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vol. **3**

Thank you
for your
purchase!

PEDDLER IN ANOTHER WORLD

**I CAN GO BACK TO MY WORLD
WHENEVER I WANT!**



“Um,
excuse me,
do you
mind
repeating
what you
just—”

“I said
I’m your
grandma.”

**Alice
Gawamio**
Shiro’s grandmother.
Known as “Alice the
Immortal Witch.”



“Mister
Shiro...
How do I
look?”

“Wh-
What
do you
think,
Shiro?
How...
How
does the
dress you
bought
look on
me?”

“You never answer when we call. We were starting to wonder if you were actually dead for real, bro-bro!”

“Bro! Can’t you at least text us from time to time to let us know you’re still alive?”

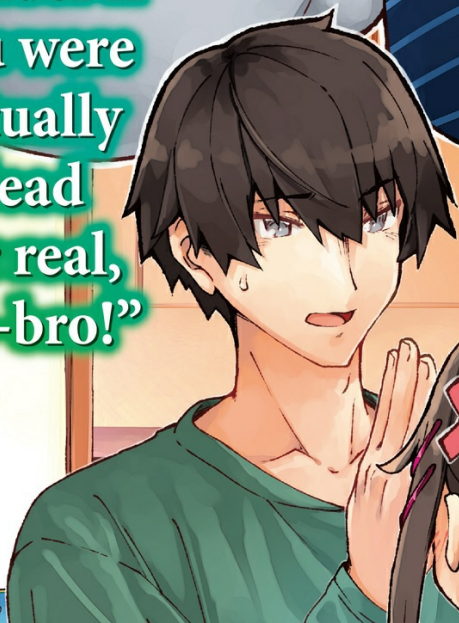


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Summary of the Previous Volume

Having settled into my new life as a peddler in another world, I—Shiro Amata—had to admit I was having a pretty amazing time in Ruffaltio. Well, at least I *had been*, right up until I found out that my believed-to-be-dead grandma was actually very much alive. And not only that, but she'd actually come to Ninoritch—the town I'd been spending most of my time in—on the day of the harvest festival the previous year. That had really gotten the cogs in my head whirring, because maybe, just maybe, that meant she'd put in an appearance at this year's harvest festival.

Speaking of which, it seemed there was going to be a surge of tourists coming to Ninoritch for the celebrations this year, so at the request of Karen, the town's beautiful mayor, I decided I would help her to organize this year's harvest festival. I was busy racking my brain to come up with some kind of attraction I could run at the festival when I was invited to go on a little mission with my good friends, the Blue Flash adventuring party. It was supposed to be a quick and easy task: venture out into the forest, pick some flowers, and be back in Ninoritch by the following day. But it could never be *that* simple, could it? After finding ourselves in a rather unfortunate situation, I ended up falling into a river and getting separated from my friends. I was on the verge of drowning when I was rescued by a fairy.

“I'm Patty Falulu!”

My encounter with this fairy called Patty wound up being a lot more significant than I'd initially realized. In a matter of weeks, we had escaped the forest together, searched high and low for her old friend, and saved all the fairies. Thanks to these escapades, not only were we now pretty much inseparable, she'd also forged strong bonds with all of my good friends.

And just like that, the day of the harvest festival arrived. After giving it much thought, I had decided to hold an alcohol auction, which ended up being a huge success. I was in the middle of enjoying the rest of the night with my friends, when all of a sudden, *she* appeared.

“Oh, is that Shiro I see?” the gorgeous young woman had said.

I had no idea who she was, so I naturally asked what her name was. The words she uttered next made my jaw hit the floor.

“I’m your grandma, you silly goose.”

Chapter One: The Reunion

“Huh?” I mumbled.

I was in the process of pressing the shutter button on my camera but immediately froze when the young woman’s words reached my ears. *What did she say? Did she just say she was my “grandma”?* No way. I must have misheard her.

“Um, excuse me, do you mind repeating what you just—” I started, but she didn’t let me finish my question.

“I said I’m your grandma,” she stated matter-of-factly. A smile had spread across her lips, almost as if she was amused by the situation.

Guess I hadn’t misheard her after all. This pretty young thing was really claiming to be my grandmother. I was utterly speechless. But can you blame me? After all, grandma was over eighty years old! She was an old woman! A senior citizen! But this girl in front of me was clearly a teenager! I guess she *might* have been twenty, but even that was really pushing it. I was still frozen to the spot, trying to make sense of the situation, when I heard footsteps behind me.

“Mister Shiro, is something wrong?” Aina asked as she half-jogged up to me. She was probably wondering why I hadn’t pressed the shutter button yet. “Mister Shiro?” she repeated when I didn’t answer her.

She glanced at me, then at the young woman, then back at me again, her head tilted to one side in confusion.

“Who’s this?” she asked, pointing to the girl. “Is she your friend?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” I said.

The young woman let out a deep, exasperated sigh. “To think my own grandson would pretend not to know me...” she lamented. “I have to say, I’m a little bit hurt.”

“Grandson?” Aina repeated, tilting her head to the other side this time.

“You heard right, cutie. I’m Shiro’s grandma,” the young woman said.

“But you’re so *young!*” Aina exclaimed in disbelief. “You’re really a grandma? Mister Shiro’s grandma?”

“That’s right. Take a good look at me. Don’t you think we look kind of similar?” My self-proclaimed “grandma” grinned as she formed V-signs with both hands.

“D-Double peace signs?” I stuttered.

Double peace signs were grandma’s trademark pose. It was the pose she’d adopted in the picture for her memorial altar, as well as in about eighty percent of the photos she’d taken while on her travels. According to what my dearly departed grandpa had once told me, she even threw double peace signs when she gave birth to my mom.

I stared intently at the young woman. Everything from the angle of her V-signs to the mischievous look in her eye was similar to grandma. No, it wasn’t just similar; it was *identical*. But even so...

“N-No way! My grandma looks more like an *actual* grandma! And...” I paused, raked my hands through my hair, and raised my voice. “Argh, I just don’t get it! Help me out here, someone!” I was seriously losing my marbles at the sheer madness of the situation.

Karen must have heard me yelling because she walked over to see what was going on. “Why are you screaming like that, Shiro? We’re all waiting for you to take the pho—”

The second her gaze landed on the young woman, she stopped speaking, even though she was mid-sentence. For some reason, her face immediately lit up.

“Ms. Alice!” she exclaimed, overjoyed and gawking at the woman. “You came again this year!”

“Oh, you’re the mayor, right?” the young woman said. “It’s been exactly a year since I last saw you. How are you? There seems to be a lot more people at this year’s festival, doesn’t there?”

“Y-Yes!” Karen said with a vigorous nod before grabbing me by the arm and dragging me toward my so-called grandma. “I asked Shiro to help me with the preparations, and we managed to make the festival bigger and better than it’s ever been!”

“Oh, did you now? Well, I guess me taking him to festivals since he was a baby really paid off in the end, huh?” the young lady said. “I hope my little Shiro hasn’t been causing you too much trouble, Miss Mayor.”

“Of course not!” Karen said quickly. “Quite the opposite, in fact. He’s been a huge help to us. I mean it. If it weren’t for him, today’s festival wouldn’t have been such a resounding success. Not to mention all the incredible work he’s done to help our little town to grow!”

Seriously, Karen? You’re really just gonna have a nice little chat with my self-proclaimed “grandma” while I’m having an existential crisis over here?

“Um, excuse me, Karen. Do you, uh...” I said hesitantly. “Do you know this lady?”

“Hm? What are you saying, Shiro? This is Alice the Immortal Witch! Didn’t you tell me she was your grandmother?” Karen said, replying with a question of her own. Her face was a picture of total bewilderment.

In truth, I was every bit as confused as she looked, and all I could do was say a quiet “Aw, crap” under my breath while my so-called grandma chuckled to herself.

“Why don’t you just accept the truth, Shiro? I really am your grandma,” she said with an air of finality, but when I didn’t say anything in response, she decided to drive the point home. “Tell me: who was it who got you into some clean clothes when you wet yourself on the way back from the movies when you were five?”

I couldn’t help but let out a gasp. Grandma was the only one in my family who knew about that particular embarrassing episode!

“S-So...” I said slowly, still bemused, “you really are grandma?”

“That’s what I keep telling you,” she said.

“Then what’s your favorite movie?” I asked after a pause. After all, I had to make really, *really* sure this wasn’t all a ruse.

“*Final Weapon*,” she answered without missing a beat.

“Your second favorite?”

“Hm, that’s a tough one. I was about to say *Lionheart*, but it might actually be *Dead Max*.”

“A-And who’s your favorite actor?” I continued.

She scoffed. “Well, that’s *obvious*, isn’t it? It’s Mel-sama. Mel Kipson-sama.”

All right, that sealed it. The young woman in front of me was, without a doubt, my grandmother. She’d gotten the questions about her favorite movies and favorite actor right, and she’d even pronounced the titles in broken English, like grandma always used to. Besides, there was no way in hell anyone from this world other than grandma would know the name of a Hollywood actor.

“Good grief. Just because we haven’t seen each other in a little while, you don’t trust your grandma anymore? That makes me really sad, Shiro,” she said, mock pouting.

“Maybe you should look in the mirror before saying something like that,” I shot back. “More importantly...” I paused, walked toward her, and placed my hands on her shoulders. “Where the hell have you been for the

past seven years?! Why'd you just disappear all of a sudden without saying anything to anyone?! Mom and I were really worried! So were Shiori and Saori! They were so small when you went away!"

My feelings had gotten the better of me, and all the frustration I'd been bottling up for the past seven years came flooding out in that moment. My eyes started feeling really hot all of a sudden, so I quickly lowered my face while trying hard to keep a lid on my emotions. This wasn't how I'd expected the reunion between grandma and me to go. Everything was just happening too fast!

"I'm sorry for leaving without saying anything," she cooed softly.

"We were all..." I sniffed. "We were all so worried about you."

"Don't look so sad, Shiro." She placed her hand on my head and started gently petting my hair like she used to when I was a kid.

"Mr. Shiro?" Stella said as she came over to join our little group, and before long, my boss, Patty, did the same. The little fairy flew toward my shoulder, intending to plonk herself down on it like she always did, but for some reason, she stopped mid-flight and went to stand on Karen's shoulder instead.

"H-Hey, Karen. Who's this hume lady? I-I can sense insane magic coming from her," Patty said, pointing to my grandma. It wouldn't be right to classify the look on the fairy's face as simple "worry," because she actually looked scared out of her mind. Even to Patty, who had been born with incredibly strong magic, grandma's magical powers seemed "insane."

"Patty, this is the living legend, Ms. Alice Gawamio, the Immortal Witch!" Karen announced proudly, raising her voice. In fact, she may have raised it a little *too* much...

"Witch?" a passerby repeated, stopping in his tracks.

"Has Ms. Alice come to visit us this year too?" someone else said.

"I-I-I j-j-j-just heard someone say that Alice the Immortal Witch is in town!"

"Papa, they're saying the witch is here!"

"The witch?!"

"Move, all of you!" someone else bellowed. "As a member of the Bayldruss family, I shall offer my greetings to the witch!"

The mere mention of grandma's name was enough to cause a huge commotion in the crowd nearby. Everyone looked like they were ready to pounce on us in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the famous witch.

"Looks like you were a little too loud just then, Miss Mayor," my

grandma pointed out, though she didn't seem particularly bothered about all the attention.

"M-My apologies, Ms. Alice!" Karen said quickly.

"It's fine. I'm used to this sort of thing," she said with a shrug as she tossed off her robe. "Sadly, it looks like I won't get to enjoy the rest of the festival now."

She raised her right hand into the air and a magic circle formed above her head.

"Wait, what? Is that a sword?!" I exclaimed, gawking at it. Sure enough, a sword had appeared in the magic circle. What the hell? My grandma's way too cool!

Grandma said a little "Okey dokey" under her breath, then plunged her hand into the magic circle—which started sparkling just like in a video game—and pulled out the sword.

"Ms. Witch!" someone in the crowd cried out.

"It really *is* Ms. Alice!"

"Get out of my way! I have to talk to—Huh? Ms. Witch?"

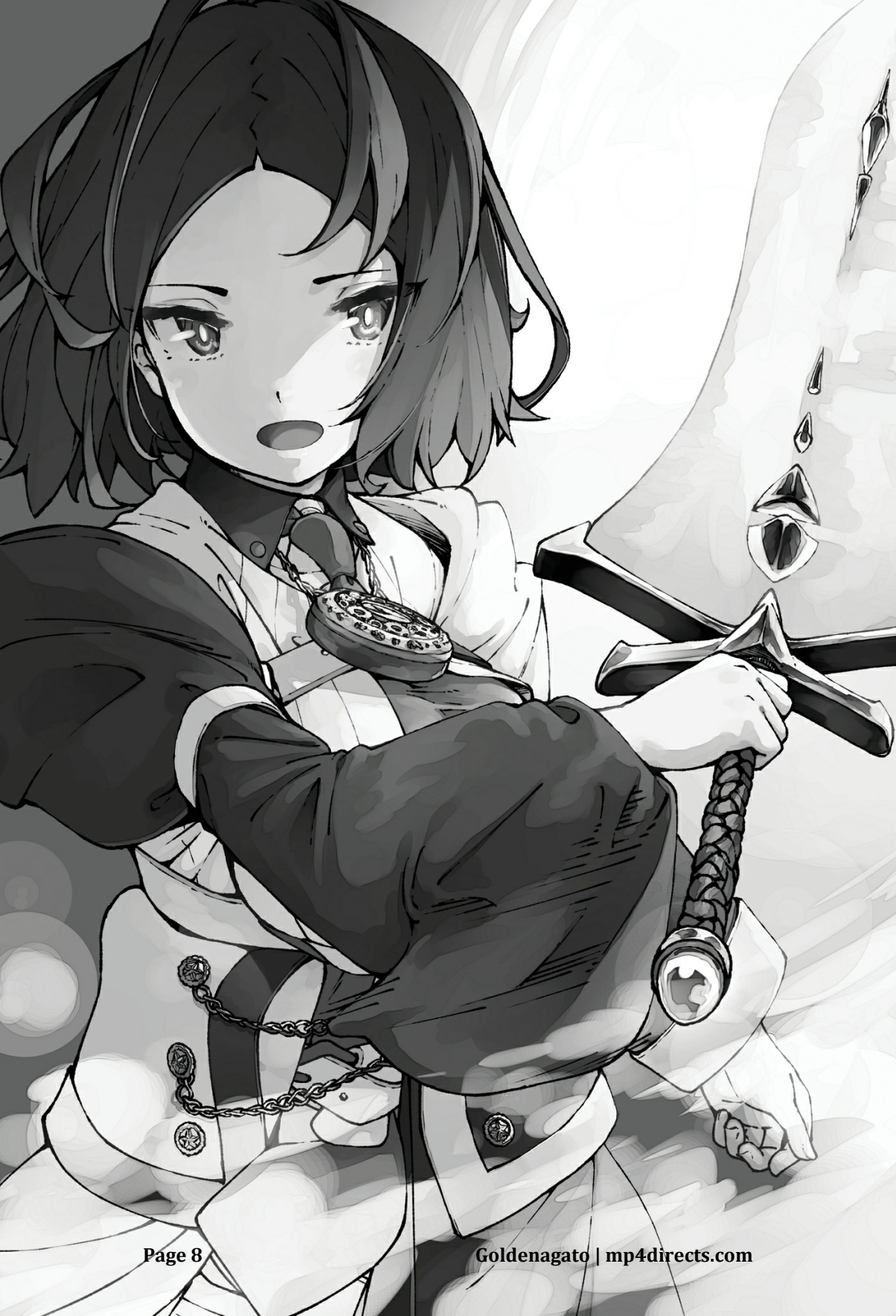
Grandma was pointing the sword at the people who had started dashing toward us, making them instantly stop in their tracks.

"That's the magic sword, Melkipson," an onlooker breathed in amazement.

Um, sorry, random person in the crowd. I know you probably *think* the name of this sword is super cool and all that, but it's actually just the name of grandma's favorite Hollywood actor.

"Good," my grandma said with a chuckle, a satisfied look splashed across her face as she scanned the crowd. She changed her grip on the sword. "Now, listen up, everyone. I'm currently busy catching up with my adorable grandson, so how about you all take a little trip to dreamland?" she said in a sing-song voice as she swung the sword around in the air with a loud whoosh.

Tiny particles of light shot out of the tip of the sword and flew toward the crowd. Dazed looks instantly appeared on the faces of every single person in our immediate vicinity, and all of them looked like they were sleepwalking.



“Uh, grandma...” I said, puzzled by this reaction. “What did you just do?”

“Oh, it’s only a little illusion spell. Nothing major. I just had them all take a quick nap, that’s all,” she said with a shrug before turning to Karen and the others. “Miss Mayor and all you lovely ladies, I’m going to be borrowing Shiro for a bit.”

“Wh-What are you saying, gran—” I spluttered, but she didn’t let me finish.

She raised her sword into the air again, then swung it downwards. My surroundings instantly distorted and went blurry, and a familiar-looking sliding door appeared in front of me.

“Grandma, don’t tell me—” I started, but I didn’t quite know how to finish that sentence.

Grandma simply shot me a quizzical look. “What’s wrong, Shiro? All we’re doing is going home. Come on, let’s go back to the house, yeah?” she said as she grabbed my arm in a viselike grip. She opened the sliding door and walked into the closet, dragging me along with her.

“Grandma! Wait a sec—”

My protests echoed around the star-filled night sky of Ninoritch before eventually dying away.

Chapter Two: Grandma's Return

"Whoa!" I yelled out as I got pushed through the closet door and ended up back home against my will. The sword in grandma's hand disappeared and she followed me through before turning around and sliding the door shut with a quiet "hup."

"I haven't seen my house in such a long time!" she said, surveying the room which had her own memorial altar in it.

This was grandma's first time being back home in seven years.



"I brewed us some tea," I said as I came back into the room.

"Thanks. Who would have thought my little rascal of a grandson would end up serving me tea one day? I'm getting a bit emotional," she teased.

"You do realize I'm twenty-five now, right?" I said as I set the two teacups down on the low table.

"Ah, hojicha," my grandma said, peering into the cup and marveling at the Japanese green tea. She cradled the cup in both hands, blew on the liquid inside it twice, and finally took a sip. She might have looked a whole lot younger than the last time I saw her, but her mannerisms were exactly the same as they'd always been. "Tea really does taste much better in this world," she stated with a satisfied sigh.

I remained silent, which drew an inquisitive glance from my grandma.

"What's wrong, Shiro?" she asked. "You look like you want to say something."

"Well, of *course* I do!" I retorted. "There are so many things I want to say! But first, how about giving me a proper explanation?"

"Explanation?" she repeated, feigning ignorance rather unconvincingly.

"That door!" I said, pointing to the closet. "What the hell *is* it?! Just who *are* you, grandma?!"

"Didn't you read my letter? I told you, I'm a witch," she replied, pouting slightly.

What the hell? Are you a little kid? "And you think that's enough, do you?" I snapped. "You think that's a good enough explanation? Well, it

isn't! What do you mean, you're a 'witch'? And why is that door connected to another world, anyway? And why..." I paused, feeling a little choked up. "Why did you leave us?"

A troubled look appeared on grandma's face. "I made you worry quite a bit, didn't I?" she said in a quiet voice.

"Your disappearance was a huge deal for everyone. Mom went off the deep end and decided we wouldn't celebrate Christmas *or* New Year until you came back! And as you can probably imagine, Shiori and Saori didn't like that decision one bit, so they were crying the whole time. And dad, well..."—I paused as I tried to find the right words to describe his reaction—"Dad was just dad. He jumped for joy when he found out he didn't have to buy Christmas presents or New Year's gifts for us."

"Well, Akane and Yuuichiro-san really reacted according to form, didn't they?" my grandma said with a fond smile on her face. Hearing her call my parents by their names made me feel incredibly nostalgic for some reason.

"They sure did. And nothing much has changed since then. Whenever anyone talks about you, mom immediately bursts into tears and dad has to comfort her."

"I see," she muttered after a pause as she stared into her cup.

"So why did you just leave like that?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I can't tell you."

"Why not?!"

"I'm a witch. It's complicated," she said with a shrug.

"What kind of an excuse is that?!"

She chuckled. "Sorry, Shiro, but you really don't need to worry about me so much. What happened might have been pretty serious to me, but for you and the rest of the family, you probably wouldn't think it's all that big a deal."

"Well, if it's no big deal, you can just tell me what it was, right?" I retorted.

Grandma didn't answer. She just sat there with an evasive smile curling her lips.

"Fine," I sighed after a while. "I won't keep bugging you about why you left. But I still have some other things I want to ask you."

I took another good look at grandma's new appearance: she had glossy black hair that looked incredibly soft to the touch, her skin was unblemished and smooth, and to top it off, she had a killer body.

“I meant to ask you this earlier, but are you using magic to make yourself look younger?” I inquired. “Did you cast something like that ‘illusion’ spell or whatever it was you did earlier?”

“Of course not,” she scoffed. “This is my real appearance.”

I was baffled. “*What?!*” I spluttered. “Wait a second. If that’s true, why did you used to look so *old*?”

“I used transformation magic to make it seem like I was actually aging,” she said as she produced something that looked like a magic wand from her sleeve. “Here, watch this.”

She waved the wand around in the air, and before I knew it, she’d shrunk in size and wrinkles had appeared all over her skin. *Hey, I recognize this old lady*, I thought. *This is exactly what grandma used to look like!*

“After all, if I hadn’t aged, the neighbors would’ve gotten suspicious, wouldn’t they? So every year on Masaru-san’s birthday, I’d use magic to make myself look a year older as well.”

“What the hell...” I breathed, completely blown away by this revelation.

This earned another chuckle from grandma. “It’s really cool, isn’t it?”

“It’s so impressive, I’m speechless,” I said with a nod. “So that was your real appearance before, huh? But you looked so young! You looked the same age as Shiori and Saori.”

For a brief moment, grandma seemed to stiffen a little. “I-Is it really that big a deal?” she grumbled. “Besides, Masaru-san said it made him happy that I’d look young forever!”

“Oh, c’mon, grandpa. Seriously?” I said, cringing.

“Ah, but we were so in love, Masaru-san and I,” she said with a dreamy sigh. “He always used to say I was really cute and pretty. Whenever he embraced me, my face would go as red as a tomato! And then, he’d lean in and—”

I yelped and immediately clapped my hands over my ears. “Stop! I don’t wanna know! I really, *really* don’t wanna know what my family members get up to behind closed doors, *especially* not you and grandpa!”

Grandma threw her head back and burst out laughing at my reaction.



“So that closet has always been connected to Ruffaltio, even before mom was born?”

“Yep, it certainly has.”

I’d finally somehow gotten used to the idea of grandma being back, and our conversation had shifted to the closet that led to Ruffaltio. Grandma told me that she and grandpa had been pretty much broke after building this house, which unfortunately meant they couldn’t go on any expensive trips, and while they did live near Asakusa and Ueno, two big districts in Tokyo that were full of stuff to see and do, they were getting pretty tired of going to the same places over and over. So grandma had come up with the ingenious idea of using her magic to make one of the doors in the house a gateway to Ruffaltio, so that she and grandpa could go on trips over there from time to time.

“At the time, there was no furniture in this room, you see. I thought that was way too dreary, so I decided to make this closet the door to Ruffaltio,” she explained as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

I wasn’t quite sure wanting to go on a trip was a good enough reason to create a doorway to another world, but there you had it. That was the story of grandma’s closet. *You truly are one of a kind, grandma.*

“I really wish you could have seen the smile on Masaru-san’s face when he saw the door for the first time,” she said, fondly reminiscing.

I’d always known grandma was a little bit off her rocker, but *seriously*, grandpa? You just went along with it? Good grief. Those two really had been made for each other, hadn’t they? I let out a long, exasperated sigh.

“So you’re telling me that you were the one who turned the closet into a doorway to another world, yet you still thought it was a good idea to just vanish into thin air like you did? What would you have done if the rest of the family had decided to sell the house? They almost did, you know.”

“What do you take me for? Of *course* I thought of that,” she scoffed. “I placed a barrier around the house that makes it so only blood relatives of mine can come near it. So even if you guys *had* decided to put it on the market, you wouldn’t have gotten any buyers.”

“A barrier?” I said.

“Yup,” she said with a nod. “Tell me: how long have you been living here, Shiro?”

“A little under five months, I think.”

“And in that time, has anyone come here to try to persuade you to subscribe to a newspaper or anything like that?”

