gave me advice, and of course, everyone who picked up

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this book.

Thank you so much!

Please continue to support this series through both the novel and the manga. I hope to see you again in the next volume…

Mitsuha: “My ambition has only just begun!”

Sabine: “Don’t stop until all the stars in the universe are yours, Lady Mitsuha.”

Mitsuha: “Oh no! I showed her too many DVDs! I’m a bad influence!”

FUNA

From the Kansai but residing in the Kanto, FUNA's first published novel was *Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?!* (although this series started first).

Having lived everywhere from Okinawa to Hokkaido, FUNA has worn the hats of amateur wireless operator, small boat sailor, and weather forecaster (not to mention seemingly being involved in aviation and the development and application of marine meteorological analysis systems, flying small aircraft, shooting guns, etc etc). What a weirdo.

Illustrator

Touzai

I'm lucky enough to make a living as a freelance illustrator, so I spend my days blissfully drawing my way through other worlds.

Saving 80,000 Gold in Another World for My Retirement 1

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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