Oh. Now that she mentioned it, I couldn’t think of a single time when that had happened. I hadn’t had a visit from one of those weird sects that

try to recruit members by knocking on people's doors either, and no door-to-door salesmen had come by to attempt to sell me some of their trinkets.

"I didn't know you could do that!" I marveled.

"Well, I *am* a witch, after all," she said, sticking her tongue out mischievously. "Anyway, if you don't mind, I believe it's now my turn to ask you a few questions."

"Sure. It's been seven years, after all. I'm sure you'd like to know what's changed in that time. Go ahead," I told her, then thought of something. "Ah, but before you ask: no, I'm not married, and no, I don't have a girlfriend."

She sighed. "So young, yet so lonely. I really didn't want you to have to experience something like that, but I guess that horse has already bolted, huh?"

"I-I'm fine, really! Besides, even if I don't have a girlfriend, I still have a pretty good life, thanks to that thing," I said, pointing to the closet door.

"I'm glad to hear it," she said with a smile. "Is the rest of the family doing okay?" she asked after a pause.

"They are, yeah," I said. "Mom and dad are fine, and the twins are doing great."

I gave grandma an update on the family situation, telling her what my parents had been up to over the past seven years, how my little sisters—who had been in primary school when she'd disappeared—were now cheeky high school girls, and finally, the fact that she'd been officially declared dead five months ago.

"I see. So I'm technically considered dead in this world, huh?"

"Well, what do you expect? You've been gone for seven years. But if it bothers you, I can go down to city hall and talk it over with the people there," I said.

"What would you tell them?" she asked.

"Hm..." I pondered. "How about: 'Hey, I found my grandma!?' Quick and easy."

She chuckled. "That's a rather punchy approach, isn't it?"

"Well, I have you and grandpa for grandparents, so did you really expect anything else?" I said with a grin. "Besides, I think the punchy approach is always the best way. Just like in wrestling! The powerhouse style is *obviously* the way to go, right? So, anyway, what do you think of my suggestion?"

Grandma shook her head. "Thank you, but I think it's better to leave it.

If I suddenly show up after being gone for so many years, it'll cause a huge hoo-ha, and I don't think anyone in the family needs that. I'd rather let everyone just believe I died and reunited with Masaru-san up in heaven."

"They still haven't come to terms with the fact that you just suddenly disappeared into thin air, though," I pointed out.

"These sorts of things happen. Sadly, farewells are always sudden." Her expression turned solemn and she stayed silent for a few seconds. "Shiro..." she said after a while. "Fate brought me to you today. That's good enough for me."

"Fate, huh?" I mused. "Oh, by the way, what were you doing in Ninoritch? Karen told me you came to the harvest festival last year as well."

"Masaru-san and I spent a lot of time in Ninoritch," she explained. "I have a lot of memories of the place. Besides, it's the closest town to the closet door. I guess I kept thinking that if I went back there, maybe I'd stumble across the person who'd inherited my house."

"And would you look at that! You actually did!" I said, smiling.

"Yeah, I did," she said with a gentle nod.

"It all makes a lot more sense now." So it seemed the reason I'd immediately felt so attached to the little town of Ninoritch was due to my grandparents' own familiarity with the place, huh?

"By the way, Shiro, why were you in Ruffaltio? I'd love to hear about all the things you've done there, what you've seen, what you've gained..." she said. "Can you tell me?"

I fell silent for a few seconds. I wasn't really sure what to say. All the things I'd done, all the things I'd seen, and all that I'd "gained" in Ruffaltio, huh? In the end, it all boiled down to money.

"Well, I, uh—" I started, but grandma cut across me.

"Actually, now that I think about it, you were always all about the money, weren't you, Shiro?" she said. "I'm sure you found a way to use the Inventory and Equivalent Exchange skills to make money, didn't you?"

Once again, I didn't say anything. She'd seen right through me.

"Looks like I hit the mark," she said with a chuckle. "It's fine. You can do whatever you want with those skills. I don't mind. But I'd really like to know what you've been doing over there, in my home world."

She might have looked completely different from the grandma I used to

know, but the warmth in her eyes hadn't changed one bit.

"I think it's pretty easy for you to guess what I'm doing there, to be honest with you," I said. "I opened my own shop, thanks to the Equivalent Exchange and Inventory skills."

"A shop, you say? That sounds like a lot of fun," she replied with a smile.

"It all started when I moved into this house after leaving my former job —"

I launched into telling grandma everything that had happened over the past four and a half months: how I'd resigned from my job at a company with a toxic work environment and moved into the house she'd left empty; how I'd started selling useful everyday items from Japan in Ninoritch; how I'd met a bunch of people there whom I now called friends. I even told her all about my little "adventures" with the Blue Flash crew and all the things that had happened to me in the forest, plus how I'd somehow managed to survive my escapades, even when it had looked like I was a goner. I had more to say about those four and a half months than about the previous seven years.

"And well, I think that's about the gist of it," I concluded. "I don't need to earn money in this world thanks to the Equivalent Exchange skill, so I'm basically just spending most of my time in Ninoritch."

"I'm really happy to hear that you're leading such a rich, fulfilling life," she said with a huge grin plastered across her face. "The first time I took Masaru-san to Ruffaltio, he had that exact same look on his face that you have now."

"He did?" I said.

"Yeah. He used to get that same little twinkle in his eye. It's like you're little kids. Every time he saw, heard, or touched something, he'd turn to me and tell me how 'amazing' it all was," she said, and I could tell from her face that she was fondly reminiscing about those moments.

"What did you and grandpa do over there?" I asked.

"Lots of fun things," she said with a grin. "We traveled about and tamed all the mythical beasts, climbed the World Tree, doled out some well-deserved punishment to a stupid king whose country was on the brink of ruin... You know, that kind of thing."

"I see," I said. "I have to say, I wasn't *quite* expecting that answer. Were you all right doing those types of things, though?"

"Yes, it was fine," she said. "After all, I'm one of the only beings in

Ruffaltio who can bend the rules of the world to their will.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, that’s what it means to be a witch,” she said with a self-deprecating sneer. “Those skill books I gave you, for example: I could only make them because I’m a witch.” She paused for a moment as her gaze gently mellowed once more. “Now that I think about it, I gave Masaru-san skill books back then too.”

That reminiscing look was back on her face again, and she breathed a little chuckle before looking me straight in the eye.

“Shiro, would you like some more power?” she said. “Just say the word, and I can give you any ability you want.”

“Wh-What do you mean?” I said.

“Quite literally what I just said,” my grandma replied. “I’m a witch. I can use long-lost magic to grant similar powers—or ‘skills,’ I should say—to anyone I want.”

“And you want to give *me* a new ability, is that it?” I said.

She nodded. “Well, you *are* my grandson, after all. I want to give you something nice.”

She stood up and threw her arms as wide as she could.

“So what type of ability do you want, Shiro? Muscles so strong that the ground shakes every time you take a step? Magic so powerful that you can even rend the sky asunder? How about the ability to control dead people so you can turn them into your puppets? I can give you anything you want. All you have to do is ask.”

“Those all sound pretty awesome,” I said, nodding.

“Like I said, I’m your grandma and I want to do something nice for my adorable grandson,” she said with a smile. “So? Have you decided what kind of ability you’d like to have?”

I pondered this question for a few seconds while making several “hmm” noises. “Do I have to decide right now?” I asked.

“Nope. You can take some time to think it over, if you want. I’ll wait around here until you’ve made up your mind,” she said.

“Great, thank—” I paused as my brain caught up with what she’d just said. “Wait a minute. What do you mean by you’ll ‘wait around here’?”

“What? Aren’t I allowed to? This is mine and Masaru-san’s house, after all,” she said with a puzzled look on her face.

“No, it’s just...” I said, trying to articulate my feelings. “I didn’t think I’d get to spend time with you again. It just took me by surprise, that’s all.”

She chuckled. “I didn’t think this day would come either.”

My grandma, who had been gone for seven years, was currently here. In my house. With me.

“G-Grandma!” I cried happily. “It’s already a bit late, so we won’t be able to do it today, but let’s celebrate your return tomorrow, okay? I’ll even make your favorite food: sukiyaki.”

“Oh, why, thank you, Shiro!” she said, beaming at me. “Well then, I hope you won’t mind me staying with you for a little while.”

And with that, my grandma had decided she would be staying in my house until I’d figured out what new ability I wanted.

Chapter Three: Aina Knows the Truth

When I awoke the following day, grandma told me she was off to “have some fun in Tokyo,” as she hadn’t been in the city in such a long time. Considering how bright-eyed and bushy-tailed she was, I figured she must have made it all the way to Asakusa, her favorite district, for a spot of sightseeing by now. I headed to the room with grandma’s memorial altar and opened the closet door about a centimeter or so—just enough to see what was on the other side. I pressed my face up against the door and peered through the crack with my right eye.

“Oh, thank goodness. It still leads to the second floor of my shop,” I blurted out, sighing with relief.

The portal always led to where it had last been summoned, so after grandma had whisked me home the day before by opening the gateway between worlds in the middle of the town square (or to put it another way, one of the busiest parts of Ninoritch), I was worried the doorway would lead back there. But it seemed my worries were unfounded. Thankfully, it still led to the place where I’d last summoned it: my store. Phew!

“If it had actually led to the town square, I would’ve had to wait till nightfall before heading back to Ninoritch,” I muttered to myself as I slid the door fully open and “logged in” to Ninoritch once more. “All righty. First, I should apologize to Karen and the others for suddenly disappearing like I did. Let’s get—”

“*Let’s get going,*” was what I’d been about to say, but I only managed to get halfway through my sentence before a little voice behind me interrupted me.

“Mister Shiro?”

I jumped out of my skin and spun around. I was met with the sight of Aina sitting on the sofa with Patty perched on her shoulder.

“O-Oh, Aina... B-Boss...” I stuttered.

They’d seen me. They’d *definitely* seen me walking out of that portal. Hang on a minute. I’d decided to keep the shop closed that day to give us some time to recover from the harvest festival, and I was almost certain I’d locked up the day before. So what were they even doing here in the first place?

The two of them were staring at me, clearly waiting for some sort of explanation.

“Um, didn’t I lock up yesterday?” I asked in a small voice.

Patty pointed a finger at the ceiling. “You did. I came down the chimney and opened the door for Aina,” she explained matter-of-factly.

Well, Patty *was* a fairy, after all. She was small and limber, and could zip about in the sky with no constraints whatsoever. It must have been a piece of cake for her to fly down the chimney and unlock the door so Aina could come in.

“Boss, y-you...” I stammered. “You’re the one who unlocked the door?” I was at a loss for words.

“Y-Yes, I did. What of it? I’m your boss, aren’t I? B-Besides, if you hadn’t disappeared so suddenly, I wouldn’t have had to go to all this trouble in the first place!” the little fairy huffed, turning her head away and snorting an annoyed “hmpf.”

Oh, so *that’s* why she’d opened the door. She and Aina had come looking for me.

“Mister Shiro!” the little girl said as she stood up in a swift, flowing motion and trotted toward me. For some reason, her eyes were sparkling brightly as she looked up into mine.

“Wh-What is it, Aina?” I mumbled as I tried to maintain my composure.

“Mister Shiro, did you just come back from the land of the witches?” she asked me.

“Th-The land of the witches?” I repeated.

“Yeah, the land of the witches!” she confirmed. Her eyes were glinting and her breathing was audible. She seemed awfully excited.

“Wh-What do you mean by that?” I asked.

Patty was the one who answered my question. “Well, after that ‘witch’—or whatever she was—took you with her yesterday, we split up and started looking high and low for you. We even asked Raiya and Nesca to help us out!”

“You went looking for me?” I said in disbelief.

“Well, duh. Of *course* we did!” Patty scoffed. “One moment, you were there, and the next, poof! You weren’t! We thought the witch might have abducted you or something,” she said gruffly, a pout forming on her lips.

As I looked at her in bemusement, I finally noticed the dark circles under her eyes, as well as Aina’s, which served as proof that they really

had been out looking for me until super late the night before.

“I’m sorry, boss,” I said.

“I-It’s fine. I’m your boss, after all. Looking for you when you vanish into thin air is my... What was the word again?” She paused for a second as she searched for it. “Ah, ‘duty’! Is that it? A-Anyway, Nesca said we couldn’t find you because the witch had taken you to her world using te...um...tele...ugh! What was it again, Aina?”

“Miss Nesca said the witch lady used ‘te-le-por-tay-tion magic,’” Aina supplied. “She said no one in the world can use that kind of magic anymore.”

“Exactly! Te-le-por-tay-tion!” Patty exclaimed, nodding vigorously. “Shiro, the witch took you somewhere far away from here with that ‘te-le-por-tay-tion’ magic of hers, didn’t she?”

“That’s what happened, right, Mister Shiro?” Aina pressed. “She used magic to take you to the land of the witches, didn’t she?”

The two of them were drawing closer and closer to me, and before I knew it, my back was pressed up against the wall on the opposite side of the room.



All right. Think, Shiro. What should I tell them?

Aina was looking at me with bright eyes that were brimming with curiosity and anticipation. Patty, on the other hand, was trying her best to look uninterested, but even so, she kept glancing my way, clearly waiting to hear how I'd answer.

"So..." I started.

"So?" Aina repeated practically immediately, cutting me off.

"Yesterday, grandma took me with her..." I continued.

"Wh-Where did she take you?" Patty pressed me.

"Sh-She took me to her house," I said, trying to keep my answer as close to the truth as possible. *Hey, I'm not actually lying, so it's fine, right?*

"Your grandma's house?" Aina queried. "You mean, the witch lady's house?"

"Yup, exactly!" I said with a nod. "Grandma's house is really, *really* far away from here, but she used magic to take us there in the blink of an eye. I-I was really surprised! I never knew she could do that! Magic sure is amazing, isn't it?" I babbled, rounding off my explanation with a strained laugh for good measure. The two of them didn't say anything, but simply nodded in unison.

"Mister Shiro..." Aina said.

"Yes?"

"Where is the witch lady's house?" she said, balling up her fists tightly as she excitedly waited for me to answer her question.

"That's, uh..."

"Yeah, where is it, Shiro?" Patty pressed, her expression deadly serious. "Did she really take you to th-the land of the witches?" Like Aina, her fists were clenched in anticipation too.

"Well, you see, the place where grandma's house is..." I said hesitantly. "It's really, uh..."

Once again, the two of them interrupted me before I could get very far into my answer. "It's really..." they urged.

"I don't know for sure if it was the 'land of the witches' she took me to, but all I can say is it was really different from Ninoritch," I said.

At this, their eyes shot open, as if this had been exactly the thing they'd been waiting to hear.

"It's just like Miss Nesca said!" Aina exclaimed. "The witch lady *did* take you to the land of the witches! Mister Shiro, can you tell us what kind

of place it is? I really wanna hear more about it!”

“Shiro, did everyone in that place have superstrong magical powers like that witch we met?” Patty asked.

“Do you think if I ask her nicely, she’ll take me there too?” Aina jumped in before I could get a word in edgeways.

“Wh-What was the food like there?” was the next question Patty fired at me. “Was it good? If it was, do you think I can give the people there some of my mead in exchange for some?”

“Where is the witch lady now?” Aina asked excitedly. “I wanna talk to her!”

“Shiro, this is an order! Bring that witch from yesterday here right now!”

The two of them kept bombarding me with questions, but all of my answers were either “I don’t know,” or “I have no idea.”

It was quite a while before they calmed down.

Chapter Four: Karen's Issue

Once Patty and Aina had settled down again, I decided I'd head over to Stella's house with them in tow to apologize for vanishing into thin air the day before.

"It did take me by surprise," she admitted. "One moment, you were there with us, and the next, you weren't. But I wasn't worried in the slightest."

"Really?" I asked.

"Yes. The way the witch looked at you, with such kindness in her eyes, I was sure you would be just fine. It was the sort of look a person reserves for someone they care deeply about," she explained with a smile.

I left the sleepy girls in her care, then went off to look for Karen. I figured I'd walk around town and try to catch her while she was going about her work. In the end, I found her near the town hall.

"Shiro! You're back!" she exclaimed happily as soon as she caught sight of me.

"Good afternoon, Karen," I said. "I'm back."

"Good grief. I was so worried when Ms. Alice took you with her yesterday," she said. "I, uh..." She paused. "I wondered if you might not ever come back."

I laughed. "I'm sorry for worrying you. Grandma simply wanted to talk. Just the two of us, you know?"

"I see," she said with a nod of understanding. "Oh, but rest assured, I don't blame you for putting me through the wringer or anything. Besides, it was because I blurted out Ms. Alice's name in public that the situation got so out of hand in the first place. I should really be the one apologizing to you, Shiro. I'm sorry. I was actually planning on apologizing to Ms. Alice as well, but she doesn't seem to be with you. Might I ask where she is?"

"Dunno. She just told me she was 'going out,'" I said with a shrug. "But I'm sure she'll be back sooner rather than later."

"Oh, I'm glad to hear it," she said. "Though I see she has once again 'gone on a trip.'"

It seemed Karen really admired my grandma. That must have been why

she'd been so worried about potentially putting a damper on grandma's evening the night before. What a sensitive and responsible person she was. To be honest, I kinda wished grandma would learn a thing or two from her. However, Karen seemed to be under the impression that grandma had gone on some sort of journey somewhere when she was actually probably just bumming around Asakusa or somewhere similar. I felt I should probably correct her on that.

"Actually, my grandma—" I started, but was almost instantly interrupted.

"Still, I can't believe I got to talk to Ms. Alice again this year," Karen said. "I wish I could apologize to her for all the trouble I've caused her, but I guess I should just be glad I was able to see her again."

"Y-Yeah," I said with a slight nod.

Karen hadn't noticed I'd started talking and I'd unfortunately missed my chance to explain what was actually going on. I begrudgingly decided to just go along with whatever she was saying.

"Still, the two of you disappearing like that caused quite a commotion among the nobles and merchants who had come to the festival, and they all went looking for her," Karen continued. "Seriously, your grandma coming to our festival two years in a row is incredible. We'll most likely be even busier next year because of it."

"Wow, I never knew grandma was such a huge deal in these parts," I said.

"Of course she is. This is *the* Alice Gawamio we're talking about. Most people have never seen her in person. She doesn't accept invitations from nobles, and she has even refused to meet with the royal family on several occasions," Karen told me. "We had a handful of nobles show up to the festival this year, but next time, we might even get royals coming to our little town from all over the world."

"Wow," was all I could say to this.

"To be honest with you, this is so overwhelming, I'm not sure if I should be rejoicing or beside myself with worry," Karen sighed.

"My grandma's causing you a world of trouble, isn't she? Sorry about that," I said sheepishly.

Karen chuckled. "Don't make that face. It might sound like I'm complaining, but I'm actually really happy. I'm glad that more people are starting to learn of this town my great-great-grandfather founded."

Karen's great-great-grandfather—Eren Sankareka—had been

Ninoritch's founder. He had come to this remote region as a pioneer and built this entire town from the ground up. It was clear Karen admired him a lot.

"Anyway, now isn't the time for worrying about next year's festival," Karen said. "There is currently another matter that requires my attention."

"Oh? What's that?" I asked.

Karen sighed. "It's almost time for me to go and pay this year's taxes to Lord Bashure, the earl of this region."



In any fiefdom, vassals had an obligation to pay tax to their fief lord. In the case of Ninoritch, which had an earl as its fief lord, a representative of the town had to travel directly to the earl's manor every year after the harvest festival to hand over the taxes for that year. It seemed that, until roughly ten years ago, tax collectors had been tasked with heading out to all the different towns and villages of the region to retrieve the tax money owed, but rather a lot of them hadn't had a moment's hesitation about helping themselves to some of that money, and once the earl became aware of this, he flew into a rage and punished the tax collectors harshly. After that, in an attempt to regain his people's trust, he decreed that every town and village should choose a representative to take the tax yield either to their nearest tax office or directly to the earl, and he even provided them with transportation and knights to protect them on the journey, so that they could pay the taxes without any middlemen needing to be involved.

"Wow," I said. "It's good that he's come up with a solution to avoid tax collectors skimming off the top, but making you travel all the way to his manor must be pretty annoying, huh?"

"Y-Yeah..." Karen answered evasively. I noticed her face had gone a little pale.

"Are you okay, Karen?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah, sorry. I always get a little down when faced with the prospect of going to the capital, Mazela, where Lord Bashure lives."

"That's understandable," I said with a nod. "After all, no one likes paying taxes, right?"

"Well, yes, but..." she said hesitantly. "But it's not just that..." She flashed me a strained smile before shaking her head slightly. "Ah, this is no good. I shouldn't be saying things like this. After all, I'm the mayor. I need to get my act together."

She slapped herself on the cheeks a couple of times and wrestled her expression into a more calm and composed one.

“Don’t go pushing yourself too hard, okay?” I said.

She chuckled. “I’m not, I’m not,” she assured me.

“You sure about that?” I asked with a frown. “I know you, Karen. You’re the kind of person who’s going to try and take everything onto her own shoulders, no matter how much of a burden it is. That’s why I’m worried about you. Anyway, please let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

Karen had a very strong sense of responsibility—most likely due to her position as the town’s mayor—but just because she wanted to handle everything by herself, that didn’t mean she would be able to. That was the kind of thing I’d witnessed way more than was necessary at my previous job. People like her generally ended up breaking down at some point.

“Thank you, Shiro,” she said. “But as mayor of this town, this is my problem to solve.”

“Aha!” I said. “See? I was right. There *is* something bothering you!”

She didn’t say anything in response, but I wasn’t one for giving up easily.

“C’mon, Karen. Please tell me what it is. Relying on others from time to time is no bad thing.”

“I’ve already asked you for help so many times before, though...” she muttered before closing her eyes and bringing a hand up to her chin to indicate she was deep in thought. “All right,” she said quietly after a few seconds. “Do you mind me bothering you with something for a bit?”

“Go right ahead,” I said.

“Ah, but first...” she said, interrupting herself, “there’s actually something I’ve been meaning to ask you for a little while now.” Even though one of her eyes was still closed, she threw a few quick glances my way.

“What is it? Oh, no, I don’t have a girlfriend, if that’s what you want to know,” I said, because I was in a mischievous mood.

“I-I don’t care about that!” she protested.

It had been a while since I’d last teased her like this, but as always, she took the bait, her face going as red as a tomato. She cleared her throat before speaking again. “Good grief. Stop poking fun at me,” she grumbled. “Besides, it’s common knowledge around here that you don’t have a partner.”

“It is?” I asked, curious about this new bit of information.

“Well, you’re an extremely adept merchant, and on top of that, you’re rich. I’m sure you’re well aware how quickly rumors can spread in little towns, and people here tend to find you *especially* interesting, so...” she explained before trailing off. “Anyway, that’s not what I’m here to talk to you about. Um...” She hesitated and glanced around.

Ah, I see the issue. She probably doesn’t want people overhearing what she’s about to say. “Would you like to go somewhere else to talk?” I suggested.

She nodded. “If you wouldn’t mind. Though I told my staff down at town hall that I was going on patrol, so we can’t go to my office.”

“All right. In that case, let’s go to my shop.”



It only took us a few minutes to get to my store, and once inside, I encouraged Karen to go sit in the break room up on the second floor while I brewed us some tea.

“Here you go,” I said as I placed two teacups on the table, then went to sit down on the sofa opposite Karen.

“Thank you,” she said before taking a sip of her tea. “As always, your tea tastes really good.”

“It’s nothing fancy,” I told her.

She chuckled. “It has such a rich flavor, though. I’m sure it must be quite expensive. You really do like the finer things in life, don’t you?”

“It does taste great—I won’t refute that—but it’s by no means an expensive tea,” I said.

“Well, if you say so,” she said, unconvinced.

We sat there sipping our tea for a little while until I decided to break the silence. “So what was it you wanted to ask me?” I said.

“Y-Yeah, about that...” Karen said hesitantly. I noticed she’d started fidgeting and looking around restlessly, as well as twiddling her fingers. She wasn’t her usual composed self at all.

“I’m not sure whether I should be asking you this, but um...” she started. “It’s just something that’s been on my mind for a little while now.” She squirmed in her seat.

Something that’s been on her mind? Wait a minute. Could it be... No, it couldn’t be that, right? But her face has gone all red, so maybe it is? A loud gulp echoed around the room as I swallowed my saliva. Does this

mean... Is Karen about to confess her feelings to me? Hold on a second. Didn't Patty tell the two of us to "make a baby" last night? Surely Karen doesn't actually want us to... No. No way. This is Karen we're talking about here. She'd never dream of doing such a thing! She just wouldn't, right? But her face is beet red and she keeps opening and closing her mouth like a fish.

As I thought about this possibility, I noted that I was already twenty-five and Karen was twenty-six, meaning we were both at the age people started thinking seriously about marriage. But in the highly unlikely event that she *did* confess her feelings to me, what should I even reply?

"Sh-Shiro!" she finally managed to get out.

"Y-Yes?" I stammered.

"Th-Th-There's something I've been meaning to say to you for a while!"

"Wh-What is it?"

Holy crap, she's actually gonna say it. I mean, there's no way this isn't a confession, is there?! I could almost hear her heart thumping in her chest from where I was sitting.

"Sh-Shiro! B-Be honest with me!" She paused and took a deep breath as the redness in her cheeks spread outwards all the way to her ears. "How is your hair so *smooth*?"

I was so taken aback by this, all I could utter was a rather ineloquent "Huh?" That definitely *wasn't* the question I'd been expecting and I almost fell off the sofa, such was my shock.

"I-I've always wondered how your hair can be so much shinier and prettier than everyone else's in town," Karen clarified.

"My *hair*?" I repeated, still finding myself unable to form a proper sentence.

"Y-Yes. Your hair!" she confirmed with a nod, her face still as red as before. "It's been..." she said, launching into a rather stop-start explanation. "It's been nagging at me for a while now. I may not look the type, but I actually try to take good care of my hair. I regularly run it under water and I brush it with a comb every day. It's a little embarrassing to say this, but I used to be really proud of my hair. Until I met you, that is."

Her eyes were full of envy as she stared at me. Or well, at my hair, more specifically. Just at that moment, a ray of sunlight filtered through the window and dappled my hair, making my head feel all warm.

"I mean, look at that!" Karen exclaimed. "I've noticed that there isn't a

day that goes by where your hair *isn't* smooth and glossy. Even now, it's as if the sun has created a ring of light on your hair!"

"Oh, you mean this? The angel's halo?" I said, pointing to the circular patch of hair that was positively glowing in the sunshine.

"Angel's halo'?" Karen repeated.

"Yeah. That's what we call this shiny circle that appears on your hair when you're in direct sunlight in my country," I explained.

"Is that so? That's an interesting thing to call it. Makes it sound like you've gotten the blessing of the gods. I-It really goes to show just how much confidence you have in your hair," she said.

"I'm not the one who came up with the expression," I pointed out.

"I realize that," she said. "But even so, I can't help being a little..." She paused briefly. "Scratch that. I should be honest about my feelings." She paused again, her eyes still firmly fixed on my hair. "I can't help being rather envious of your hair."

And I had to admit, she looked incredibly frustrated. She let out a loud sigh and sat back in her seat.

"As I told you earlier, every year after the harvest festival, I have to go directly to the manor of the earl of this region to pay our taxes," she said.

"Tax season really does suck, doesn't it? My wallet always feels that much lighter after I've paid what I owe," I said with a sympathetic nod.

"It really, really does," Karen agreed. "But we live in someone else's domain, after all. We don't really have a choice but to pay them."

"It's your duty as a vassal, yeah."

She nodded. "So here's my issue: Lord Bashure is actually very kind to his people, which is exceedingly rare for a noble. And every year, he organizes a banquet to entertain the mayors who travel all the way to his residence to pay their taxes."

"Really?" I said. "So sort of like a 'thank you' party, huh? I thought nobles were much too arrogant to host something like that."

According to Karen, every year during harvest season, a tax inspector visited every town and village in the region to estimate the amount of taxes the vassals would need to pay the earl. Then, after the harvest festival, the towns' representatives traveled all the way to the capital of the fiefdom or the nearest tax office to pay the taxes they owed. In the case of Ninoritch, the closest place they could go to in order to pay their taxes was the feudal capital. However, as Ninoritch was located right on the very edge of the region, it was still a whopping six-day carriage ride just to get there.

“I’m not too worried about the taxes part,” Karen said. “Everyone in Ninoritch always works hard all year round, so we never really struggle with that. And thanks to you, our tax yield is even higher this time.”

“That’s great!” I replied. “I’m happy my contribution has been of some help to you.”

The tax system in Ninoritch was all rather simple. Every person who stayed in Ninoritch for more than two months was considered a resident and had to pay a poll tax plus twenty percent of their overall revenue. I was no exception, and two months ago, I had paid taxes in this world for the first time. Karen’s jaw had hit the floor when she saw just how much money that was and she’d completely frozen up for several minutes. It had been quite a while before she rebooted.

“Thanks to your shop and the Fairy’s Blessing setting up a branch here, we’ve had the highest tax yield in the history of Ninoritch this year,” she said.

“Oh, is that what’s worrying you?” I asked. “Was the tax yield this year *too* high?”

She shook her head. “No, it doesn’t have anything to do with that. The issue I have doesn’t concern the taxes at all.” She paused briefly. “It’s the banquet part I’m worried about.”

“What do you mean?” I said, not following.

As Ninoritch’s representative, Karen had to attend the banquet Lord Bashure hosted every tax season. Normally, that would be something to get excited about, wouldn’t it? So why was Karen looking so dejected?

“Lord Bashure’s banquets are way too fancy for someone like me,” she said with a sigh. “Ninoritch is a very remote town, and there are only so many things I can do to make myself look *presentable*, you know? Besides, I’m pretty much the only female mayor in the region. So, um, how should I put this...” She paused. “Whenever I go to the banquet, I always get strange looks from Lord Bashure’s female relatives, like ‘Look at that country bumpkin over there.’ They don’t say that out loud obviously, but I know it’s what they’re thinking. It’s not rare for them to make fun of me in front of everyone either, in a roundabout way.”

“That’s so cruel,” I sympathized.

Just like in Japan—where in the majority of cases, men could get away with just putting on a suit when attending formal events—evening wear for men in Ninoritch was a rather uncomplicated affair. On top of that, men’s fashion hadn’t changed all that much over the last few decades and it was

very common for noblemen to don the same suits that their grandfathers had purchased many years prior. Unfortunately, women didn't have that luxury. Fashion trends came and went incredibly fast every year, and simply buying a pretty dress wasn't enough; matching accessories were a must too. For women in Ruffaltio, formal events were the best place to show off their wealth and their looks, and this was the root cause of Karen's worries. Just like on Earth, women didn't have it easy here either, huh?

"We don't even have a proper dress store in town," Karen continued, obviously frustrated by the situation. "And I can't just have one tailored once I get to Mazela either, because it wouldn't be ready in time."

"Yeah, it probably wouldn't," I concurred with a nod.

"So that's why I wanted to ask you about your hair," she said, circling back to the beginning of the conversation. "I was thinking if I could get *my* hair looking as smooth and glossy as yours for the banquet, I definitely wouldn't get made fun of this time. I'd actually stand out in a good way for once."

Karen's face was still bright red, and her breathing had gone a little ragged. She must have been feeling extremely embarrassed about relating such a personal issue to me.

"I see. I think I understand, yeah," I said, nodding again. She'd shoved her pride to one side in order to tell me about her troubles. I would be a poor excuse for a man if I didn't help her after that.

"You do?" she said.

"Yup, I do," I confirmed. "Stop me if I'm wrong. Your plan is to have the most beautiful hair at the banquet to surprise everyone in attendance, while at the same time proving to all the women who previously teased you about how you looked just how dead wrong they were."

"E-Exactly! That's exactly what I want to happen!" she said firmly as she bent forward and grasped my hand tightly. "I don't own any fashionable dresses and all the accessories I own, I inherited from my parents and my grandmother. Every year, I'm the only one who turns up to the banquet dressed in old-fashioned clothes. But if I could just get my hair to look shiny and smooth like yours..."

Her eyes clouded over as she went back to staring at my lustrous hair. I deliberately ran my fingers through it and nodded at her.

"I understand. I'll make sure your hair ends up looking just as smooth..." I checked myself. "No, even *smoother* and *glossier* than mine!

There's this one specific item I use that can do just that."

"Does an item like that really exist?" Karen asked, her eyes instantly widening.

"It sure does. But it'd be a waste if I simply stopped there. I *am* a peddler, after all. This is the perfect opportunity for me to put my 'talent' through its paces."

"Your talent?" she repeated, tilting her head to one side.

"That's right," I said before pausing briefly and counting to three in my head to increase the drama of the moment. "Please allow me to furnish you with a dress to wear for the banquet."

"A-A dress?!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, a dress!"

She stared at me, totally dumbfounded.

"Please just leave it to me, Karen," I said, lightly beating my chest. "I'll bring you a dress so elegant, you won't feel even a little ashamed at the banquet. You'll be the most beautiful person in the room and you'll make everyone's jaws drop to the floor!"

And that's how I became Karen's stylist for the night of the banquet.

Chapter Five: Picking a Dress with Grandma

“What are you doing, Shiro?” my grandma asked me as I sat scrolling away on my tablet the evening after my chat with Karen. She’d just gotten out of the bath and was wrapping her damp hair in a towel. She plonked herself down on the floor next to me and crossed her legs.

“Dresses?” she asked, glancing at the screen. Her voice and the way she spoke were exactly the same as the grandma I’d always known, but I still couldn’t get used to her new appearance.

“Yup, dresses,” I said, nodding. “I’m looking for something that won’t seem too out of place in Ruffaltio.”

“You wear dresses now?” she said. “I see you’ve opened the door to a whole new world while I was gone.”

“It’s not for me. It’s for Karen,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Besides, I’m not all that interested in opening doors into any more worlds, thank you very much.”

“Karen?” My grandma squinted at me. “Oh, that mayor girl! I see. So you have a thing for her, do you? Doesn’t she seem a little bit uptight? Though her boobs *are* huge. I’ll give you that.”

“I don’t ‘have a thing’ for her,” I said testily. “I just made a promise to her, that’s all.”

“A promise?” she asked. “You mean, you *proposed* to her?”

“I didn’t!” I protested quickly. “I already said I don’t have a thing for her! Look, it’s like this...”

I told grandma about my promise to Karen to find her a dress befitting of the mayor of Ninoritch—befitting of an elegant lady—to wear to the earl’s banquet. As a peddler working in Karen’s town—and more importantly, as her friend—I wanted to find her a ball gown that would dazzle everyone in the room.

“I see,” my grandma said once I’d finished filling her in on the details. “All righty. You can leave it to me, Shiro. I’ll find her the perfect dress.” She seemed rather excited by the idea.

“Huh? You will?”

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she huffed. “I’m a woman too, you know. I’m sure I’ll be able to help her far more than you could.”

“Well, you have a point there, but...” I trailed off and glanced across at her. “Grandma, do you even know what ‘fashion’ is?”

“Of course I do, you little brat! My fashion sense is amazing!”

“You’d probably be a bit more convincing if you weren’t dressed like an old woman right now,” I pointed out.

After her bath, she’d put on one of those classic “old lady” shirts (I don’t know the actual name of them, sorry), the same kind she used to wear all the time before her disappearance, and she’d matched it with a pair of long, tight pants that were the exact same shade of beige as the shirt. “Fashion icon” wasn’t exactly the phrase you’d use to describe her at that precise moment in time, and I wasn’t entirely sure entrusting her with the task of finding a dress for Karen was a good idea.

“Who cares what I wear in my own house?” she grumbled. “And these are really comfortable, I’ll have you know!”

“I don’t have any problem with you wearing comfortable clothes in your own home,” I said. “At my parents’, the twins would often walk around in just a T-shirt and underwear. But what you’re wearing right now is, uh...”

“What? Am I the only one who isn’t allowed to wear what they want?” she griped.

“You have the face of a teenager, but you’re wearing an old lady shirt. It just looks weird, you know? So when you tell me you’re going to look for a dress for Karen while dressed like that, all that’s going through my mind is how can I turn down your offer without hurting your feelings.”

“Wh-What do you mean, ‘turn down my offer’?!” she bristled. “Listen here, you. You might be my precious grandson, but I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer!”

A pout had started curling her lips. Since our reunion, this was the first time I’d seen her looking so displeased.

“Fine!” she said after a few moments of silence. “If you insist, then fine!”

Still pouting, she muttered a spell under her breath, and when she was finished, a rainbow-colored light appeared and wrapped itself around her body.

“How about this?” she asked.

Once the light had dissipated, I saw that she’d reverted back to the form

I was familiar with: the wrinkled old lady throwing double peace signs. As always, she had a slightly mischievous look on her face, but at least the old lady shirt she was wearing wasn't clashing with her appearance anymore.

"You could've just changed your clothes, but you went and changed your entire appearance instead, huh?" I said. "Well, what else should I expect from you?"

"I'm starting to think you're just complaining for the sake of complaining," she said with a frown. "Would you rather I went for a sexier look and walked around in my underwear like Shiori and Saori?"

"Please spare me that," I grimaced. "It might give me nightmares."

"That's what I thought," she said, grinning at me the same way she'd always done before she'd vanished into thin air. "All righty. Let's start looking for a dress for this girlie, shall we?"

Like before, she sounded really excited by the idea.



"I've already picked out a few dresses I think would suit Karen. Could you take a look?"

I'd bought a couple of fashion magazines at the convenience store and cut out the outfits that had caught my eye, then pasted them in a notebook. I'd also looked up some dresses on the internet, printed them out, and just like the ones from the magazines, glued them into the notebook. I'd chosen a bunch of outfits, all of them in different styles, including some that were more traditional. I handed my little scrapbook to grandma and she took a look inside.

"You've done a lot of research for this girlie," she noted.

"Well, I owe her a lot, so it's only natural I'd go the extra mile," I explained. "Anyway, what do you think? I don't know the first thing about what kind of clothes are currently considered fashionable in Ruffaltio, but I'm sure at least one of these could work, right?"

Grandma let out a pensive "hmm" as she leafed through the scrapbook, her eyes narrowing as she studied the pictures.

"Oh, I've also added a few fantasy outfits from some anime series and video game artbooks. This one here is from an anime that's super popular right now, so we can probably find it at a cosplay shop or something," I said and I pointed out the outfit I was referring to in the notebook to draw her attention to it.

Grandma stared at it, deep in thought for a little while, before shaking

her head. "It's not bad, but it's a little plain," she decided.

"I'm sure the person who designed this outfit doesn't want to hear that from someone who's wearing beige from head to toe," I said.

Grandma ignored my little jibe and pointed to another outfit. "I like this one better. What do you think?"

"Really? I don't think the color would suit Karen all that well," I said.

"Then what about this one? It'll protect her skin from the sun too. That's always good."

"You'd only be able to see her eyes in that one, though. Wouldn't that be a bit rude? After all, she's going to a banquet hosted by the earl of her region."

"Hm, yes, they might think she's an assassin in that and sentence her to death," my grandma said, nodding.

"Yeah, not that one, then. Why'd you even suggest it in the first place?" I asked with a frown.

She chuckled. "Just my little joke."

"Yup, your humor's always been kinda weird," I said.

The two of us carried on looking through the scrapbook for a while, with grandma cracking unfunny jokes every now and again, and it made me feel like I'd gone back in time. Back when I was in middle school, grandma and I used to leaf through magazines about action movie stars together a lot, so this was making me feel a little nostalgic. Grandma and I looked through the notebook and shared our opinions on each of the outfits until finally...

"Shiro! This one! This one's perfect!" my grandma exclaimed, pointing to one particular outfit. "I felt my heart leap out of my chest when I saw it!"

"That's a bit extreme," I said. "Which one was it?"

"This one here! Ah, I remember Shiori and Saori wearing outfits similar to that back when they were little. Oh, I'm getting a bit nostalgic all of a sudden."

I glanced at the outfit grandma was pointing at.

"Grandma..." I said, my voice unconsciously dropping to a whisper. "Are you insane?"

Chapter Six: Let's Decide on a Dress, Everyone!

The next morning, I went down to the town hall with Aina in tow.

"Oh, Mr. Shiro!" the lady at reception said when she saw us. "The mayor told me you'd be coming by today. She's waiting for you in her office."

I thanked her and headed for Karen's office. I knocked on the door a couple of times, and it was flung open almost instantly.

"I've been waiting for you all morning, Shiro!" Karen said, her arms spread wide.

She had a smile on her face, but I could see a glint of worry in her eyes, almost as if she was internally crying out for help. Maybe it was just my imagination, though.

I peered inside her office and noticed a bunch of dresses scattered around, which gave a rather good indication of how much effort she was going to in order to find a suitable outfit for Lord Bashure's banquet. I got the impression that she'd brought all of her clothes to her office for me to look at. Though, thinking about it, did that mean she'd practically carried her whole wardrobe all the way from her house to the town hall by herself just so I could offer my opinion on what she should wear? I was impressed by her dedication.

"Oh, I see Aina's with you today," Karen said, sounding somewhat surprised when she saw Aina, who was clinging to the back of my shirt.

"Good morning, Miss Karen!" the little girl piped up.

"G-Good morning, Aina," Karen greeted her back before bringing her lips closer to my ear and lowering her voice. "Shiro, I didn't know Aina would be with you. D-Did you tell her about my, uh, little *issue*?"

"Don't worry, I didn't say anything," I whispered back. "But I decided to have her tag along. There's this one little thing I'm gonna need her help with."

"What little thing?" she asked, unconsciously tilting her head to one side.

"It'll all become clear later," I said mysteriously.

“I-Is that so? Well, all right, then. Anyway, come in and have a seat. I’ll brew some tea for us.”

Karen showed us in, then locked the door behind us. What was about to happen in this room was highly confidential because it concerned Karen’s dignity as the mayor of this town. She didn’t want anyone else knowing about it, which is why she’d organized this secret meeting and only the three of us were allowed in attendance.

Aina and I sat side by side on the sofa and waited patiently as Karen placed three cups full of steaming black tea—which I had given to her as a gift a few weeks earlier—on the table in front of us before taking a seat on the sofa opposite ours.

“I’ll cut to the chase, if that’s all right with you,” she said with a serious expression on her face. Her cheeks had gone a little red, perhaps because she was a tad embarrassed about the topic we were here to discuss. She was always supremely calm and composed, but deep down, she was still a girl, after all.

“Shiro, did you bring me the items I asked you for yesterday?” Karen asked. “The ones you said can make a person’s hair smooth and glossy?”

I nodded. “I sure did.” I opened my inventory and took out a basket with three bottles in it. “Here they are,” I said as I handed the basket to Karen.



She took the basket from my hands and swallowed loudly. “So these are the items that will make my hair look beautiful, are they?” she asked, wanting confirmation.

I nodded again. “Yup. Shampoo, treatment, conditioner,” I explained, pointing to the respective bottles in turn. “These three products will ensure your hair is super smooth and shiny.”

“Oh, hmm...” she said as she picked up the shampoo bottle, her hand shaking slightly due to what I could only assume was excitement. “What a strange container this is. Can I open it?”

“Of course.”

She fiddled with the bottle for a bit, but couldn’t figure out how to get it open. “Wait, how do you open this?”

“Here, let me show you.”

She handed me the bottle and I flicked open the lid. The aroma of lavender immediately spread all around the room.

“What a soothing scent,” Karen said. “Is it some sort of flower?”

“Yes. This is made using a certain flower from my homeland,” I explained.

“It smells so nice,” Aina said, sighing dreamily. “I like this flower!”

Both Aina and Karen had closed their eyes and were taking in deep whiffs of the lavender-scented air.

“Shiro, this isn’t perfume, is it?” Karen asked after a few seconds.

“Nope, it isn’t,” I confirmed. “This is called ‘shampoo.’ It’s a kind of liquid soap that’s got flower essences mixed into it.”

“What? Th-This is *soap*?” Karen asked, totally flabbergasted.

I nodded and proceeded to explain that shampoo was a special sort of soap specifically designed for washing your hair.

“I didn’t know you sold soap too, Shiro,” Karen said. “I don’t think I’ve ever come across any in your store.”

“That’s because I’ve never sold any before.”

“Why not?” Karen asked, her eyebrows climbing up her forehead. “Is it because it’s too expensive due to these ‘flower essences’ that it has in it?”

I shook my head. “No, that’s not the issue. I’m worried the river might get polluted if I actually do start selling soap.”

Soap was one of the products I’d considered selling at my store, but in the end, I’d decided against it. The reason was rather simple: most people in Ninoritch washed and did their laundry in the river that skirted the town. But if they started using soap to wash in the river, wouldn’t the water end

up getting polluted? Of course, with this in mind, I would have sold additive-free, eco-friendly soap exclusively, but even so, the river was a lifeline to the people of Ninoritch. Sure, if I sold soap, everyone would love it, but I wasn't about to go polluting the river just to make a bit more moolah. If I ever did end up selling soap, it would only be in a big city that had a proper sewage system, like the ones Nesca had told me about.

"I see. You have a point," Karen said with a nod. "In that case, even though I know I'm the one who asked you for these in the first place, I have to give them back to you for that reason."

She held out the basket for me to take back, though it was pretty obvious she was reluctant to part with it.

I gently pushed the basket back toward her. "It's fine. You can use them. We just have to find a way to stop the soap from ending up in the river." I raised my index finger and continued. "For instance, what if you washed your hair over a large bucket? All we'd have to do once you're done is tip the water out on the ground somewhere, and hey presto, no polluted river. Of course, the ultimate solution would be for you to wash your hair in a bath, but—"

"A bath?" Karen interrupted. "I can do that!"

"Oh?" I said in mild surprise. "Does this mean you have a bathtub in your house, Karen?"

"Of course not," she scoffed. "Only nobles and wealthy merchants are rich enough to have their own bath. But there *is* a public bathhouse in Mazela!"

"Oh, that's perfect!" I exclaimed.

Mazela was the place Karen was going to for the banquet, and from what she was saying, it had a bathhouse that was linked up to a proper sewage system, which meant we didn't have to worry about where the soapy water would go afterward.

"All right. So when you arrive in Mazela, you should definitely visit the bathhouse and use this shampoo set. I guarantee you'll love the results," I said.

Karen nodded, happy with this plan. "I will. Thank you so much, Shiro."

And just like that, the shampoo issue was settled.

"All righty. Time to pick your dress," I said.

"Are there any dresses among your wares that you think would s-suit me, Shiro?" Karen asked, looking a little bashful.

A smug smile appeared on my face as if to say *of course* there were. I gave a little exaggerated chuckle.

“Don’t you worry, Karen. I was up all night looking for dresses that would meet your expectations. Here, take a look at this,” I said and proudly placed the scrapbook I’d made the day before down on the table. It was filled with dresses and outfits grandma and I had spent hour after hour carefully selecting the day before.

“Y-You brought an entire book full of dresses?” Karen said, blinking.

“You’ve helped me out so many times in the past, so now that I’ve finally gotten a chance to repay you for your kindness, I felt it was only right that I spend a little bit of time on this,” I said. “Have a flick through and if anything stands out to you, I can have it made for you.”

“I’m sorry for bothering you with such a trivial matter,” Karen said sheepishly. “All right, then. Let me take a look at what you’ve prepared.”

She opened the scrapbook and started flipping through the pages. Aina stared at her intently, obviously curious about the contents of the notebook.

“Hey, Mister Shiro?” she said, gently tugging on my shirt.

“What is it, Aina?”

“Are there photos of dresses in the book Miss Karen is reading?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. I looked for outfits—well, mainly dresses, really—that I thought would suit Karen and put all of them in that notebook.”

“Wow!” the little girl exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “I wanna see too! Can I take a look after?”

“Sure,” I said with a smile, and she let out a little “Yesss!” in response.

“You can look now if you want,” said Karen, who had overheard our conversation. “Do you want to help me find a dress, Aina?”

“Can I?”

“Of course. Here.”

Karen put the scrapbook down on the table and motioned for Aina to come and sit next to her.

“Thank you!” Aina said as she jumped to her feet and rushed around to the other side of the table before plonking herself down next to Karen.

“What do you think of this one?” Karen asked, pointing at one dress.

“Hm, I think *this* color would look much better on you, Miss Karen,” the little girl said, prodding a finger toward another outfit.

“R-Really? Well, what about this one, then?”

“Mama says women shouldn’t wear clothes that show off their chest too much. She says it’s, uh...” She trailed off as she searched for the word her mother had used. “Ah, ‘improper’! That’s what mama says!”

“I-I see,” Karen said. “In that case, let’s not pick that one.”

The two of them carried on flipping through the pages of the scrapbook with a look of concentration on their faces, their heads so close together that their cheeks were nearly touching. For some reason, this sight was way too comical to me, and I was having a hard time trying to stop myself from laughing. At regular intervals, I’d snort air out of my nostrils.

“Ah, Miss Karen! What do you think about this one?” After staring intensely at the scrapbook for the past few minutes, Aina seemed to have landed on something she really liked, judging by the excitement in her tone.

“I see that one also caught your eye, Aina,” the mayor said. “I was just thinking it would be very suitable.”

“You thought so too, Miss Karen?” the little girl asked.

“Yes. The color of this outfit is reminiscent of the formal wear they favor in the Byfrostil Empire. The design is also very different from anything else we’ve seen in this book up to this point. It’s not too gaudy, but it’s definitely not plain either. And most importantly of all, it is incredibly elegant.” Karen paused in her little review of the outfit. “I can’t believe a dress like this exists. What a shock.”

“I’m sure it would look really good on you, Miss Karen!” Aina piped up. “It’s such a cute dress! I wanna wear one like it too!”

“It is indeed incredible,” Karen agreed. “It is both elegant and adorable at the same time.”

The two seemed to be on the same wavelength when it came to this particular dress they’d found. *Well, looks like we have a winner.*

“Okay, I’ve decided, Shiro. I’d like to wear this dress to the banquet. Would that be possible?” Karen asked, pointing at an outfit in the scrapbook.

When I saw the dress she had picked out, I instinctively brought my hands up to my face and rubbed my eyes vigorously.

“Look, Mister Shiro, it’s this one!” Aina said, pointing to the same dress Karen had indicated. “This is the one Miss Karen wants.”

It seemed I wasn’t hallucinating after all. “Are you kidding me right now?” I muttered to myself.

The two of them were pointing to the same dress grandma had picked

out the night before.

Chapter Seven: Aina's Job

“Wh-What’s that face for? D-Don’t you like it?” Karen asked, perturbed by my reaction.

“Oh, no, I *do* like it, don’t worry,” I quickly reassured her. “It’s just, uh...” I paused as I tried to think of a diplomatic way of vocalizing my thoughts. “I didn’t expect you to pick *that* one.”

To say I wasn’t very well-versed in fashion would be an understatement—I literally knew nothing about it—but even a total fashion ignoramus like me was baffled that Karen would pick out this particular dress (if you could even call it that). It seemed I would never understand fashion, even in this world.

“Anyway, it’s all good. This...” I paused briefly as I pointed to the dress in the scrapbook, just to make extra sure. “This *is* the dress you want, yes?”

“That’s the one,” Karen said with a nod. I could see sparkles in her eyes that hadn’t been there earlier, which I put down to the fact that she’d finally managed to find a fashionable dress to wear to the banquet. Or maybe she was just excited at the idea of wearing a dress she had seemingly fallen in love with. She was a girl, after all.

“I was hoping she’d shown me the wrong dress, but it doesn’t seem like she did,” I muttered to myself.

“Hm?” Karen said. “Did you say something, Shiro?”

“Nope,” I said and wrestled my expression into something a bit more neutral. On the bright side, Karen had chosen her dress. Now all I had to do was get it for her, regardless of my own personal feelings on it.

“All righty. Now that you’ve made your choice, we can proceed to the next step. Aina, you’re up,” I said, turning toward the little girl.

She answered with a little “Right!” and started searching for something in her backpack.

“We’re going to have to take your measurements, Karen,” I said.

Her eyes grew wide. “M-My measure—*what?! You didn’t tell me you’d have to do that, Shiro!*”

“You’re right, I didn’t. In fact, the thought hadn’t even crossed my mind until my grandma reminded me I’d need them.”

“A-Are you going to measure my, um...”—she fidgeted awkwardly —“my whole body?” She looked slightly embarrassed.

I nodded. “Yup. But don’t worry. I won’t be the one taking your measurements. Aina here will.”

And there you had it. That was the reason I’d brought Aina with me to see Karen. I needed to have her precise measurements, and as a man, it wouldn’t have been appropriate for me to do it myself, so I first did some research on how to properly measure someone’s body, then relayed everything I’d learned to Aina. I had also provided her with a tape measure I’d bought at the 100-yen store so she could take Karen’s measurements for me.

“Miss Karen, I’m going to take your measurements now, so you need to take off your clothes,” Aina ordered.

“Wh-What?!” Karen squeaked. “A-Aina, what are you—”

“If you don’t take off your clothes, I can’t measure you properly,” the little girl said, frowning. “C’mon, take your clothes off already!”

She was holding the tape measure in both hands and reaching out toward Karen, who instantly wrapped both arms around herself as if trying to protect herself from attack.

“Now, hold on a second, Aina!” she pleaded. “I might be the one who asked Shiro for a dress, but I can’t just *take my clothes off* in front of him!”

“Oh, don’t mind me. I’m gonna step out for a bit,” I reassured her. “Let me know when you’re all done. Well, I’ll leave it to you, Aina.”

“Okay!” the little girl said, nodding vigorously.

“Thanks,” I said and left the room. I could still hear Aina urging Karen to undress as I walked off down the hallway. And then...

“Miss Karen, they’re so big!” I heard Aina exclaim just as I was stepping out of the building.

I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.



Thanks to Aina, I now had Karen’s exact measurements, and as soon as I got home that day, I immediately contacted the company that made the “dress” (could it *really* be called a dress?) to have them whip one up in Karen’s size. I told them I wanted it ready within the next few days, which meant I had to pay a rush fee on top, but even with that extra expense, it was still much cheaper than if I’d tried to get it tailored in Ruffaltio. I hadn’t been expecting that, but it did make some sense. After all, sewing

machines weren't a thing there, which meant everything had to be done by hand. Besides, things like petticoats and crinolines—that were used to make sure the skirt held its shape—had to be made with monster bones, and all the shiny accessories that went with a dress were usually crafted out of precious gems. Sure, being able to turn these raw materials into the finest of dresses showed just how skilled the dressmakers in the other world were, but it naturally meant their wares came with a higher price tag. Apparently, buying a new dress in Ruffaltio could set you back at least one gold coin, and the fashionable gowns noble ladies favored went for several times that price. It was no surprise that most women in the other world couldn't readily make such big purchases. Compared to those dresses, the one I'd ordered seemed dirt cheap, and when I told Karen how much it had cost when she swung by my shop early the following day, she seemed really surprised.

“Are you sure it's all right for me to get it for such a low price?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yup. It's not a very popular design in Ninoritch, you see. That's why it's so cheap,” I half-lied. “Oh, but it's not ready yet. I should have it in about two or three days.”

“I don't mind waiting a little if it means I get to wear a gorgeous dress like that one,” she said with a smile.

“I'm happy you found a dress you like, Miss Karen!” Aina piped up.

“Thank you, Aina. It's all thanks to your help. I wouldn't be able to wear such an amazing dress if you hadn't taken my measurements, after all,” Karen said, gently petting Aina's head. The little girl giggled and blissfully closed her eyes as Karen stroked her hair.

“Oh, by the way, when are you leaving for Mazela?” I asked Karen.

“As it happens, I was just informed that the knights due to take me there are currently two towns over, meaning they should be here in the next four days or so.”

To ensure the safety of the towns' representatives when they traveled to the feudal capital to pay their taxes, the earl of the region always sent out a carriage with an escort to every single town and village in his territory. When they eventually got here, the knights would spend the night in Ninoritch to rest up a bit, and then the following morning, they would load the money or the crops—or sometimes both—the town had to pay to the earl into the carriage, before departing again for Mazela, the capital of the region.

“It’s a lot of time and effort to get me all the way to Mazela so that I can pay the town’s taxes directly to Lord Bashure, but at least it means no corrupt tax collectors can steal any of it before it gets to where it’s going, so in a way, it’s a good thing,” Karen told me.

“Being mayor sure ain’t easy, huh?” I said.

She sighed. “Tell me about it.”

“Good luck, Miss Karen!” Aina piped up.

“Thank you, Aina. I’ll make sure I don’t do anything that’s unbecoming of a mayor. Especially since Shiro has gone as far as to provide me with a d-dress.” Karen always seemed to get a little uncomfortable whenever she talked about the dress I’d ordered for her. I found it kind of cute.

“Mazela is a trading city, isn’t it? Must be nice there. I’m sure there are lots of merchants selling unique items there,” I sighed dreamily. On top of being the feudal capital, Mazela was also a very important trading city.

It had been five months since I’d taken my first steps on Ruffaltio soil, and in that time, I hadn’t left Ninoritch once, save for a handful of expeditions into the Gigheena Forest east of town. My life here was just too good, meaning I hadn’t even *thought* about visiting other towns or cities.

“You’ve never been there, Shiro?” Karen asked, sounding curious.

“That’s strange. The safest route to Ninoritch is through Mazela.”

“Y-Yeah, I know. I-I just...” I stammered. “I came here by another route.” It wasn’t a lie exactly, because I *had* used another route. One that took me through my closet instead. “That’s why I don’t really know what kind of place Mazela is.”

“I see,” Karen said, seeming to ruminate on this. “Would you like to accompany me there this time?”

Whoa. I hadn’t been expecting her to invite me to tag along. “C-Can I?”

“Sure,” she said with a nod. “It takes about six days just to get to Mazela, then add to that the handful of days I have to spend there, plus the return journey...” She sighed. “Well, all in all, I’ll be away for about half a month. It’ll be quite boring for me if I’m by myself the entire time. But if I could have a close friend accompanying me, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, right?”

“Please let me come with—”

“*Please let me come with you,*” was what I’d been about to say, but I quickly cut myself off before reaching the end of my sentence. Why, you

might ask? Well, if I left Ninoritch for half a month, I wouldn't be able to run my shop. Aina must have come to the same conclusion, as I could see her little face scrunching up to the point where she looked like she might burst into tears at any second.

"Thank you for the invitation, Karen, but unfortunately, I can't be away from my store for that long," I said.

"If you're worried about Aina, why don't you have her come with us?" Karen suggested. "Though, of course, that'd still mean shutting your shop for a couple of weeks."

"That wouldn't be a problem. I have my satellite store at the Fairy's Blessing guild, after all. Even if I close my main one for a little while, that other shop should still run just fine," I said. "But are you sure it's all right for Aina to come along too?"

"Well, I *am* the mayor, after all. It would be a little embarrassing if I showed up to the feudal capital without some kind of entourage, wouldn't it? Besides, I'll need some help putting on the dress and I can't possibly get you to do that. It would be much better if Aina came with us."

"Well, you heard the lady, Aina," I said, turning to her.

The little girl had a huge grin on her face. "Can I really come?" she asked.

Karen nodded. "Of course. But you're going to have to assist me. Can you do that?"

"Yup! I'll be the best assistant you could ever wish for, Miss Karen!" the little girl said happily.

"Thank you, Aina. Oh, but you have to get permission from your mother first, okay?"

"Okay! I'll ask mama later!"

"This is pretty important, so you should go ask her now, Aina," I said.

She turned to me and I saw that her eyes were sparkling. "Can I?"

"Sure," I replied. "Well? What are you waiting for? Get going already."

"Okay, I'll go ask mama now!" the little girl announced cheerily. "I'll be right back, Miss Karen, so stay there!"

The mayor let out an amused chuckle at how excited the little girl was. "Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere. I'll sit here and chat with Shiro while we await your return."

"I'm off, then!" the little girl declared as she dashed out of the store.

About ten minutes later, she was back again and panting for breath, having secured her mother's permission to travel with us to Mazela. And

so it was settled that Aina and I would accompany Karen to the feudal capital.

Chapter Eight: Preparing for the Trip

Of course, I couldn't just leave town for half a month without telling anyone. I informed all of my regular customers as well as the other merchants in the marketplace that my store would be closed for about two weeks. I also told grandma I wouldn't be home for a while. She simply smiled and told me to enjoy myself out there, seemingly very pleased that her precious grandson was finally going to start exploring the world of Ruffaltio.

All righty. Now for one final stop.

"Huh. So you're going to Mazela with the mayor?" said the handsome blond adventurer in front of me.

"Yeah. I wanted to see more of the world, and this seemed like the perfect opportunity," I explained.

I had come to the Fairy's Blessing Adventurers' Guild to let my friends there know about my upcoming expedition to the feudal capital. Two months prior, I'd hired the guild to exterminate the flying rhinoceros beetles that had built their nest in the Gigheena Forest, and while carrying out this task, we had accidentally stumbled across the ruins the guild had been searching for this entire time. Ever since, the Fairy's Blessing guild had been a real hive of activity. It turned out the numerous ruins they'd discovered actually led to underground dungeons, and as such, the guild kept sending wave after wave of adventurers down there to try and clear them out, though they were still nowhere near done exploring all the ruins. *Underground dungeons, huh? Sounds terrifying. Well, I'm never setting foot down there, that's for sure.*

My friends in the Blue Flash crew had also been tasked with clearing out the dungeons, and Raiya told me that on one such foray, they had spent a full ten days down in one.

"Still, I'm really glad you're here today, Raiya," I said. "If you hadn't been, I'd planned on leaving a message with Emille, so thank goodness I didn't have to go through all that."

"Yeah, I wouldn't go down that route if I were you. Knowing Emi, she'd probably charge you a hefty sum for being the messenger," Raiya said with a laugh as he glanced in the direction of the bunny girl who was

bustling about behind the reception desk. As always, she had lots to do: she had to pay the adventurers who'd just finished up a job, make eyes at any guy that looked rich, *and* give the cold shoulder to the cute new receptionist the guild had hired. Talk about being rushed off your feet.

Aside from Raiya, there were two other people I had to talk to at the guild. The first was Ney, the guildmaster. When I told her my shop would be closed for the next two weeks, she offered to send a few adventurers over to the marketplace every day to set up a temporary shop where they could sell my items while I was away. Her reasoning was the townsfolk might need to buy certain items in those two weeks and this would mean they still could. I gratefully accepted her suggestion, though it took a little bit of persistence on my part to get her to accept me paying the adventurers for doing this task. Once I was done talking to Raiya and Ney, there was one last person I had to see.

“Hey, Raiya, where’s Nesca? Is she still out in the forest?” I asked.

“Nope,” he said with a shake of the head. “She said she wanted to go practice some things over at the training grounds.”

“The training grounds, huh?” I mused. “I hope everything’s fine.”

“I’m gonna come check on her with you, man,” Raiya said.

“Great, thanks.”



Raiya and I wandered onto the training grounds behind the guildhall.

“Hm, I don’t see her,” I said, looking around.

“She’s not in this part. She’s in her special training area, all the way over there,” Raiya explained, pointing to a spot on the outskirts of town. I looked in the direction he was indicating and...

BOOM! A giant pillar of fire shot up from the ground with a deafening noise. I jumped out of my skin and yelped in surprise.

“Yup, she’s over there, all right,” Raiya said matter-of-factly, and set off toward the place the giant column of fire had sprouted from.

Nesca’s personal training grounds had been set up on an empty plot of land about halfway between the town and the forest. As we got nearer, I saw that the ground was scorched in some places and frozen solid in others, and I was in no doubt that this was Patty’s handiwork. Nesca was currently teaching her magic.

BOOM! The sound of another explosion arose from Nesca’s personal training grounds, followed soon after by Patty’s high-pitched voice.

“H-How was that?”

“Awful,” Nesca answered, sounding as lethargic as she always did. “Why does your Fireball always cause an explosion?”

“Y-You really think I have any clue why it’s doing that?!” Patty said, clearly frustrated.

“Try to remember what I taught you. Listen up, because I’m not saying it again. You have to try to curb your magic when casting a spell. Imagine you want it to just come out of the tip of your finger, rather than your entire body.”

“I-I got it,” Patty said before trying the spell again. “How about this?”

KRAKABOOM! An even bigger pillar of fire shot up from the ground.

“I don’t think you’re getting it,” Nesca said with a sigh, her head drooping in defeat.

Patty was terrible at controlling her magic. No matter how much she tried to hold back, her spells always came out way too strong. It had been two months since Nesca had volunteered to teach her how to properly control her magic, and well... It was starting to look like she’d lost all hope of Patty ever succeeding.

“One more time! I’m *sure* I’ll get it right this time!” the little fairy said resolutely.

Nesca didn’t answer.

“Hey, Nesca! Say something!” Patty ordered, growing impatient with her teacher.

But Nesca just stayed silent.

“Nesca!” the little fairy tried one last time.

Well, this wasn’t good. I needed to find a way to get Nesca to stop looking so down.

“Hiya,” I called out to them and raised my hand in the air to attract their attention.

“Shiro!” Patty exclaimed when she saw me.

“Good work today, boss. We saw that fire column all the way from the guild.”

“I-It may not have looked it, but I was actually holding back just then, you know?” she said smugly, trying to hide her embarrassment even though her face had gone as red as a tomato.

“Same goes for you too, Nesca. Good work,” I said to the mage, who’d dropped to her knees on the ground with a look of desperation on her face. “Looks like my boss has been causing you all sorts of issues today, huh?”

She was so down, the only reply she could manage was a weak “Shiro...”

“Here, have some of these. Might cheer you up,” I said as I took a few boxes of cookies out of my backpack. This particular variety had only come out recently, but they were covered in chocolate, which was just how Nesca liked her cookies.

“Thank you, Shiro. Some of my motivation has come back,” she said before promptly stuffing her face full of cookies.

After a few seconds of chomping, she finally got to her feet again, seemingly having regained some of her strength. Well, kind of, at least. Her boyfriend, Raiya, did have to step in to help her up. I was positively green with envy. Seriously, how had these two *not* been blown to bits yet?

“So what brings you here, Shiro?” Nesca asked after she’d finished devouring three entire boxes of cookies. There was a lot more color in her complexion again, thanks to the power of chocolate.

“I need to tell boss something,” I said.

Patty tilted her head to one side. “Who, me?”

“Yup, you, boss.”

“What is it?” she asked curiously.

“Well...”

I explained to her that Aina and I were leaving Ninoritch for a couple of weeks to go to the feudal capital and that she would be staying with Stella while I was away.

“I’m going with you guys!” she declared as soon as I stopped talking. “I’m coming too!”

Yup, that went exactly as I’d expected. Of course she wanted to tag along. “Sorry, boss, but that ain’t happening. While the people of Ninoritch might all be familiar with you now, folk in other towns still think fairies only exist in legends and stories, right?”

While the residents of Ninoritch didn’t even bat an eye when they saw Patty flying around town anymore, fairies were still extremely rare creatures. If I took her to the feudal capital, her mere presence would almost certainly cause a huge stir.

“I-It’s fine as long as no one sees me, right? I can just hide in Aina’s backpack, like I used to,” she suggested.

“That’s—” I started, but she immediately cut me off.

“I would also like to remind you that I am your boss. You *have* to do what I say!”

Oof, she was getting mad. She started whacking me on the shoulder as she repeated her demand to be taken to the feudal capital over and over, tears rushing to her eyes.

“Patty, stop pestering him,” a quiet voice said next to us.

“But Nesca...” the little fairy protested, though she did stop hitting me all the same and instead landed gently on my shoulder.

“Mazela is a trading city. That means there are lots of people there,” Nesca explained. “And while the majority of them will most likely be good people, there’s always a few bad apples in the bunch in a place that size. After all, you’re a fairy. A legendary creature. Someone with bad intentions might attempt to abduct you.”

Patty winced at that last bit.

“And if they succeed, you’ll likely never see the outside world again,” Nesca said, driving the point home. “They’ll sell you to the highest bidder and you’ll spend the rest of your life in a cage. Is that really what you want?”

Patty opened her mouth, but no words came out. Her face scrunched up in frustration, but all she could do was open and close her mouth repeatedly like a fish.

But Nesca wasn’t finished. “Besides, we’re not done with your training. You can’t even cast a normal Fireball yet. I can’t just let you go wandering off to a city. You might accidentally blow the place up.”

Patty made a high-pitched whining noise and stamped her feet in frustration. *Uh, Patty? That’s my shoulder you’re standing on. That hurts.*

“I-I won’t use my magic, then!” the fairy protested.

“It’s still a no,” Nesca said firmly.

She let out another frustrated cry and started stamping her feet even faster, to the point where I began to think there was a very real possibility that I wouldn’t be able to raise my arm the following day.

“Boss...” I said.

“What do *you* want?” Patty said, her hissy fit carrying on unabated.

“The city we’re going to is a six-day carriage ride away,” I told her.

“And?” she said huffily.

“Well, would you really be able to hide inside a backpack for six days straight?” I asked.

She immediately stopped stamping her feet. “C-Can’t I come out from time to time?” she asked.

“No,” Nesca and I said in unison.

“Why not?” the fairy pouted. “Just a few minutes at a time!”

Again, Nesca and I replied with a perfectly in-sync “No,” earning us another frustrated whine from the little fairy.

Raiya—who up until this point had been watching our little exchange in silence—burst out laughing.

“You should probably give it up, Patty,” he told her. “Besides, Shiro said there’d be two knights escorting them to Mazela, so there’s not much chance of you being able to come out of Aina’s bag at all.”

“Knights?” the little fairy repeated with a frown.

“Yup, knights. They’re these seriously boring, straitlaced guys who serve nobles. And you can bet if a noble tells his knights to capture you, they’ll put their lives on the line to obey their master’s orders. They’re a real troublesome bunch.”

“R-Really?” the little fairy asked.

“Yup,” Raiya confirmed.

“I-I see...”

“Guess you gotta give it a miss this time, Patty,” Raiya said.

The little fairy’s shoulders drooped. It looked like she’d finally resigned herself to not coming.

“Hey, boss. You can’t come with us this time, but there’ll always be a next time,” I said, poking her gently in the back to try to cheer her up.

“Tell you what—next time, we can all go there together. You, me, Aina, and even the Blue Flash crew!”

“Shiro...”

“That’s why, until that day comes, you have to work super-duper hard to get better at controlling your magic. Okay, boss?”

She didn’t say anything to this, so I tried nudging her some more with my finger. “Well?”

She remained silent for one whole minute before finally nodding.

“All right! You’d better take me with you next time! This is an order from your boss, Shiro!” she said in her usual self-important manner.

After a little while, Patty declared she was going to go train some more, which was my cue to leave. I made sure to give Nesca a few more boxes of cookies so that she could endure teaching Patty magic for a bit longer, then Raiya and I headed back to the guild together before going our separate ways.

“Hm? Is that you, Mr. Shiro?” I heard a voice say behind me just as I was about to walk out of the guildhall and head off home. I turned and saw

that the person who had spoken to me was a middle-aged man. I was sure I'd seen him before, but *where*?

“Oh, it really is you!” he said. “It’s been a while.”

Darn, I’m sure I know him. Who is this guy?

After a few seconds of racking my brain, I finally remembered who he was. “Ah! Mr. Gerald!”

Yup, that’s right. The man standing in front of me was Gerald, whom I’d last seen in town four months ago, back when this Adventurers’ Guild had still been called the Silver Moon, before it became a branch of the Fairy’s Blessing guild. When I first encountered him, he had come to the Silver Moon to insist the money he had lent the guild be repaid, and Emille had prostrated herself in front of him and implored him to give her more time to get the funds together.

“Oh, you remember me? It’s been a few months, hasn’t it?” he said, holding out his hand for me to shake, to which I obliged.

“It sure has. Are you here to buy some loot?” I asked casually.

“Yeah. Since this guild became part of the Fairy’s Blessing, I’ve been able to buy a lot more loot than before. I’ve been making a killing off selling it all,” Gerald said, then guffawed.

I glanced at his attire and noticed that, while his clothes hadn’t exactly been shabby when we’d first met, they were definitely of better quality now. It seemed he really had been “making a killing.”

“Wow, that’s great. I’m envious,” I said with a polite smile.

“It’s all thanks to you, Mr. Shiro. If you hadn’t sold that murder grizzly loot to the Silver Moon that day, I’d have cut all ties with them and never gotten the opportunity to do business with the Fairy’s Blessing guild. I’m really grateful to you for that!”

Gerald was the only loot merchant the Ninoritch branch of the Fairy’s Blessing did business with, which meant he had a complete monopoly when it came to buying the valuable loot the guild had acquired, and after snapping it all up, he’d sell it all wholesale to businesses and merchant guilds in other towns. This had clearly been working for him, as he had managed to save up enough money to buy himself a new cart to make transporting goods easier and was even planning to open up a new branch of his business—Gerald & Co.—in another town.

“A branch store, huh? That’s amazing. You’re really making me jealous now, Mr. Gerald.”

“What are you saying, Mr. Shiro? A merchant as adept as yourself

could easily set up a branch store at the capital and make a roaring success of it!” the man said.

I laughed. “I’m already busy enough managing my store in Ninoritch. Unfortunately, I don’t have the time to set up and manage a branch store as well. Although, if the opportunity *did* arise at some point in the future, who knows? Do you mind giving me a little advice on how you think I should go about ‘branching out,’ so to speak? If I ever decide to, that is.”

“Of course!” the man said affably. “I’m always available for advice, Mr. Shiro.”

“Thank you.”

“No need to thank me!” He laughed. “Well, let’s see now...” he said as he thought about the question I’d posed. “If you want to stay close to Ninoritch, I’d suggest setting up your branch store in either the fortified town of Gufka, or Domtro to the northwest. You could also try Mazela, the feudal capital. It’s a very prosperous trade city and I cannot recommend it enough as a place to do business.”

The mention of Mazela had me intrigued. “Have you ever been to Mazela, Mr. Gerald?” I asked.

“Just one time, several years ago now. It’s quite a big city, like you’d expect a feudal capital to be.”

“I see. I’m actually going there soon, so I’m a little curious about what kind of place it is,” I explained.

“Oh, really? Might I inquire why you’re going there? Ah, is it to check out some locations for this future branch store of yours? Or maybe you have business with a merchant guild there?” Gerald asked.

I shook my head. “Nope, not this time. I’m mostly going to do a bit of sightseeing.”

“Oh, is that right? Well, if you do ever plan on setting up a branch store in Mazela, I advise joining one of its merchant guilds.”

“Merchant guilds?” I repeated, intrigued.

“Yes. There are five major merchant guilds in Mazela,” Gerald explained. “I’ve heard if you don’t join one of them, you have a hard time doing business in the city.”

According to Gerald, it was an absolute necessity to join one of the five merchant guilds in Mazela if you wanted to trade there as a business, the reason being that all taxation on merchants was done through the guilds themselves. Mazela was divided into several districts, with each merchant guild managing its own subdivision of the city, and as such, these major

guilds were known as the “Big Five” of Mazela.

“Or at least, so I’ve heard,” Gerald concluded. “I’m not exactly an expert on Mazela either.”

“That was really informative,” I assured him. “Thank you.”

“At any rate, I gotta go wrap up some business with the guild, so I’ll be on my way now,” Gerald said, excusing himself.

“I hope to see you again soon,” I said to him, then we went our separate ways and I departed from the guildhall.

Chapter Nine: The Morning of Departure

And then, just like that, the next morning arrived. The earl had sent several carts to Ninoritch for the crops that would serve as part of the town's taxes, plus a covered wagon for Karen, Aina, and me to travel in. We also met the two knights who would be escorting us to Mazela.

Meow.

The first was a taciturn middle-aged man who seemed quite unfriendly. He had sharp eyes and a five o'clock shadow that gave him a certain rugged charm.

"This way, please, Miss Sankareka," the second knight said to Karen. He seemed to be around the same age as me, had lustrous blond hair and a handsome face, and to top it off, he was also quite tall. Everything about him screamed elegance.

Meow.

While Raiya was handsome in a "bad boy" kind of way, this man was the very picture of refinement. This pretty-boy knight held out his hand toward Karen to help her into the covered wagon.

"I believe we have already had this conversation in the past about not calling me 'Miss Sankareka,' Sir Lestard," Karen scowled. "I will step into this wagon as Ninoritch's mayor and representative. So please refrain from calling me 'Miss Sankareka,' as it might tarnish my reputation in front of the other representatives."

"My apologies, *Mayor* Sankareka," he corrected himself. "You are so beautiful, it just slips out. And please, call me Duane."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Sir Lestard," Karen said, as calm and composed as always. She ignored the knight's proffered hand and climbed into the wagon without assistance.

Meow.

"And would you two be Mayor Sankareka's retinue, perhaps?" the pretty boy asked us, seemingly noticing the presence of Aina and me at long last.

"Y-Yes," I stammered. "I own a store in Ninoritch. M-My name is

Shiro Amata. It's a pleasure making your acquaintance," I said, before adding a hurried, mumbled "sir" because I felt I hadn't been polite enough.

"And I'm Aina! I-I mean, my name is Aina," she corrected herself, feeling her initial introduction had been too casual for the occasion. "It's nice to meet you..."—there was a brief pause—"sir," the little girl blurted out, following my example.

I'd never talked to a knight before. It was kind of nerve-racking, to tell the truth. And it wasn't just me who was feeling it: poor little Aina was shaking like a leaf. I was plenty used to dealing with adventurers, of course, but this man was a *knight*. If we assumed the knights of this world were just like the warriors who'd existed centuries ago in Japan, then it was only natural a commoner like me would be nervous around him.

Meow.

"You don't need to be so polite around me," the man said with a smile. "I was also born a commoner, you see. Lord Bashure made me a knight, but I'm no different from the two of you."

Damn. Not only was this guy incredibly handsome, he even had a winning personality too.

"Like I said to Mayor Sankareka, please call me Duane," he added.

"It seems Karen didn't take you up on that, but I might, Duane," I said with a smile.

"C-Can I call you Mister Duane?" Aina asked.

The grin on Duane's face grew even wider. "Of course you can. At any rate, it's almost time we got going, so you two should probably hop in the wagon with Mayor Sankareka."

Meow!

Aina and I didn't move.

"Um, Duane..." I said.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Before we jump in the wagon, may I ask you a question?"

Meow!

"Of course. Oh, but before you ask: no, I'm not seeing anyone at the moment. I might have feelings for a certain someone, though."

"No, that's not what I wanted to ask..."

I ignored Duane's rather enigmatic statement and shifted my gaze about twenty centimeters to the right of his face. I finally just came out and said what was on my mind. "Why is there a cat on your shoulder?"

That's right. All those "meows" we'd been hearing this whole time had

been coming from a tiny black cat that was sitting on Duane's shoulder.

"Oh, this black cat, you mean? I picked this little guy up on the roadside on the way over. He was meowing so pitifully and I couldn't just leave him there. Monsters don't usually come this close to the highway, but it's not unheard of, so I decided to bring him with us," Duane explained as he took the little cat in his arms and showed him to us.

"What a cute kitty," Aina marveled.

"Would you like to pet him?" Duane asked.

"Can I really?"

The knight nodded. "Go right ahead. He doesn't seem to be afraid of humans at all."

Aina slowly extended a hand toward the cat, who immediately gave it a lick.

"So cute!" the little girl squealed and started gently petting the black cat, who meowed happily at the attention.

"He seems to be a kitten," I noted. "I wonder if he got separated from his mother."

"That's a possibility, I guess," Duane said with a nod. "But I just couldn't leave him there all by himself. Besides, black cats are a symbol of good luck, so that's a plus."

"A symbol of *good* luck?" I queried.

Duane shot me a quizzical look. "You didn't know that? In the Giruam Kingdom, if you happen across a black cat, it's considered a lucky omen."

"No, I didn't know that," I admitted. "Where I'm from it's actually the opposite. If a black cat crosses your path, it's considered a sign of bad luck."

"Really? But they're just so darn cute," Duane said. "What a cruel superstition."

I nodded. "I have to say, I do feel kinda bad for them. Those poor cats didn't do anything wrong, yet they get accused of being bearers of bad luck."

After this little conversation between Duane and me, the young knight once again gently urged Aina and me to get into the wagon, and this time, we obliged. I got in first, and Aina followed close behind, Duane helping her up.

Meow.

Almost at the same moment that Aina got into the wagon, the black kitten meowed and hopped up in there with us too.

“Huh. Looks like the little guy’s taken a liking to you two,” Duane said with a smile as the kitten purred softly and nuzzled into Aina. “If you don’t mind, can he stay with you in there for now?”

“Well, you heard the man, Aina,” I said to the little girl.

A huge grin spread across her face. “He can stay with us?” she asked.

“Sounds like Duane doesn’t have an issue with it,” I said with a nod.

“Then I want the cute kitty to stay!” the little girl said, and the kitten let out a few happy meows in response.



“We’re all sitting down now,” I informed the driver once all three of us had taken our seats in the wagon. While covered wagons left their occupants pretty exposed to the wind, they were still fairly comfortable, and it was particularly generous of Lord Bashure to provide his vassals with such good transportation free of charge. Well, that’s what Karen said, at least.

“All right, then. Time we got going, everyone,” Duane announced.

“Wait! Don’t move that wagon yet! Hold on a minute!” a feminine-sounding voice cried out from somewhere behind us.

I turned and saw a distant figure with bunny ears making a beeline for us from the other side of town.

“Hm? Is that Emi?” Karen said as she peeked through a gap in the wagon’s cover.

“Certainly looks like her,” I said, nodding.

It took Emille a little while to get to us, but she eventually reached the wagon. “M-Mister, Karen...” she panted, completely out of breath. “You two are...”—pant—“You two are *big meanies!* You’re...”—pant—“You’re going all the way to Mazela and you...”—pant—“you didn’t even tell me! You didn’t even invite me to come with you!”

“Invite you?” Karen said. “What about your job at the guild?”

I nodded. “Yeah, Karen’s right. You can’t come with us. You have work to do. Besides, we’re only going to Mazela so Karen can pay this year’s taxes to the earl of the region. There’s not really much point in you tagging along, is there?”

“I-I know *that!* I know I can’t come with you because of work. But...” She paused, then she suddenly blurted out, “I just really wanted to go to Mazela with you, mister! I sometimes get tired of living in this desolate little town. I’d love nothing more than to go to the big city for a few days

and give my ears a good stretch for a change!” The bunny girl stamped her feet in frustration.

Whoa, you’ve got guts, calling Ninoritch a “desolate little town” in front of the mayor, Emille. I could see the vein on Karen’s forehead pulsating, and the polite smile she’d forced onto her face was starting to look a little scary.

“Well, anyway, since I can’t come with you, I want you to have this, mister,” the bunny girl said, fishing something out of her breast pocket and shoving it into my hands.

“A letter?” I said when I saw what it was.

“Yes!” Emille confirmed. “I put my heart and soul into writing that letter, mister. I-I wanted you to know how I truly feel. Promise me you’ll read it!”



Watching the scene unfold from the sidelines, Duane let out a low whistle. “You’re quite the ladies’ man, aren’t you, Shiro?”

And what exactly are you implying?

Beside me, Aina moved her mouth closer to Karen’s ear.

“Hey, Miss Karen,” the little girl whispered.

“What is it, Aina?” Karen said in an equally low voice.

“Do you think that was a ‘love letter’ Miss Emi just gave to Mister Shiro?”

“*What?!*” Karen spluttered while still trying to keep her voice down. “A-A love letter?! Emi gave Shiro a...” She trailed off momentarily. “Hold on. She actually might have. I mean, it’s not impossible, is it? Don’t tell me Emi likes...” She couldn’t finish that sentence either.

Uh, you two do realize we can hear everything you’re saying, don’t you?

“Have a safe trip, mister,” Emille said. “And promise me...” She paused and took my hand in both of hers. “Promise me you’ll come back!”

She was gripping my hand tightly and seemingly overcome with emotion. I noticed her face was even a bit scrunched up, like she was on the verge of tears, and her voice was shaking. She really did seem terrified that I wasn’t coming back.

“Hey, there’s no need to look so sad, Emille. I’m not planning on leaving Ninoritch for good,” I reassured her.

“You promise?” she sniffed.

“I promise.”

“I’ll be really mad if you don’t come back,” she pouted.

“Don’t worry. I’ll come back for sure,” I repeated. “I’ll even bring you a souvenir, so be good and wait patiently for me to return, okay?”

As soon as the word “souvenir” passed my lips, she started squeezing my hand even tighter. “A souvenir?” she exclaimed. “I-I’ll be good, I promise!”

We all said goodbye to her, and a short time later, we were finally underway.

“Come back soon, mister!” Emille yelled after us, waving vigorously as our wagon left town.



“Mister Shiro, what does Miss Emi’s letter say?” Aina asked after a little while, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“Y-Yes, go ahead and read her letter. Don’t mind us. Come on. Open it already,” Karen urged me, getting in on the act.

Meow.

Looked like everyone in the wagon was dying to know the contents of Emille’s letter.

“Jeez, you guys are so impatient,” I sighed. “Hold on a second, then. Let me open it.”

I put on an air of nonchalance as I took a closer look at the envelope. It had been sealed with wax, and I spotted the crest of the Fairy’s Blessing guild on it. The envelope alone showed just how much care Emille had put into composing this letter.

“All right, I’m opening it,” I announced.

“Come on, come on!” Aina urged me, and she was so excited, she was practically bouncing up and down in her seat.

“Emi looked like she couldn’t wait for you to read it,” Karen pointed out. “For her sake, I believe you shouldn’t waste a second longer, and you should open it right now.”

I nodded and broke the seal under their hawklike gazes. Inside the envelope, I found a sheet of what looked like very good quality paper that had been folded in half. *Surely it can’t be an actual love letter, can it?* I proceeded to read the letter and...

“Mister Shiro?” Aina said after a few seconds.

“Wh-What does the letter say, Shiro?” Karen asked.

I handed the piece of paper to Aina in complete silence. The little girl shot me a puzzled look before peering down at the letter in her hands.

“Read it aloud, Aina,” Karen urged.

“Um, lemme see here... ‘A brooch from J-Jarzl’s. A hair ornament from Lerkan. Sweets from Borzlm. A scarf from Silver Fox...’” the little girl read slowly, then paused. “Mister Shiro, this is...” She trailed off and raised her head to look at me, an expression of sheer bewilderment splashed across her face.

I nodded, my face almost a mirror image of hers, then sighed deeply. “Yup. It’s a list of things Emille wants from Mazela,” I said.

“Things she wants?” Aina repeated. “But there’re so *many* items here!”

“It’s probably stuff she can’t get in Ninoritch. She also put this in the envelope,” I said, showing the two of them what else I’d found with the letter. It was a single copper coin.

“A copper coin? Don’t tell me...” There was a stunned pause as Karen

processed this. “Does Emi really expect you to buy everything on that list with just that one single coin?”

“I think it’s safe to say you’ve nailed it there,” I said with a nod.

Karen and I exchanged a look, then sighed in unison.



We’d been on the road for quite a while by this point, but Karen was still fuming about Emille’s letter.

“I swear, that Emi...” she muttered. “Shiro, just to be sure, you do know you don’t have to buy her anything at all, right?”

“Of course I know that,” I said.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Good to know.” She then turned to Aina with a smile on her face. “By the way, Aina, I didn’t know you could read,” she remarked, sounding impressed.

“Mama taught me how to read and write!” the little girl said proudly and puffed out her little chest. She was still petting the kitten.

“I see,” Karen said with a little nod. “That’s impressive. Most of the people in Ninoritch don’t know how to read and write. I’m not sure even half of the adults can.”

It seemed the literacy rate was quite low in this world. Karen looked very impressed that this eight-year-old girl was able to read and write, and continued to sing Aina’s praises for several more minutes.

“I asked mama to teach me to write because I wanted to write a letter to someone,” the little girl said, her cheeks reddening slightly.

“Oh? What kind of letter? Wait! Was it a love letter, perhaps?” Karen teased her.

The little girl giggled adorably. “It’s a secret!”

I couldn’t help but wonder who Aina had written her letter to.

Chapter Ten: Mazela, the Feudal Capital

The journey to Mazela was an excruciatingly long one. On the first and second days, we were forced to sleep out in the open air. On the third day, we wound up in a small village and spent the night there. On the fourth day, we stayed at an inn in a little town that was only slightly bigger than Ninoritch. Thankfully, the fifth day ended up being the last time we had to sleep under the stars, for at around noon on the sixth day, we finally arrived in Mazela.

“So this is the feudal capital, huh?” I said, marveling at the new surroundings we had found ourselves in.

“It’s so big!” Aina squealed excitedly beside me.

“It really is,” I agreed. “I’m looking forward to finding out what awaits us here.”

Mazela was a huge city, which was hardly a surprise given that the earl of the region, Lord Bashure, resided there. The entire city was surrounded by ramparts, and as this was a trading city, there were lots of people going in and out. In fact, a long line had formed in front of the city gate.

“Do we have to join the line?” I asked Karen, pointing at the crowd.

She shook her head. “No. There’s another gate we use when coming to pay the taxes.”

“It’s the same gate we use. So do members of Lord Bashure’s family. It’s on the east side of the city,” Duane added.

He led us past the crowd that had gathered in front of the city gate and toward the side gate we would be passing through. There, he exchanged a few words with the knights who were standing guard and they immediately opened the gate for us.

“Shiro. Aina. You two are here as part of Mayor Sankareka’s retinue today, so you won’t have to pay the toll for entering the city. But if I remember correctly, you two are merchants, yes? If you plan on doing any business in Mazela, you’ll need to join one of the merchant guilds here and pay the appropriate taxes,” Duane explained.

I nodded. “Noted. Thanks.”

“Good,” Duane said with a smile. “Now, ladies and gentleman, let me formally welcome you to the beautiful city of Mazela.”

After spending several months in Ruffaltio, the time had finally come for me to set foot in a big city here.



“All right, so here’s what’s happening, Shiro. Sir Lestard is going to accompany me to the earl’s manor to pay the taxes. What are you and Aina going to do in the meantime? If you want, you guys can go on ahead and rest up at the inn,” Karen said.

“Well, the day is still young, so we’ll probably go do some sightseeing first,” I said before turning to my little sidekick for confirmation. “Isn’t that right, Aina?”

She nodded excitedly. “Yeah! I wanna see some of the city!”

“Okay, sure. That works too,” Karen said. “Do you remember the name of the inn we’re staying at?”

“The ‘Overflowing Chivalry’ on East Street, right?” I replied.

Duane nodded. “Bingo. You’ve got a good memory, Shiro. Though I guess that shouldn’t really come as a surprise, what with you being a merchant and all.”

The young knight had been the one who had booked the rooms for us at the inn, and since we’d come all the way to Mazela so Karen could pay Ninoritch’s taxes, that of course meant we didn’t have to spend a single coin on accommodation. We were basically getting a free vacation just to go pay the taxes we owed. I was very impressed with Lord Bashure’s generosity. I’d obviously never met the guy, but I was certain he must be an incredibly kind man to do all this for us.

“It’s a good thing you remember,” Karen said with an approving nod. “Well, all that’s left to say now is take care out there. While Mazela is rather a safe city, you never know what might happen. Oh, and...” She paused and glanced down at the black kitten. “What about Peace? Should I take him with me?”

But the kitten simply averted its gaze, clearly uninterested in the prospect of going with Karen. As mentioned above, the trip to Mazela had been excruciatingly long, and we’d had a lot of time on our hands. So much so, in fact, we’d spent the best part of three days trying to decide on a name for the black kitten. It turned out all right in the end, though, as we’d managed to come up with a name all three of us could agree on:

Peace.

“Little Peace, do you wanna come with me instead?” Aina suggested.

The cat meowed and hopped up onto Aina’s shoulder. I could almost hear the heart shape that accompanied his purring.

“Seems he really likes you, Aina,” Karen said.

“He really does,” I agreed. “Whenever I try to pick him up, he starts clawing at me, but he acts like a spoiled baby around Aina.”

“Oh, he claws at you too, Shiro? He scratched me quite badly earlier. Here, take a look,” Karen said and pulled up her sleeve to reveal five red marks on her forearm, the aftermath of Peace’s attack.

Meow!

“Peace, stop! That tickles!” Aina giggled as the little kitten licked her face, happily meowing away. If Patty had been here to see them, she would definitely have waged war against the cat, because Aina’s shoulder was technically *her* spot.

Karen stared at the kitten for a few moments longer before letting out a small sigh. “Well, I suppose I’ll just have to go pay these taxes alone, then.”

“Oh, don’t worry on that score, Mayor Sankareka. I’ll be accompanying you,” Duane reassured her.

“So anyway, enjoy your sightseeing, Shiro. We’ll meet up at the inn later,” Karen said, elegantly ignoring Duane’s comment. I couldn’t help but chuckle at that.

“Okay, see you soon, Karen. Oh, and thanks for everything, Duane.”

“Good luck, Miss Karen! Mister Duane!” Aina said.

The two of them said their goodbyes, then went on their way. Aina and I also decided to get going, Peace still perched on the little girl’s shoulder.

It was finally time to explore the first big city I’d been to in Ruffaltio.



“Look, Mister Shiro! There are so many shops here!” Aina marveled when we reached a marketplace.

“There sure are,” I agreed. “What a busy place this is.”

“Hey, look! They’re selling food over there! I think it’s meat!” the little girl exclaimed, excitedly pointing at a stall.

“Now that you mention it, I’m starting to get pretty hungry,” I said.

“And look over there! Flowers!” she said, pointing at a flower store and bouncing up and down. “Wow, a *whole* shop just for flowers!”

She was wandering aimlessly around the marketplace, and pointing out all of the things that caught her attention.

“Mister Shiro! Look at *that!*”

“Hm? What was it you wanted me to look at?”

“That *there!*”

It seemed like Aina was having the time of her life. She was flitting about everywhere and drinking in every sight and sound, like it was all some innocent game. In short, she was acting like an eight-year-old girl, which of course is what she was.

“Hey, Mister Shiro,” she said after a while.

“Hm? What is it?” I asked.

“Could you...” She hesitated. “Could you hold my hand?” she asked bashfully and looked up at me with puppy-dog eyes.

Well, this was new. Usually, she’d just grab my hand without asking. Was something up with her today?

“Of course I can,” I said, flashing her a reassuring smile and taking her little hand in mine. “There we go. There are lots of people here, so don’t let go, okay?”

“Kay,” she replied with a firm nod.

Hand in hand, we continued our exploration of the city of Mazela, stopping passersby every now and again to ask them what the must-see tourist spots were. We watched a couple of street performers doing their thing, and then somehow managed to get ourselves lost, though we did eventually find our way again. We were having so much fun, before we knew it, dusk had closed in.

“You know...” Aina started as we walked back to the inn, her hand still in mine, while the setting sun cast an orangey-red glow over the streets of Mazela. “The first time I went to a big city with papa, he said to me: ‘Hey, Aina, let’s go exploring!’ and we walked around for a really long time, just like we did today, Mister Shiro.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. It was so much fun,” she said, and she looked up at me with a huge smile on her face. “Walking around the city with you today reminded me of that time with my papa. I’m really happy right now!” She punctuated her sentence by squeezing my hand tightly.

Even though, in that moment, it was me she was walking with, I had a feeling that in her imagination, I wasn’t really the one standing beside her—her father was. We continued our slow amble down the streets, my hand

firmly gripping hers and not letting go—not even once—while Peace meowed sporadically to remind us of his presence.

Chapter Eleven: Taking a Bath in Another World

“Here we are, Shiro and Aina! This is one of Mazela’s many, many bathhouses!” Karen said as she pointed out one of the buildings, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

When Aina and I had checked into the inn we were staying at, we were completely exhausted from our fun yet very long walk. A little while later, Karen joined us too, her taxpaying duties all finally dealt with. With the three of us reunited, a question arose: what should we do now? It was already quite late, so our options were either have dinner or take a bath. After a quick show of hands, the bath option won the vote impressively, three to zero. And with that, the three of us headed down to one of Mazela’s bathhouses.

“Wow. It’s huge!” I remarked.

We’d decided to go to the closest public bathhouse to the inn. The building was made of stone, dome-shaped, and a lot bigger than any other structure in the area, which just went to show the kind of money sloshing around in the city of Mazela if it could afford to spend so much on one public bathhouse. I also noticed it had two entrances: one for men, one for women. Karen, Aina, and I just stood in front of the building and admired it for a little while. Peace wasn’t with us, because just like in Japan, pets weren’t allowed in bathhouses in this world either, so we had left him back at the inn.

“A long time ago, there was some sort of epidemic in Mazela,” Karen explained to us. “So the feudal lord at the time decided to use the majority of his private wealth to put in place a proper sewage system, as well as build public bathhouses in every corner of the city to halt the progression of the disease.”

“Proper hygiene is crucial to stopping disease from spreading,” I said with a sage nod.

“Is that true, Mister Shiro?” Aina asked, her head tilted to one side.

“Yup. Most illnesses are caused by bacteria or viruses...” I paused. “Hm, she probably won’t understand words like that, will she?” I said to

myself quietly. “Let me think...” I briefly pondered how to explain what I meant, before hitting on a way I figured might work. “Okay, Aina. So in the world around you, there are all these tiny little illness seeds everywhere, right? And when they get inside your body, they start sprouting and spreading their roots everywhere, and that’s why you get sick.”

What a clear and easy-to-understand explanation! Go, me! Or that was what I thought, right up until I saw tears welling up in Aina’s eyes.

“An illness seed is going to get inside me? And it’s going to spread roots?” she mumbled, her voice trembling and dread writ large on her face.

“It’s just a metaphor,” I said, hurriedly trying to reassure her. “Don’t be scared, Aina. Besides, if you eat properly, get plenty of rest, and maintain good hygiene, you won’t get sick too often.”

“So that’s why I have to wash my hands and rinse my mouth every day, right?” Aina said.

“Yup, exactly!” I replied with a nod, feeling proud that she had remembered what I’d told her. “If you do all that properly, you won’t get sick! And for that, you’re going to have to use the item I gave you earlier. You have it with you, yes?”

“Yup!” She opened up her backpack and took a small bundle out of it. “Soap!” she declared. Inside the packaging was the bar of citrus-scented soap I’d given to her earlier.

“Oh? Did Shiro also give you some soap as a gift, Aina?” Karen asked, intrigued.

“Yup! Mister Shiro said I could use it in the bath!” the little girl said with a huge grin on her face as she happily rubbed the little bundle against her cheek.

“It looks a lot different from the ‘shampoo’ you gave me, Shiro,” the mayor pointed out.

“That’s because it’s not the same type of soap. The one I gave to Aina is made for cleaning your body, while the one I gave to you is for your hair,” I explained.

“Hm, interesting. May I take a look at your soap, Aina?” Karen asked the little girl.

“Sure! Here you go!” Aina said as she handed the bundle to Karen.

“This packaging is made out of good-quality paper,” Karen observed as she inspected the soap. “I don’t know where the artisan who crafted this is from, but they must have spent a lot of time on this. It seems very

intricate.”

“You can open it if you want,” I suggested.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Well, Aina’s about to use it in the bath anyway, so you might as well open it now. If you want to, that is.”

Karen nodded at this and started unwrapping the bar of soap. “Oh! What a pleasant smell!” she marveled. “It feels sort of comforting in a way, and it’s so different from all the other kinds of soap I’ve used before now.” She paused for a second as she breathed in a lungful of the citrus-scented air. “I never knew soap could smell *this* good. Ah, I wish... I wish I could just keep sniffing this soap forever.”

She brought her nose closer to the still mostly wrapped soap and took deep whiffs of its scent, a blissful smile on her face. *Anyone passing by right now must be wondering what the hell is wrong with her*, I thought to myself as I watched on. *Still...* I added, making a mental note, *Karen seems to really like nice-smelling things, huh?*

I chuckled awkwardly. “I gave it to Aina, so don’t hesitate to use it as well, if you want to,” I said.

“Thank you, Shiro. I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Well, soap is made to be used, after all,” I said with a smile.

“Anyway, did you bring the shampoo set I gave you?”

“Of course I did,” Karen said, nodding as she took the shampoo set out of her bag. “Oh, that reminds me. I forgot to ask how I’m supposed to use it. Could you tell me?”

“Sure. First, you use the shampoo to get the dirt out of your hair, then you apply the treatment to hydrate your hair, and...” I hesitated, before muttering to myself, “Hm. There’s not really a need for that much explanation, is there?” I turned to Aina. “Do you remember the order you use the shampoo set in, Aina?”

“Yup, I do!” the little girl said cheerily, then she took a good look at the bottles in Karen’s hands. “First, you use the shampoo,” she explained, pointing to one of the bottles, “then you put the treatment on your hair and leave it there for a bit. And then after that, you use the, uh...”—she hesitated and tried to find the word she was looking for—“the co...”—pause—“the con...”—pause—“Ah! The con-dee-show-ner! You use the con-dee-show-ner last! Did I get that right, Mister Shiro?”

That’s the little genius for you! Aina had managed to remember all of those really complicated words, even if she wasn’t totally there on their

pronunciation.

“Yup, perfect answer!” I said with a satisfied nod. “Do you think you can help Karen use the shampoo set?”

“Kay!” she replied happily. “I’ll wash Miss Karen’s hair!”

Aina had never had a proper bath before, but we’d been talking about going to the public bathhouse for several days by this point, and judging from the look on her face, it was obvious she was extremely excited by the idea of taking her first ever bath.

“Well then. I’ll see you two later,” I said before turning and heading for the men’s entrance to the bathhouse.

“See you soon, Shiro.”

“Bye, Mister Shiro!”

I waved to them, then entered the bathhouse.



“Never seen you ’round these parts before. You a traveler?” the burly man behind the reception desk asked me when I got to the front of the line. I nodded.

“Gotcha. Entrance fee is five copper coins for travelers. Do you plan on buying soap? It’s six copper coins for the low-quality animal-fat soap, and twenty for the seaweed-based soap,” he explained.

“Wow, that’s a huge difference in price,” I noted.

The man flashed me an amused look. “What do you expect? Animal-fat soap stinks, so it’s cheaper. But you can only use it in one specific bath, ’cause of the stench.”

“I see,” I said. “And what about scented soap? Do you carry any?”

He looked at me as if I’d grown a second head. “You an idiot or what? You ain’t gonna find stuff like that ’round here. If you want some scented soap, try up at the earl’s manor.”

So in this world, scented soap was a luxury item only rich people could afford. Good to know, good to know.

“Anyway, you plannin’ on buying soap or not?” the man asked again, seemingly growing impatient.

“I brought my own soap, so I’m all good,” I replied.

“Gotcha. If it’s the animal-fat kind, you can only use the bath on your right. If I were you, I wouldn’t try taking it out in any of the other baths. Well, if you want to leave this place in one piece, that is.”

I laughed. “It’s not a smelly kind of soap, so I should be fine.”

The receptionist regarded me with suspicion as I fished five copper coins out of my pouch and handed them to him. He must have been expecting me to have brought some kind of cheap, smelly soap with me. I headed off to get undressed, then finally entered the part of the bathhouse with all the baths, a towel strategically placed over my groin. The first thing I noticed was how big the place was. You wouldn't have known from outside, but the baths in here were actually partly underground. A quick glance around the vast room told me there were three baths, all of them on the large side, while the washing area—the place where you generally scrubbed your body before taking a dip—was also fairly big.

“It's so different from the public bathhouses in Japan,” I said to no one in particular as I took another look around.

Two burly men were engaged in a contest of strength in one corner of the room, while in the washing area, a middle-aged man was getting a young man—most likely an employee here—to help him wash using some kind of cylindrical object. A beastman was relaxing in one of the baths, the water reaching up to his shoulders, while in another bath, a lizardman had his body and head entirely submerged.

Seems like there are people from all different races here, huh? I guess that makes sense: Mazela is a trading city, after all. Well, at least no one's gonna pay much attention to a scrawny, black-haired Japanese man here.

“All righty. Time to wash,” I said to myself as I took a seat in the washing area.

I grabbed my bar of lavender-scented, additive-free soap and started rubbing it on the natural loofah sponge I'd brought with me. I was usually a washcloth kind of guy, but since those weren't really a thing here, I decided to settle on using a natural loofah instead. I poured some water over the loofah and got to work scrubbing my body, the soap lathering up as it rubbed against my skin.

“Hm? Is it just me or does something smell really good in here all of a sudden?” I heard a man nearby ask.

“It's like I'm in a field of flowers or something,” another said.

“Reminds me of my hometown in the springtime,” a third man sighed.

“Have they started burning incense in here?”

“You stupid or what? You really think they'd let us enjoy some high-quality incense without making us pay extra for it?”

“The scent's getting stronger and stronger...” The speaker paused as he sucked in a huge lungful of lavender-scented air. “Damn, that smells

good.”

“I bet ya those ‘goddess’s gardens’ ya read about in fairy tales smell exactly like this.”

The smell of lavender permeated the room. All the other men in the bathhouse seemed utterly enthralled by it, and they started looking around for the source of the scent.

“Hey, I think it’s coming from that black-haired guy over there,” someone said, gesturing in my direction.

“I think you’re onto something. The room only started smelling different when he took out his soap thingy.”

“He a noble, ya reckon?”

“You really think a noble would be seen in a public bathhouse?”

“But only guys with deep pockets can buy scented soap.”

“Maybe he’s just a really weird noble.”

All the men in the room had started speculating under their breath about the soap and its owner. Yup, they were all looking straight at me. *Huh. Maybe now’s my chance.*

I took a deep breath and held it before pouring the contents of my bucket over my head to rinse off the soap. I then turned to face the (buck naked) men who were staring at me and flashed them all an apologetic smile.

“It seems my *special* soap is disturbing your baths. I apologize,” I said, making sure to put extra emphasis on the word “special.” “I’m actually a merchant, you see, and this soap is one of my wares.” I paused and waited for their reaction.

“He’s a *merchant*?”

“Well, that explains a lot.”

“Still, he must be loaded if he’s bringing such high-quality soap in here.”

Most of them carried on muttering to each other, but one stout, middle-aged man came over to talk to me directly. “Might I ask where you bought that soap? Was it in Urola? Or Jelaris, perhaps? You see, I’m a traveling merchant myself, and while I’ve never sold soap before, I can’t help but wonder where you found this product.”

My smile unwavering, I brought a finger up to my lips. “I apologize, but I can’t tell you. That’s confidential information.”

The man sighed. “I figured as much, but it was worth a shot. After all, it wouldn’t do your business any good if you disclosed the source of such

an incredible product so easily.” He didn’t seem all that disappointed, and from his words, it was obvious he had been anticipating the answer I’d given.

“Sorry about that,” I chuckled before turning to look at the rest of the assembled men again. “Excuse me, everyone. May I have your attention? As an apology for disturbing your baths, would any of you be interested in trying out this soap for yourselves?”

The merchant’s eyes grew wide. “C-Can we really?”

“Of course,” I said. “What do you say? Would you like to experience this amazing, flower-scented—*oof!*”

Before I could even finish my sales pitch, a full-on brawl broke out in the bathhouse. I got shoved out of the way as all the men rushed toward the soap.

“Outta my way! Lemme use it first!” a man said.

“I promised my wife a good time tonight, if ya know what I mean, so hand it over!” another piped up.

“No, *I’ll* use it first!”

“H-Hey! I’m the one who went over to talk to him, so it’s only right I get to use it first,” the merchant argued.

“Who cares ’bout that? It’s first come, first served here, buddy,” a burly man barked as he snatched the soap. Unfortunately, he ended up applying too much pressure to it in his attempts to keep the other men from stealing it, and the soap shot out of his hands and went flying across the room, with yet more naked men rushing after it. Then the same thing happened again. And again. And again.

Thank goodness Aina and Karen aren’t here to see this, I thought as I watched the unseemly display.

“I-I actually have a couple more bars on me if you guys want—*oof!*”

Once again, I didn’t even manage to finish my sentence before I was swarmed by a bunch of naked men all pushing me out of the way to get to the soap. I decided to put a little bit of distance between me and the brawling men, and resumed my washing away from the crowd. I shampooed my hair, then poured another bucket of hot water over my head to get rid of all the shampoo.

It took about an hour for the battle for the soap to finally die down.



“Yoo-hoo! Mister Shiro!”

I'd only taken a few steps out of the bathhouse when I heard a little voice calling out to me. I looked around, and sure enough, Aina was standing there, waving at me.

"Aina! Sorry for making you wait," I said as I walked over to her.

The little girl shook her head vigorously. "It's okay. I just came out too!"

Her cheeks were a little flushed from spending a bit too long in the bath, which suggested she was telling the truth and not just saying it to make me feel better.

"Your hair looks really smooth," I pointed out. "How was the shampoo set?"

"It felt super, super, *super* nice!" she exclaimed, jumping up and down on the spot every time she said the word "super." "And my hair smells like flowers now!" she added, beaming.

Aina really does love flowers, doesn't she? I thought as I gazed fondly at her smiling little face. She was clearly overjoyed that her hair smelled like the flowers she loved so much.

"I'm glad you're happy, Aina," I said, returning her smile. "By the way, where's Karen? Is she still inside?"

I glanced around to see if she was waiting for us a little farther away, but I couldn't see any sign of her.

Aina shook her head and pointed to a crowded area near the side of the road. "Nope, she's right over there."

"Huh? Where?" I said, straining my neck to peer in the direction Aina was pointing.

After staring into the crowd for a few seconds, I finally managed to distinguish Karen's silhouette slap-bang in the middle of the circle. I watched with great interest as she ran a hand through her hair and posed for the crowd, then repeated the same action over and over as her hair fluttered in the breeze.

"Uh, Aina?" I said.

"Yeah?" the little girl replied.

"What's Karen doing over there exactly?"

"Well, her hair got all soft and smooth after she used the shampoo and the treatment and the con-dee-show-ner you gave her..." the little girl started, a troubled look on her face.

"Uh-huh..."

"And she was feeling all happy about it, so I think she just went over to

a spot with lots and lots of people and started bragging about it.”

I didn't say anything. I was too stunned to speak.

“Look, Mister Shiro! Miss Karen looks so *happy*! I've never seen her that happy before!”

“Yeah, you're right,” I said with a slight nod after a short pause.

Aina and I watched on, mesmerized by the display of Karen smoothing her hair with her hand—once, twice, three times—and the occasional chuckle escaping her lips as if she'd just heard something funny. She was blatantly showing off, and then some.



The crowd surrounding Karen was mostly made up of women, all of whom were staring enviously at her.

“Do you think she’s gonna come back over here soon?” Aina asked after a little while.

“Probably not, to be honest with you.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Me too.”

Aina and I exchanged glances. Karen probably wasn’t going to be rejoining us for a while.

Chapter Twelve: Next Stop: the Merchant Guilds!

The next day came. Lord Bashure's banquet was still five days away, and we were free to do whatever we pleased in Mazela until then.

"Mister Shiro, what are you gonna do today? Go for another walk?" Aina asked me after breakfast.

Her spirits were every bit as high as they'd been the previous day, and she was clearly excited by the idea of seeing more of the city.

"I'm sure you two still have lots of things to see. Mazela is a really big city, after all. Now that I have some free time too, I can show you around if you like," Karen suggested.

Her freshly washed hair was glossy and smooth, and I couldn't help thinking she looked even more beautiful than usual—perhaps even up to five times more beautiful. What was it grandma used to say all the time about girls and their hair? Oh, yeah! "A girl's hair is her life," or something along those lines. At that moment, I felt like I *truly* understood the meaning of those words. That was how beautiful Karen was looking today.

"What do you say, Shiro? I've heard there's a street that's full of top restaurants that all serve delicious food over on the western side of the city," Karen said.

I smiled and shook my head. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm gonna pass for today. There's something I want to go check out."

"Oh? What is it?" she asked.

"I'm thinking of paying a visit to the merchant guilds," I explained. "I've come all this way to a trading city, so I might as well do something 'merchant-like' while I'm here, right?"

Karen nodded. "Your mind's on work like always. That's very you."

I chuckled. "I just thought I could learn a few things about doing business in such a big place."

"I see. Well, I wouldn't want to get in the way of your business. I-I'm actually thinking of going back to the bathhouse again. What about you, Aina?" Karen asked, glancing at the little girl.

Aina let out a pensive “Hmmm...” and allowed her gaze to wander around the room, first stopping on me, then Karen, then little Peace, who was asleep on the bed.

“I’m gonna stay here with Peace today, I think,” she declared with a little giggle.

I knelt down in front of the little girl, my eyebrows knitted together. “Aina. You really want to go to the bathhouse with Karen, don’t you?” I asked her.

“N-No, I don’t mind staying here,” the little girl stuttered.

“Really? You can’t hide stuff from me, you know, Aina. I saw the envy in your eyes when you were looking at Karen’s hair.”

She stayed silent as tears started to well up in her eyes.

“Is that true, Aina?” Karen asked.

“I-I *did* look at your hair, Miss Karen, but...” She stopped halfway through her sentence.

“C’mon, Aina, you can tell the truth. You actually want to go to the bathhouse with Karen, don’t you?”

She didn’t say anything for a few seconds, but in the end, she nodded. “Well, yes...” she said hesitantly. “But if I go too, little Peace will be all alone again!”

“I thought you might say that,” I said with a knowing nod.

Aina was such a kindhearted little girl, and she was always putting other people’s feelings before her own, even if it meant missing out on what she truly wanted to do. And that was true even for a hard-to-love cat like Peace. She probably couldn’t bear the guilt of leaving the little guy alone for two whole days in a row.

“Okay, I have a suggestion for you, Aina,” I said.

“What is it?” the little girl asked.

I walked over to the bed, grabbed the yawning cat by the scruff of the neck, and placed him down on my shoulder. “I’ll take Peace with me today. And in exchange, I want you to go have fun with Karen at the bathhouse. What do you say?”

“But—” the little girl started to protest, but I cut across her.

“Don’t worry about me. I just want you to have a good time. That’s the only thing that matters to me,” I gently reassured her.

“A-Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yup.”

“Like, *sure* sure?”

“Like, *sure* sure sure.”

The little girl treated me to a grin as bright as the sun. It looked like we’d finally come to a decision.

“Thank you, Mister Shiro,” she said.

“My pleasure,” I said, smiling back at her. “Oh, by the way, if you’re going to the bathhouse, could you do me a little favor? You too, Karen, if you don’t mind.”

“A favor?” Aina asked.

“I don’t mind, but what is it?” Karen said.

“Well, you see...”

I told them my little request.

“I can do that!” Aina said, nodding vigorously.

“Sure. That doesn’t sound too hard,” Karen said.

We said goodbye to one another and the two of them headed off to the bathhouse. A short time later, I went off in the direction of one of the merchant guilds with Peace the disagreeable kitten still perched on my shoulder.



A short walk later, I arrived at the first merchant guild on my list. I’d decided to check out one of the “Big Five” Gerald had told me about that went by the name of “Ruby and Jade.” The guild was located in a large building, and it was absolutely bustling, with merchants transporting various goods in and out of it.

“Wow, I didn’t expect the guildhall to be *this* big,” I said to myself as I stared up at the huge building, feeling a little anxious about the prospect of going inside.

C’mon, Shiro. You didn’t walk all this way for nothing, did you? I mentally slapped myself around a bit, took a deep breath, and walked in. Once inside, I made a beeline for the reception desk.

“Can I have your letters of recommendation?” the young man behind the counter said.

“M-My letters of recommendation?” I mumbled.

“Yes, your letters of recommendation,” the receptionist repeated, shooting me an annoyed look. “Don’t tell me you don’t have any.”

“Well, this is actually my first time in Mazela, and...” I trailed off, hoping my silence might be enough of an explanation.

“Your first time?” the young man said, then clicked his tongue. “Oh,

great. A country bumpkin,” he muttered under his breath, before raising his voice and saying, “Please leave.”

“Hold on a minute. Let me show you my wares, at least. I promise they’ll be worth your time,” I said, trying to negotiate with the young man.

But he simply shook his head. “Rules are rules. Sorry.”

“Can’t you make an exception?” I pleaded.

“Nope. If you don’t have any letters of recommendation, you’re not welcome here. I won’t say it again: please leave. This guild isn’t the place for small-timers like you.”

“You really, *really* can’t?” I insisted. “I promise the guild won’t regret it if you let me join.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard that one before. Roughly ten times a day, in fact,” the young man said, rolling his eyes. “And nobody who says that ever has anything actually worthwhile to show us.”

If only I could show him my wares, I’m sure he’d change his mind, I thought.

I was just about to insist once more that he allow me to show him what I had to offer when a booming voice echoed around the room. “My, my, you two are *awfully* loud. Might I ask what is going on here?”

A man of around forty or fifty who I would describe as “nouveau riche” strolled toward us with a smile plastered across his face.

“G-Guildmaster...” the receptionist stammered by way of greeting as his body visibly tensed up. His rather nonchalant and slightly exasperated expression had been replaced by one of worry.

So this guy’s the guildmaster, huh?

“Well? What’s the reason for all this commotion?” the guildmaster asked the receptionist.

“Th-This peddler here wishes to join our guild,” the young man stuttered, probably due to how nervous he was.

“Oh? I see,” the guildmaster stated. “And who wrote his letters of recommendation?”

“He...” the receptionist started. “He doesn’t have any, sir.”

“He doesn’t have any?” the guildmaster repeated after a pause.

“Th-That’s what he says.”

“I see,” the GM said for a second time, ending his sentence with a slight nod before turning to me, his smile unwavering.

“I apologize for the trouble. Here at Ruby and Jade, we only accept new recruits if they have letters of recommendation from at least three

merchants already in our guild, or from one of the nobles we do business with,” the man explained.

What the hell? That’s impossible! What a stupid rule! There’s no way in hell I can ever get a letter of recommendation like that!

“If you don’t mind me asking, where are you from?” the GM said.

“Ninoritch,” I replied. “It’s a small town east of here.”

On hearing this, the GM seemed to freeze for a second. “Interesting. Ninoritch, you say? I take it you also sell those ‘matches,’ then?”

“You know about matches, huh?” I asked, somewhat surprised by this.

“Well, of course. A few of our merchants sell them, as it happens,” he said with a nod.

I’d heard stories about people reselling my matches in other towns, but I hadn’t imagined they would have made it all the way to Mazela before I could.

“I see,” I said. “Well, yes, I do sell matches, but I also have plenty of other interesting items. For instance...”

I paused for a second as I slipped off my rucksack and set it down on the floor, then crouched down in front of it and slid open the zipper. But just as I was grabbing one of the items I wanted to show them, I heard the GM chuckle.

“There will be no need for that.”

I felt cold liquid being poured onto my head. Peace meowed indignantly in my ear, as he had been splashed with it as well.

“What the...” I muttered from my spot on the floor. I looked up to see the GM holding a vase.

“I apologize. It seems you don’t understand how things work around here, so I thought I would do you a favor and help you cool off a little.”

It took me a couple of seconds to work out what had happened, but the penny finally dropped. The guildmaster had poured water out of the vase and onto my head. Peace hissed at him, though the man didn’t seem the least bit fazed by this reaction from the cat.

“It’s so *incredibly* irritating to have to deal with the likes of you, day after day,” the man said, fixing me with a cold glare. “Opportunists who think that if they just introduce themselves as ‘a merchant from Ninoritch,’ I will instantly let them into my guild. There have been so *many* of your type over the past few months. Well, I’m tired of it.”

Seeing that I had no words to say in response to this, the GM continued. “And here you are, another so-called ‘merchant’ who has

waltzed into town, thinking there's a killing to be made selling matches here. Well, I'm sorry to tell you this, but we already sell matches. And it's not just us either: all the other guilds do too. So don't go thinking you can join a guild as prestigious as Ruby and Jade just because you happen to sell matches."

I remained silent as I slowly stood up straight again. I took a handkerchief out of my pocket and used it to dry poor little Peace, who'd gotten just as drenched as I had.

Meow.

"Come now, Mr. 'Merchant from Ninoritch.' You know where the exit is," the guildmaster sneered. "I warn you, though: do not set foot in my guild ever again. The next time I see your sorry face, you won't get off with just a little water tipped over your head."

He emphasized his words by hurling the vase to the floor, where it smashed with a deafening sound, the shattered pieces flying in all directions.

This time, it's the vase. Next time, it'll be you. That must have been what the guildmaster was trying to get across to me. Peace let out another angry meow, but I just shook my head.

"Let's get out of here, Peace," I said, trying to soothe the angry cat as I shuffled out of the Ruby and Jade.



"Guess joining a merchant guild here won't be as easy as I thought," I sighed. "It's fine, though. Still four more to go. Let's hope things go better at the next one."

I swung by the inn to change into some dry clothes and tried to pick myself up again. *Sure, that guy wasn't very friendly, but that was nothing compared to how badly my former boss treated me.* That thought cheered me up, so I headed off to the second guild on my list.

"May I see your letters of recommendation?" the receptionist asked me.

Meow.

Fine. Let's try the third guild.

"So what you're saying is, you don't have any letters of recommendation?"

Meow.

Fourth time's the charm, perhaps?

"You don't have any letters of recommendation? Why are you wasting

my time? Get out!”

Meow.

And just like that, I was turned away from all four of the guilds I’d visited that day. Seriously, what was the deal with all of these guilds and their obsession with letters of recommendation, anyway? Gerald had told me that doing business in Mazela wasn’t easy if you didn’t join one of the merchant guilds, but he’d neglected to mention how hard it was to join one of those guilds in the first place! I took a second to thank whoever was up there for how easy it had been to set up my store in Ninoritch.

“Time to try the last guild,” I said, heaving a sigh as I stood in front of the last building on my list. “C’mon, Shiro, what’s one more? Go for broke!” I said to myself in an attempt to lift my dejected spirits.

I took a deep breath and opened the door to the fifth guild. I walked up to the reception desk, said I wanted to join the guild, blah blah, yadda yadda, and...

“May I see your letters of recommendation?”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured you would say,” I sighed.

Of *freaking* course. They wanted letters of recommendation here too.

“Ah, judging by your expression, I’m going to assume you don’t have one,” said the young woman behind the reception desk, a slight teasing smile crossing her lips.

“Is it that obvious?” I said glumly.

“Just a little. You look exhausted. I’m guessing you tried the other guilds and got rejected there before coming here, yes?”

“Bingo.”

“Yup, that’s what I thought,” she said with a nod. “I see a lot of folk like you, so I’ve learned to recognize the signs.”

“Does it really happen that often?” I said.

“It does!” she replied. “Mazela *is* a trading city, after all. A lot of merchants come here hoping to get rich.”

“And then their dreams get crushed by heartless merchant guilds and they have to scurry off home with their tails between their legs,” I said, finishing her sentence for her.

She laughed. “I guess that’s one way of putting it.”

“Fine,” I sighed. “I guess I’m gonna have to give up on attempting to do business in Mazela this time around and just try to have a good time exploring the city.”

“I think that’s probably your best bet, yup,” the receptionist said with a

nod. “Though...” she started. “I mean, if you really, *really* want to do business in Mazela, there *is* a way, but...” She glanced around and gestured for me to come closer to the desk.

“Wh-What is it?” I asked as I did what I was told.

“The guildmaster won’t be happy if he hears me telling you this, but...” she said, lowering her voice.

“But?” I asked, gently urging her to continue.

“Well, you see, aside from the Big Five, there is one *other* merchant guild in Mazela.”

My eyes grew as wide as saucers. “Really?”

“Yes, really!” she confirmed. “And I’m pretty sure they accept people without recommendation letters too.”

“Wow! That’s great!” I said. “And where is this guild?”

“In the southern part of town. It’s called the ‘Eternal Promise.’ If you’re lucky...” She stopped and corrected herself. “No, scratch that. If you really *are* a good merchant, I’m sure you’ll make a killing there.”

“So it’s all down to my abilities, then, huh? I like the sound of that!” I said.

“Isn’t it great?” the receptionist agreed with a chuckle.

“But why are you telling me this?” I asked. After all, she was under no obligation to let me in on any of this, so I couldn’t help being slightly curious why she would.

The reception lady’s eyes darted to my shoulder. Or more specifically, to Peace, who was sitting on my shoulder still.

“What can I say? I like cats,” she said. “Especially black ones, like yours. So I thought: why not help you out a little?” She ended her sentence with a wink.

“Thank you so, so much,” I said to her. “Well, guess I’ll go hit up this ‘Eternal Promise’ guild, then.”

“Good luck out there,” the lady said, waving goodbye as I headed out of the guild.

Duane had told me that, in this world, cats were an omen of good fortune.

Meow.

I guess that might be true after all.

Chapter Thirteen: The Eternal Promise

“Oh, Mister Shiro!”

I was en route to the southern part of the city with Peace still perched on my shoulder when I heard someone call out to me. I turned around and saw Aina and Karen walking toward me. Their hair looked all smooth and glossy, which told me they were done with their bath.

“Aina! Karen!” I called back with a smile spreading across my face. “What a coincidence, running into you two here!”

“We went to a different bathhouse from the one we all visited yesterday,” Karen said by way of explanation. “Every bathhouse in Mazela has its own character, so today, we decided to try out one in this part of town.”

“I see,” I replied.

“Trying out all the different types of bathhouses in the city is a popular touristy thing to do, after all,” Karen continued. “Besides, we had to take care of your request.”

I chuckled. “Yes, you did. Thanks again.”

The two of them told me they were planning on visiting another bathhouse that evening. In a way, Mazela was somewhat similar to the hot-spring districts you find in Japan, except here, the main attractions were bathhouses. I decided I’d also swing by a bathhouse later in the day.

“Mister Shiro, Miss Karen and I are gonna go eat some pie!” Aina told me excitedly.

“Pie?” I asked, shooting Karen a quizzical look.

“The receptionist at the bathhouse told us about a restaurant not too far from here that supposedly does some very good pies,” she explained. “So Aina and I thought we’d go check it out.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Why are you here, Mister Shiro?” Aina asked. “Were you going there to eat pie too?”

I chuckled. “Not quite. I was actually on my way to check out one of the merchant guilds.”

I explained the situation to them, telling them how I’d been turned away at the door of each of the Big Five merchant guilds because I had no

letters of recommendation, and that I'd been informed that the only guild in the city that didn't require me to show any documentation was located in the southern part of Mazela. Once they were sufficiently up-to-date, Karen and Aina exchanged a glance and nodded.

"I see," Karen said. "Let me tag along with you this time."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "I thought you two were gonna go grab a bite to eat."

"We can go later. Besides, while Ninoritch might be a small town out in the sticks, I'm still a mayor. Having me alongside you might help convince them to let you into their guild, don't you think?"

"I agree!" Aina piped up. "We already had lots of fun in the bath, and I wanna help you out more than I wanna eat pie, Mister Shiro!"

Well, seeing how enthusiastic the two of them were about helping me, I couldn't exactly refuse, could I?

"Thank you. That's really nice of you. All righty, should we get going?"

Meow!

And so, the three of us plus Peace headed for the southern part of the city.



"This *is* the right address, isn't it?"

I'd followed the directions the receptionist had given me to a T, and even gone as far as asking a few passersby where the guild was, so this *must* have been the place, but...

"Is this the guild, Mister Shiro?" Aina asked.

"I think it might be," I said hesitantly.

The little girl stared at the building in silence. "It looks old," she said after a while.

"I'm surprised it's even still standing," I agreed.

"It reminds me of the house mama and I used to live in."

She was right. The building in front of us looked rather shabby and even seemed to be leaning a little to one side. So this was the sixth merchant guild in Mazela, huh? The other five guildhalls had been large, impressive buildings, so it went without saying that I hadn't been expecting this one to be so tiny and run-down.

"Look, Shiro. There's a sign with the name of the guild on it over here," Karen said.

“Oh, you’re right,” I said, looking in the direction she was pointing. “Though it’s so old, the letters are barely legible.”

“If you squint, it’s not *completely* unreadable. Let’s see here...” Karen’s eyes narrowed as she tried to decrypt the sign with some difficulty. “The... The Eter... Eternal... Promise. ‘The Eternal Promise.’ Is that the name of the guild you’re looking for, Shiro?”

“Yeah, it is,” I said slowly. “Well, guess that means we’re at the right address.”

From what I could tell, on top of being a merchant guild, the Eternal Promise also doubled up as a shop, but I couldn’t see anyone entering or leaving the building. Maybe the guild had shut down?

“Well, I guess we should go inside.” I knocked and pushed open the door. “Excuse me!”

We took a few steps inside the dark building, though saying it was “dark” was an understatement because it was almost pitch black in there. There seemed to be no lamps or anything else to light the interior, and the tall buildings that surrounded the guildhall largely prevented natural light from seeping in through the windows. I felt Aina slip her little hand into mine. The poor thing must have been pretty scared.

“Um, excuse me. Is anyone there?” I called into the darkness.

There was total silence for a few seconds.

“Hm? Has someone come in?” a lethargic-sounding voice said, somewhere in the darkness.

“Wh-Where are you?” I asked.

“Here,” the voice answered.

“Okay, but where is ‘here’?”

Peace meowed, his eyes firmly fixed on one corner of the room. I followed the cat’s gaze and noticed a large, oblong-shaped shadow there.

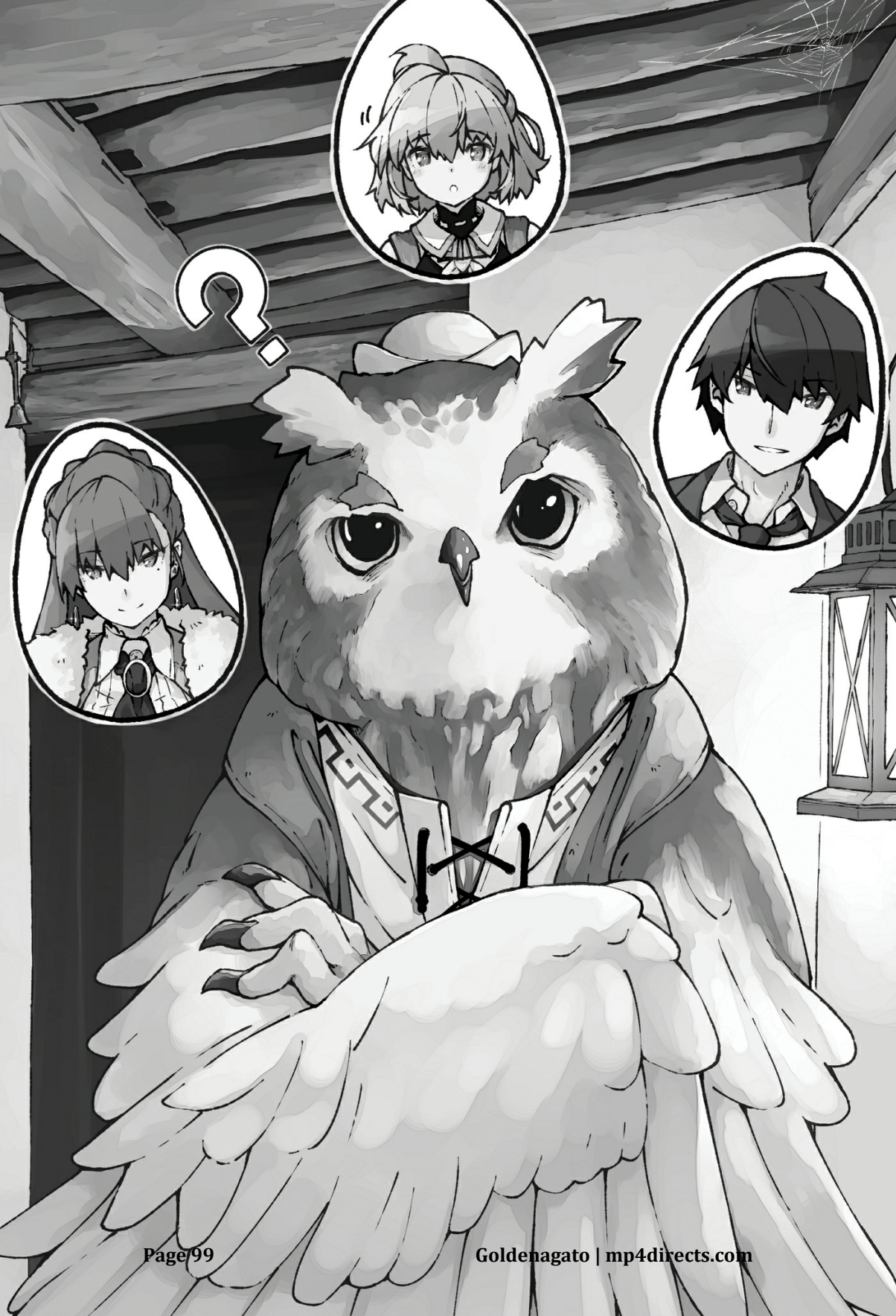
“What are you three doing here?” the sluggish voice asked.

Aina must have noticed the shadow too because a little “Eek!” escaped her lips. Karen didn’t say a word, but she reflexively linked her arm through mine.

“Oh, you probably can’t see a thing. Sorry about that. I can see in the dark, so I usually don’t bother with light in here,” the voice said, and a few moments later, a lantern was lit, its dim light revealing the appearance of our mysterious host.

It was a giant owl. Unlike Kilpha and Emille, who looked pretty much like humans but with a bit of extra fluffiness in certain areas, his whole

body was covered in feathers and his features were way more owl-like than human-like. Someone had once told me that this type of beastman was known as a “birdman.” Picture an owl the size of a human walking around on two legs and you probably won’t be far off.



“What brings you here today?” the owl asked, still sounding lethargic.

I instantly straightened up. “My name is Shiro Amata, and I’m a merchant from Ninoritch. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” I said, going into full-on business mode to introduce myself.

“I-I’m Aina. I work at Mister Shiro’s shop.”

“And I’m Karen Sankareka, the mayor of Ninoritch.”

“So you’re a merchant, hm?” the owl said after a few seconds.

“Yes,” I said with a nod.

“And this little girl here is your apprentice?” he continued.

“I-I am,” Aina confirmed, though she still looked a little anxious.

“And you are the mayor of Ninoritch?” the owl said to Karen.

“I am,” she replied, nodding.

The owl goggled at her in surprise. “I understand why a merchant might come here, but what is a town’s *mayor* doing at our guild?” he asked her.

“Well, Shiro here is a merchant from Ninoritch, and an incredibly adept one at that. I simply felt like accompanying him here.”

The owl looked thoughtful as he considered this. “Hm. That’s mighty impressive. You must be one incredible merchant if the mayor of your town has come all this way with you,” he said, fixing me with a stare.

I chuckled. “I wonder about that. Of course, I wouldn’t call myself incredible or extremely adept or anything like that, but I do believe the wares I sell aren’t half-bad,” I said, allowing a smug smile to spread across my face.

“Wares?” the owl said, his eyes widening. “I thought you’d come here to ask us to round up some laborers for you. Don’t tell me you actually want to do *business* on Rag Street?”

“Rag Street?” I said, confused.

“This part of town is packed with dirty, rag-wearing beggars, so people commonly refer to it as ‘Rag Street,’” the owl explained. “Though I guess our guild isn’t looking all that much better than those folks at the moment, hoot hoot hoot!” he said, laughing at his own joke.

The owl went on to explain the Eternal Promise’s current situation to us. This part of Mazela was basically the slums, and the guild was only in charge of a single marketplace, located in the heart of Rag Street. At the present time, most of the business the guild did was through acting as an agency where the people of the slums could register themselves as temporary laborers for the other merchant guilds—and sometimes, the

artisan guilds—to hire.

“This place is also a store, you know,” the owl continued. “Though we never get any customers, hoot hoot hoot!” The owl’s self-deprecating laugh echoed around the room.

I glanced about and noticed there were indeed items for sale on the shelves, though the majority of them were caked in dust. “Well, if the place is always this dark, it’s no wonder no one ever comes in,” I pointed out.

The owl shook his head. “Alas, even when I light the lanterns, we still get no customers.”

“And that’s why you keep them off?” I queried.

“Well, lantern oil *is* expensive, after all,” the owl said by way of explanation. It seemed the guild was in such a tight spot, they couldn’t even afford lantern oil.

Karen let out a contemplative “hm” as she surveyed the goods on the shelves. “These are all rather *unusual* items,” she said.

“What’s this thing?” Aina asked, pointing to something on another shelf.

There were all sorts of items lined up next to one another: a deformed wooden doll, a knife made out of some variety of stone, some armor, a spear... Clearly, this guild just sold whatever they managed to get their hands on.

“Let me know if anything catches your eye,” the owl said. “Though I’m fairly sure you won’t find anything you like in this little lot, hoot hoot hoot!” He hooted with laughter again.

“Could you maybe tone down the self-deprecation a bit?” I suggested.

“Pah!” the owl snorted. “You know, we haven’t sold anything in five years.”

“Five years...” I repeated under my breath.

“Yup, five years. Isn’t it sort of impressive in its own way? Hoot hoot hoot!”

“I don’t think that’s really something to laugh about,” I said.

“Well, what else would you have me do?” the owl said before launching into another round of hooting laughter.

As the owl stood there merrily laughing away, I heard Aina let out a curious “Huh?” indicating she had found something that had caught her interest.

“What’s this?” she asked, holding up a bracelet with a weird pattern on

it. It seemed to be the only item in the store that wasn't covered in a thick layer of dust.

"Oh, that's called a 'Bracelet of Promise,'" the owl said.

"A Bracelet of Promise?" the little girl repeated, tilting her head to one side.

"Yes. There is a tribe that resides in the north known as the Kozma tribe, and whenever they make an oath, they use these bracelets as proof of it," the owl explained. "They also use them for certain rituals. They are very rare and sacred."

Aina stared at the bracelet in her hand. "Um..." she started, then paused. "How much is it? I'd like to buy it," she said after a few seconds. It was quite rare for Aina to ask for anything, let alone an accessory to wear. She must have really liked that bracelet a lot.

"Hm? You want the bracelet, little girl?" the owl asked.

"Y-Yes!" she said, nodding vigorously.

"I see. Well, I'm sorry, kid, but that bracelet isn't for sale. It's a memento from my pa."

"A memento?" she said.

"Yeah. From my pa," the owl repeated. He held out his feathered hand and Aina dropped the bracelet into it. "You know, I'd actually like to close this two-bit guild down for good, but I can't. If I did, the people of the slums would have a hard time finding work and food, and most importantly of all, I'd be breaking the promise I made to my pa."

"To your father?" I asked.

The owl nodded. "Yup. My pa's the one who founded this guild, you see." The owl paused for a second as his gaze fell on the bracelet in his hand, a wistful look in his eye. "Not so long ago, there were two really big merchant guilds in Mazela, and the Eternal Promise was one of them. But one day, my pa—who was the guildmaster at the time—traveled to a nearby town to stock up on goods, and alas, he was attacked by brigands on the journey over and he never made it back home."

"That's..." I started, but the owl interrupted me.

"I don't need any words of comfort. That was ten years ago now," the owl said with a shrug. "Anyway, my pa was the kind of person who always honored his promises, which is why he chose the 'Eternal Promise' as the name of the guild. Now, about this Bracelet of Promise..." He paused briefly and held up the bracelet. "When I was young, my pa always used to say the same thing to me over and over..." He paused, cleared his

throat, and put on a gruff voice. “‘When you become a full-fledged merchant, you must look for a business partner you can *fully* trust and give them this bracelet.’ Then he’d go on to remind me that I needed to choose carefully, because I’d have to continue doing business with that merchant, come what may, and blah blah, yadda yadda,” the owl concluded, switching back to his normal voice for the last bit.

“It sounds like your father was an exemplary merchant,” Karen said.

The owl’s eyes narrowed as he laughed again. “He was, wasn’t he? Always nagging everyone about ‘promises’ and ‘agreements.’ I also have this...” The owl paused and raised his other hand to show us another Bracelet of Promise that was peeking out through the fluffy feathers on his wrist. “This is proof of the promise I made to my pa. I told him I’d become the second guildmaster of the Eternal Promise. Frankly, I regret ever saying it, but a promise is a promise. If I go breaking it now, I know my pa would be really disappointed in me,” the owl said.

It may have sounded like he was complaining, but I could tell from his expression and his tone of voice that he was actually really proud of the promise he’d made. It was plain to see that he had really admired his father and still held him in the highest regard.

“We even gave each other Bracelets of Promise,” the owl continued. “So I really can’t go back on my word. Anyway, all of that was to say I’m sorry, little girl, but I can’t sell this bracelet. Not to you, nor to anyone else.” The owl bowed slightly to Aina to underline how apologetic he was. “Still, I’m surprised you even want this piece of junk in the first place. You’re a weird one, kid.”

Aina smiled bashfully. “It’s just...” she started. “My papa had a bracelet just like that one.”

“Really?” the owl asked, his eyebrows shooting up his forehead.

The little girl nodded and let out a quiet “Yeah.”

“Hm. Does that mean you’re also from the Kozma tribe?” the owl asked.

Aina didn’t say anything.

“What’s wrong, little girl?” the owl pressed her gently.

“I...” the little girl began after a few moments of silence, clutching her skirt with both hands. “I don’t really remember my father.”

I walked over to her and gently wrapped my arms around her from behind. She leaned into me, grateful for the gesture.

“Sorry for asking something so personal, little girl,” the owl said.

Aina shook her head. “No, it’s okay. I’m sorry for asking you to sell me that bracelet when it’s so important to you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the owl said with a shrug.

“I’m really sorry,” the little girl persisted.

“Since we both have something to apologize for, let’s just agree to accept each other’s apologies, okay?” the owl suggested, ending his sentence with some more loud hoots of laughter.

Meow.

Peace swiftly hopped from my shoulder across to Aina’s and started meowing repeatedly in her ear as he rubbed his head against her cheek.

“Stop that, Peace. It tickles!” Aina giggled as she tried to push the kitten away.

Meow!

But Peace wasn’t going to be deterred, and he kept at it until a smile finally returned to Aina’s lips.

“Peace can be pretty useful sometimes, huh?” Karen whispered to me. I nodded. “Shame he acts like a jerk to us, though.”



“Anyway, back to the topic at hand. Are you *sure* you want to try doing business on Rag Street?” the owl asked me once Aina was back to being her usual bubbly self again.

I instantly switched back to business mode and gave a decisive nod. “Yes. That’s why I came down here in the first place.”

“Hm. Well, it takes all sorts, I guess. Oh!” The owl’s eyes suddenly lit up as if he’d realized something. “I get it now! You tried the other guilds first, but you didn’t have any letters of recommendation, so they turned you away! Am I right?”

“Bingo,” I sighed. “I didn’t know I’d need any letters of recommendation, so I just kinda waltzed in there and got turned around almost immediately. But the receptionist at the last guild I visited told me I should try my luck at your guild.”

“Receptionist? Oh! You mean *her*. Yes, yes, I see now,” the owl said with a nod of understanding as he crossed his arms.

“Oh, is she a friend of yours?” I asked.

“Childhood friend, to be exact,” he explained. “We’re from the same town.”

“Really? So *that’s* why she sent me here,” I said.

“She’s always been a busybody, ever since we were kids. Anyway...”—the owl paused—“are you *sure* you want to join our guild?”

I nodded. “I am. And well, even if I wasn’t, this is the only guild I can join if I want to do business in Mazela, so...”

“You really are a weird one,” the owl said pointedly. “What if you end up regretting joining this guild?”

“Where I come from, we have a saying: ‘Better to regret something you’ve done than regret not doing it at all.’”

“Hm, that’s a very optimistic outlook,” the owl said. “Usually, when you regret doing something, it’s because you ended up losing something because of it, no? If I can help it, I’d rather have no regrets at all.”

“I don’t mind, personally,” I said, before adding, “Well, as long as the loss in question isn’t *too* big.”

“What a grand thing to say,” the owl chuckled. “I take it you’re a wealthy man, then? Well, anyway, far be it from me to try to stop you if you have your heart set on joining this guild.” He paused and handed a sheet of paper to me. “You can read, yes? Here is your contract. Oh, do keep in mind that you cannot be a member of two guilds at the same time in Mazela, as per the earl’s decree.”

“Noted,” I said as I held up the contract to read it.

“The joining fee is 30 copper coins,” the owl continued. “You can’t sell any stolen items, obviously. We also take a twenty percent commission on every sale you make. I won’t let even a single copper coin slide, so you’d better keep on top of those payments.”

“Twenty percent?” I asked.

The owl glared at me. “Please don’t start complaining that it’s too much money. Out of that twenty percent, we have to pay ten percent to the earl, so all in all, we only get to keep half.”

“Oh, no, I don’t think it’s too much at all,” I said quickly. “Quite the opposite, in fact. It sounds very reasonable to me.”

“It is, isn’t it? The Ruby and Jade guild takes forty percent of every sale for themselves, plus there’s the ten percent that goes to the earl on top, so in the end, you only get to keep half the money you make. *And* their joining fee is 10 gold coins! I tell you, they’re just a bunch of rotten money-grubbers. That’s what they are!”

Ten million yen just to *join* their guild? Damn. I was starting to thank my lucky stars that they’d turned me away at the door. Although, it did seem a *bit* shady that the joining fee for the Eternal Promise was only

3,000 yen by comparison. I muttered a quiet “hmmm” as I scanned the contract, though it appeared to simply be restating the exact same things the owl had just told me.

“So all I have to do is sign here, right?” I asked him once I was done reading.

“Yup. But are you really, *really* sure you want to join this guild?” he asked for the umpteenth time. “You won’t make a lot of money doing business on Rag Street, you know.”

Hadn’t he literally just said he wasn’t going to try to stop me from joining the guild? Yet there he went again, trying to dissuade me. I could tell he was a good guy, though. He could’ve just taken my money without saying anything, but he’d decided to warn me in advance that I wouldn’t be able to earn a lot here.

“Oh, I’m not worried,” I said. “Remember what I told you? My wares aren’t half-bad.”

“Well, if you say so. And hey, who knows? If you manage to rake in the big bucks, you might catch the attention of one of the Big Five. If any of them ever invite you to join their guild once your contract with us is up, accept the offer. Well, if you manage to make any money on Rag Street in the first place, that is. Hoot hoot hoot!” the owl said, bursting into laughter once more. He was basically telling me to jump ship before this one sank.

“I’m not such a pushover that I’ll just instantly accept an offer from a bunch of money-hungry parasites who refuse to even let me show them my wares. *Especially* if it’s that guildmaster who poured water over me doing the inviting,” I said as I scribbled my name on the contract. “Shi-ro Am-a-ta. There.”

I handed my signed contract back to the owl.

“You really are a weird one,” the owl mused as he looked over the contract. “Okay, everything seems to be in order. Well then...” The owl paused briefly. “Welcome to the Eternal Promise, Shiro. I’m Zidan, this guild’s second guildmaster. I look forward to working with you.”

He held out his hand for me to shake and I obliged, though his talons dug into my skin as our hands came together. It was pretty painful.



“Welcome to Rag Street.”

Now that the formalities were all dealt with, the owl—Zidan—took me over to the marketplace so I could see what I would be working with.

“*This* is the marketplace?” I said, dumbfounded.

The owl burst out laughing yet again. “Hoot hoot hoot! It doesn’t exactly scream money, does it?”

Rag Street looked exactly like how I’d envisioned a slum to look. There were a few stalls dotted around the marketplace, but most of the wares on them were either rotten vegetables, stale-looking bread, or crude tools. On top of that, there seemed to be barely anyone around.

“Mister Shiro, are you really going to open a shop *here*?” Aina asked me, a concerned look on her face.

“I’m worried too, Shiro. I know you’re an extremely adept merchant, but I’m having trouble picturing how even you could turn a profit in a place as bleak as this,” Karen added.

The general atmosphere of Rag Street must have made the two of them a bit uneasy, as it really didn’t seem like I’d be able to sell anything here.

“Only poor people come here to shop, you see,” Zidan informed us. “I don’t really know what kind of stuff you’re planning to sell, but no matter how good your wares are, the folk in the slums probably won’t be able to afford it.”

He proceeded to inform me that even really high-quality items would only sell for five copper coins here at best.

“Oh, I’m not worried,” I said. “Like I said, my wares aren’t half-bad.”

“Hm. Well, if you say so,” Zidan said with a shrug.

“If people start buying my wares, that’ll end up attracting more customers,” I explained. “My only issue right now is there aren’t a lot of people here, which means I’m not sure I’ll be able to make that first sale that gets the ball rolling.”

“You sure do have a lot of confidence in yourself, don’t you? Well, I look forward to seeing how things turn out for you. When do you plan on opening up your shop?” Zidan asked.

I crossed my arms in front of my chest and gave this some thought. I already knew what I was going to sell here, so all I needed to do now was decide when to start. I glanced at Karen.

“Wh-What is it, Shiro?” she asked.

I didn’t answer. I glanced at Aina next.

“Is something wrong, Mister Shiro?” the little girl said.

Again, I didn’t answer. Instead, I closed my eyes and tried to picture the busy streets of Mazela.

“Yup. I’m sure of it now. I’m gonna make a huge profit here,” I said

with a firm nod. “All righty!” I turned to Zidan. “I’ve decided. I’ll set up shop in six days’ time.”

“Six days? Why not tomorrow?” he asked, rather surprised by this proposed timeline.

“I have a few things I need to get ready first. Actually...” I said, thinking of something, “I have a *teeny, tiny* little request for you, if you don’t mind.”

“For me? What is it?”

“I mean, a request for your guild, but yeah. So basically...”

I outlined my request.

“Well, sure. I can do that much,” the owl said with a nod, seemingly confident that he could fulfill my request without too much trouble.

And that’s how I finally became a member of a merchant guild in Mazela.

Chapter Fourteen: Karen's Dress

Five days had passed since my visit to the Eternal Promise guild. Yup, that's right: the day of Lord Bashure's banquet had finally arrived, and as soon as it started to get dark outside, Karen took us up to the earl's manor. When she told the guards at the gate that we were representatives from Ninoritch, they immediately let us in. Once inside the manor, the two girls headed off to another room, so that Karen could get ready, while I—wearing my usual red jacket, which I'd figured should be fancy enough for a banquet—decided to check out the venue.

“Here we are, sir. Welcome to the banquet.” The gray-haired butler bowed as he opened the door that led outside to the garden.

My first impression was that the space that had been allocated for the banquet was huge—probably about as big as four tennis courts put together. There was a fountain at the center and the grass felt incredibly soft as I strolled across it. *Too bad there are people around. If I were here alone, I'd take my shoes off and run around in this grass,* I thought to myself as I glanced around.

The two moons shone brightly in the night sky overhead, bathing the garden in pale light. It seemed like the banquet was going to be a buffet-style celebration, as several tables had been set up, all crammed with food.

“As per Lord Bashure's instructions, we have set up tonight's feast in the garden, as the twin moons are very beautiful tonight,” the butler explained to me.

“I see. It feels nice and open. I like it. And I agree, the twin moons are looking stunning tonight,” I said with a polite smile.

The butler returned my smile. Judging from his words, he seemed to really like and respect his master, Lord Bashure.

“I shall now return to my duties and escort the other guests this way. I hope you will enjoy tonight's celebrations,” he said and bowed before heading back into the entrance hall again.

“All righty. I still have a bit of time before Aina and Karen are ready to make their grand entrance. What should I do in the meantime?” I muttered to myself as I glanced around the garden for a second time.

I noticed the partygoers had divided themselves up into three big

groups. The first group consisted of some rather fancily dressed ladies and young girls, who were most likely Lord Bashure's relatives. They walked around the garden like they owned the place, chatting about things like jewelry and dresses. The second group seemed to be largely comprised of rich merchants, and in the middle of them, I spotted that piece of crap, the Ruby and Jade's guildmaster. I listened in on the conversation from afar and it was exactly what you'd expect from a bunch of merchants.

"The price of wheat keeps fluctuating."

"Salt costs more this year than last."

"Silver is going to sell well in the capital this year."

Blah blah, yadda yadda, money, money, money. I made a mental note not to go near this group under any circumstances. I didn't want a repeat of the Ruby and Jade incident.

The last group appeared to be composed of what I could only assume were the mayors and representatives from the other towns and villages in the region. Some of them were already stuffing their faces at the buffet tables, while others were busy sucking up to the noble ladies and the merchants. Their fancy clothes looked incredibly out of place on them, so they were easy to spot even when mingling with the other groups.

"There are so many different kinds of people here," I mumbled to myself.

I still wasn't sure what I should do while waiting for Karen and Aina to come down. The food looked really good and I *was* getting hungry, but I didn't want to start eating without those two, so that was out of the running for the time being. *Maybe I should just go grab a drink*, I thought, and I'd just started to make a move toward one of the tables when I heard someone call out to me.

"Hiya, Shiro."

The young man who had just said my name was blond and incredibly handsome.

"Duane!" I exclaimed.

A few knights had been dispatched to the party to make sure there wouldn't be any funny business and it looked like Duane was among them. He seemed to be wearing formalwear unique to this nation, instead of the armor he'd been clad in the last time I saw him.

"Care for some wine?" he said, offering me a glass, which I gratefully accepted.

"Thank you very much."

“Well then. Cheers!” he said, and we clinked glasses.

I took a sip and noted that it was a bit sour for my liking, though it was still drinkable, unlike the wine we’d had to endure in the little town we’d stopped at on the journey over here.

“Is this your first time attending a party like this?” he asked.

“It is,” I confirmed. “Though frankly, just the thought of me currently being in the same place as the earl is giving me the jitters.”

He chuckled. “You don’t need to be so nervous! Lord Bashure is actually a very kind person,” he reassured me. “Oh, look. He’s right over there,” he said, peering at one corner of the garden. I followed his gaze and my eyes landed on a short, scrawny old man sitting in a chair.

“That’s Lord Bashure?” I asked.

“You sound surprised.”

“I am. I mean, I was kind of expecting him to be more, um, *imposing*.”

“I know what you mean,” he said, sounding amused. “Everyone has that reaction when they see Lord Bashure for the first time.”

Well, could I really be blamed for being so surprised? The old man in the chair did appear to be wearing somewhat fancy clothes, but they were still sort of plain, and he didn’t seem to be wearing any kind of accessories. He had a warm smile on his face and I couldn’t help thinking that he had a very kind look about him.

“Oh, but don’t go judging him on his appearance alone, you hear?” Duane warned me. “He’s actually a genius when it comes to military strategy. Every single person in the countries bordering ours knows his name.”

“Really? So he’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing, huh?”

“Ooh, I like that comparison. I’ll have to tell Lord Bashure that one next time I talk to him,” he said with a wide grin.

“I don’t mind, but only tell him I’m the one who said it if we get through tonight without him hating me, okay?” I said uncertainly.

Duane burst out laughing. “That’s merchants for you. Always overthinking everything. But yeah, sure. I won’t mention your name if you don’t want me to.”

Duane and I stood and chatted breezily while I waited for Karen and Aina to come and join the party. *Man, women sure do take their time getting dressed, don’t they?* I thought. *I bet she’s doing something with her hair too, so that probably means she’s gonna take forever.*

“Oh, speaking of merchants, did you manage to join a merchant guild,

Shiro?” Duane asked.

“I did, yeah.”

“That’s great! I heard it’s really hard to join one if you don’t have the right connections,” he said. “Well? Which guild did you end up joining? The ‘Bountiful Prayer’? Or the ‘Ruby and Jade,’ maybe?”

“Nope, neither of those,” I said.

“Hm. The ‘Golden Scale’?”

I shook my head.

“Ah, got it! The ‘Diamond Chalice’!”

“Nope.”

“Then, that just leaves the ‘Gods’ Whimsy.’ I’ve heard they specialize in selling low-priced stuff to as many people as possible. Most peddlers end up joining that one.”

“Nope, not the Gods’ Whimsy either,” I said, shaking my head again. “The one I’ve joined is much smaller than all of those guilds. It’s called the Eternal Promise.”

“The Eternal Promise? Never heard of ’em. Oh, wait!” He paused, his eyes growing wide. “Now that I think about it, I *have* heard about another merchant guild in the southern part of town that specializes in putting other guilds in contact with temporary laborers from the slums.”

“Yep, that’s probably the one,” I said. “I don’t have connections of any kind in this city, so it was the only guild I could join.”

“I see. But, uh, won’t it be a bit difficult for you to turn a profit there?” Duane said, looking a bit concerned. “Hey, wait, I know! If you want, I could put in a good word for you with the guildmasters of the Big Five. I think I spotted the guildmaster of the Ruby and Jade around here earlier...” He scanned the assorted guests before seeming to spot the person he was looking for. “Ah, speak of the devil. There he is!”

He gestured for me to follow his gaze, and sure enough, there was the man who had poured water over me five days earlier. He appeared to be in the middle of presenting a gift to a lady in an extremely fancy dress. I noticed he had rings encrusted with absurdly huge gems on *all* of his fingers. Was it even possible to look any *more* nouveau riche than this guy?

“The countess is, um, very *fond* of pretty things. The Ruby and Jade guildmaster knows this, and that’s why he’s giving her that gift,” Duane said evasively with an embarrassed smile.

So that woman was the earl’s wife, huh? It looked like I’d seen

something I wasn't really supposed to.

"Well, anyway, back to the topic at hand," Duane said as he took a sip of his wine to hide his awkwardness. "While it might *in part* be because they have the favor of the countess, the Ruby and Jade is one of the most influential guilds in the city. If you join them, you could end up making a huge profit in a very short amount of time. What do you say, Shiro? Should I go talk to their guildmaster for you? I am a knight, after all. He might give you a shot."

I was a little moved by Duane's kind offer, but I couldn't possibly have accepted because that was the guildmaster who had poured water over me, meaning I had absolutely zero intention of joining his guild and playing all nicey-nicey with that bastard. Besides, it was too late for that. I was already part of the Eternal Promise guild.

"I appreciate the offer, but—"

I didn't get to finish my sentence, because just when I'd started speaking, the clacking of heels drifted over to us. It was such a pleasant sound that everyone in the garden turned to try to find out where it was coming from. The manor door that led out to the garden opened with a loud creak, and everyone instantly fell silent. The only thing that could be heard was the clack-clack of heels on the marble floor beyond the door. The butler appeared in the doorway, followed closely by...

"Sorry for making you wait, Shiro."

It was Karen. Her silky hair rippled in the breeze and I noticed she'd put on a little bit of makeup.

"Wh-What do you think, Shiro? How..." she said hesitantly. "How does the dress you bought look on me?"

Oh, and she was wearing a magical girl costume.

I was at a complete loss for words. Seeing her killer body in a magical girl outfit brought to mind those cosplayers who would always go all-out on their costumes, but despite her dress being an *actual* cosplay, it somehow managed to make her look refined, sophisticated, and cute all at the same time. This was in huge contrast to the countess and the other noble ladies at the party, whose dresses were so bold and opulent that they bordered on the gaudy. On top of that, this outfit had been designed to emphasize the wearer's natural beauty, rather than seeking to overshadow it. *You really shouldn't underestimate magical girls*, I mused. *There's a very good reason why these kinds of outfits have been going strong since the early Heisei era, about twenty or thirty years ago.*

“It looks amazing on you. You’re looking particularly beautiful tonight, Karen,” I said after a while. My brain was still in the middle of trying to process the image of Karen with her hair in bunches, but I figured I’d already made her wait long enough for an answer. Seeing her in this magical girl costume had taken me aback at first, but I wasn’t lying to her; I genuinely thought she looked amazing in it.

“I see. Th-Thank you, Shiro,” Karen said feebly, her face as red as a tomato.

Still, while she might have looked stunning, I was worried how the other guests would react to her wearing a magical girl costume to the earl’s party—particularly since I was the one who’d found the dress for her in the first place.

“My, my, what a beautiful woman,” I heard one man say.

“Which family is she from?” a second person asked.

“Who *is* the stylist who designed that dress?” a young woman gasped.

“That translucent fabric around her hips is to die for. I wonder where the stylist even found something like that!”

“Would you just look at how beautiful her dress is! The blue part even has a shine to it!”

“Does anyone know who this fine lady is?”

“Her hair’s so beautiful. It seems to be shimmering in the light of the twin moons.”

Thankfully, my worries were totally unfounded, because everyone appeared to love Karen’s new look. Even Duane couldn’t take his eyes off her. “She’s so beautiful...” he whispered in amazement.

Every single person in the garden had their eyes firmly fixed on Karen. Behind her, Aina slowly emerged from the door to the manor house.

“Mister Shiro...” she started, a bashful look on her face. “How do I look?”

For this evening’s banquet, Aina was also wearing a magical girl costume. It was almost the exact same dress Karen had on, just in a different color, and she looked absolutely adorable in it. Peace was perched on her shoulder, which made her look even more like the perfect little magical girl.

“You look so pretty, Aina! Just like a princess,” I said to her.

“Really? I’m so happy!” she giggled adorably, before practically throwing herself into my arms, Peace meowing his surprise at the sudden movement. I petted her head, and as my fingers ran through her hair, I

noticed it was feeling much smoother than usual. The shampoo set had seemingly worked its magic.

“Oh, gosh! Look at that cute little girl over there!” a woman in the crowd exclaimed when she caught sight of Aina.

“Is she a princess from a neighboring country?” another queried.

“Her dress appears to have been made by the same person who designed the outfit for that other beautiful lady,” someone else noted.

“I didn’t know Lord Bashure had invited a *princess* to the banquet! I must pay my respects to her!”

Before long, the attention of the crowd had shifted to Aina. They had somehow convinced themselves that she was a princess from another country. *We should probably let them know she’s not actually a princess or this might cause trouble for us further down the line*, I thought.

“Shiro. Aina. Let’s go greet Lord Bashure,” Karen said, and from the look in her eye, I could tell she’d come to the same conclusion as me.

Under the watchful gaze of the other guests, we went over to where Lord Bashure was sitting, with Karen leading the way.

“Karen from Ninoritch,” she greeted him with a curtsy. “Thank you for inviting us to tonight’s banquet, my lord.”

The earl stared at her, his eyes as wide as saucers. “Mayor Karen! I hardly recognized you!” he exclaimed. “What a beautiful dress you’re wearing tonight! I don’t believe I’ve ever seen something so exquisite! Not even in the royal capital!”

We stood there for several long minutes while the earl raved at length about Karen’s outfit.



It had been a good hour since Karen had made her grand entrance, and well...

“Mayor Karen, might I know who made the dress you are wearing tonight?”

“Th-That’s—”

“I would like to know too! But my, what a splendid dress it is. It *must* have been made by a famous tailor, yes?”

“Actually, it—”

“The more I look at it, the more I want it! Could you tell me what material it is made out of?”

Poor Karen was completely surrounded. The second she had finished

talking to Lord Bashure, all the ladies in the garden—including the countess herself—had descended on her to ask her about the dress, and they hadn't stopped bombarding her with questions for the past hour. She didn't even have time to answer a single question before the next one was thrown at her. Aina and I had spent the last hour watching this scene from the sidelines.

Growl.

Ah. That was my stomach trying to tell me something. Aina and I had planned to wait until Karen was done with her schmoozing before eating any of the food that had been laid out, and my stomach was pretty much empty by this point.

Growl.

This time, the sound had come from somewhere down by my side.

“Aina, are you hungry?” I asked the little girl.

“I-It wasn't *my* stomach that just made that noise! I promise!” she said, shaking her head vigorously. But then...

Growl.

Her stomach growled again, a bit louder this time. She looked down in shame and quickly wrapped her arms around her midsection.

I chuckled. “C'mon, Aina, you know not eating when you're hungry is bad for you. Should we go grab a bite while we're waiting for Karen to come over and join us?”

“No! I wanna eat with Miss Karen!” the little girl protested.

“Well, I guess we can wait a little bit longer, then.”

After all, they'd been talking about Karen's dress for a full hour by this point. Surely they must have almost run out of things to say by now, right? Well, about that...

“You said your name was Karen, right?” a young woman said to her. “There is something I have been meaning to ask you since I first laid eyes on you. Your hair's absolutely beautiful. Could you tell me how you come to have such smooth and glossy hair? What is your secret? Please tell me. I am dying to know!”

“Me too!”

“I wish to know too!”

“Now, now, everyone. It is rather unbecoming for ladies to behave in this way, wouldn't you agree? That's quite enough chirping and screeching, thank you very much.”

The woman who had raised her voice above the crowd was none other

than the countess herself. As soon as the words left her mouth, all of the women around Karen fell silent.

“That’s more like it,” the countess said with a satisfied nod. “Now, Karen, you may answer. Please let us in on the secret of how you come to have such beautiful hair.”

Her mouth was hidden behind a colorful folding fan, so it was a little difficult to read her expression, but the glint in her eye was plain to see. She looked like a hunter that had just spotted its next prey. Karen remained silent for a good few seconds.

“Whatever is the matter, Karen? Do you perhaps not *want* to tell us your secret? That surely *can’t* be the case, can it?” the countess pressed, punctuating this last question with a sophisticated laugh.

Karen looked like a deer in headlights, and she glanced around with a stiff smile on her face. As her gaze met mine, I could see that her eyes were screaming for help.

“Aina, could you hold this for me for a second?” I said to the little girl as I handed her my glass of wine.

“Kay.”

“Thanks.”

I corralled my features into the usual friendly business expression I broke out on these occasions and went to Karen’s rescue. “Mayor Karen! Would you mind introducing me to all these lovely ladies?” I said as I walked up to the crowd.

All of the women instantly turned to look at me, and Karen let out a quiet sigh of relief. The ladies around her, on the other hand, all eyed me suspiciously, probably wondering who the hell I was and why I was interrupting their conversation.

“Of course. Ladies, this is Shiro Amata. He works as a merchant in Ninoritch,” Karen announced.

“Nice to meet you all, my good ladies,” I said, bowing slightly to the group of women.

“You’re a merchant?” the countess said skeptically, her eyes shooting daggers at me. “You seem quite *different* from the merchants we are acquainted with.”

Her tone wasn’t very friendly, but I didn’t let my smile falter for an instant. After all, this icy reception was nothing compared to the harassment I’d suffered in my previous job.

“Shiro’s actually from another country originally,” Karen said in an

attempt to explain my rather unusual attire.

“Oh? He’s not from here?” the countess said, raising an eyebrow.

“No, he’s not,” Karen confirmed. “However, his wares are truly incredible. For instance...”—she paused as she gently pinched the fabric of her skirt—“he’s the one who provided me with the dress I am wearing tonight, as well as the soap I used to wash my hair. He even supplied me with the perfume I currently have on.”

The second these words left her mouth, a buzz of surprise shot around the garden. Yup, that’s right: *everyone* started talking about me, from the noble ladies, to the earl’s relatives, to even the earl himself. I could see the guildmaster of the Ruby and Jade staring at me in shock too, though from the look on his face, it appeared he didn’t recognize me.

“So you’re the one who found that dress?” someone asked me.

“I am,” I confirmed. “Mayor Karen asked me to provide her with a dress for this evening, and this is the one we settled on.”

“And it’s also thanks to you that her hair is all glossy and smooth, like silk?”

“I gave her a special kind of soap from my homeland, yes,” I said.

I tried to stay as rigidly business-like as possible as I fielded these questions, making sure to keep my voice flat and even the whole time. I hoped that if I stayed calm and composed, it might impress the other guests, and in turn, improve Karen’s social standing. But all of a sudden, the countess rushed toward me.

“C-Could you please provide me with some of that soap too?” she asked loudly, her eyes practically sparkling with envy. Hadn’t she chided the other women for similar behavior before, calling it unbecoming of a lady or something?

“Please make room for me, mother!” said a young lady, who I assumed was one of the countess’s daughters. “I want some of that soap too!”

“Me too!”

“Don’t forget about me!”

“I-I would also like some...”

In the blink of an eye, I found myself in the center of a throng of noble ladies. I was trying to figure out what I should say to them when, all of a sudden, it hit me that this was one hell of a business opportunity.

“Now, now, everyone. Please be patient,” I said, putting on the friendliest smile I could muster as I surveyed their faces. “I’ve actually brought several sets of soap just like the one I gave to Mayor Karen with

me, and I was thinking of handing them out to all of you, as a sort of thank-you gift for letting me attend this evening's party," I announced.

This earned me a collective "Oh!" from the ladies around me.

"Now, if you'll just excuse me for a moment, I can fetch them for you right away."

The ladies exchanged glances with each other, but no one said a word until the countess herself broke the silence after a few moments. "Y-You may go," she said simply.

"Thank you. I'll be right back."

I ambled out of the garden and searched for a spot where I could use my skill discreetly. Once I'd made sure there was no one in the area who might see what I was up to, I took a few shampoo sets out of my inventory. These weren't like the cheap shampoo bottles I'd used when I went to the bathhouse, though. No, they were the same ones I'd bought for Karen at a specialty store in Omotesando, an avenue in Tokyo renowned for its fashion and luxury goods outlets, and they were *expensive*, selling for around 30,000 yen each. *Thank goodness I decided to buy lots of them, just in case*, I thought.

"I apologize for keeping you all waiting. Here's the *special* soap I gave to Karen that made her hair all *smooth* and *glossy*," I announced once I was back in the garden again, making sure to place extra emphasis on the bits I wanted them to remember. I started handing out the sets to the noble ladies who had swamped me earlier, explaining to them in what order they should apply the products as I did so.

"Oh, I just remembered. I have some unfinished business I need to attend to," the countess announced before promptly scurrying toward the house clutching her shampoo set.

"M-Mother!" one of her daughters exclaimed. "Don't tell me you're..." She trailed off as she realized exactly why her mother had exited the garden at such speed. "Aw, that's so unfair! I want to take a bath too!"

"So do I!"

"I'm going too!"

And just like that, the countess and her daughters filed out of the garden with the collective intention of washing their hair. Finally free of all the scrutiny, Karen let out a sigh of relief, and Aina and I were able to eat at last.

Chapter Fifteen: Self-Respect

About an hour later, the manor house door was flung open, and the ladies who had gone to take a bath flooded back into the garden.

“Dearest, what do you think of my hair?” the countess called out to her husband, who was on the other side of the garden.

“Father! Look at how smooth my hair is now!” one of his daughters boasted.

“My hair feels so *different* from how it did before!” another said.

I noticed that all of them had changed into different evening gowns that were even more elaborate than the ones they’d been wearing before. But it wasn’t their fancy dresses that caught the collective attention of the partygoers.

“Dearest wife! My dear daughters!” the earl exclaimed. “Your hair is so *beautiful*! I hardly recognize you! You look like *goddesses*!”

The earl appeared to be completely enthralled by the sight of his wife and daughters, their hair shimmering in the light of the twin moons, and he proceeded to shower them with compliments. Earlier in the evening, the hair of the earl’s daughters had been as dry as straw, while the countess’s had looked incredibly greasy, likely due to whatever product she had used on it. But thanks to the shampoo set I’d given them, their hair now seemed clean, nourished, and hydrated, making it look smooth and glossy.

“Such beautiful hair!” a woman exclaimed.

“I can’t believe how soft it looks...” another remarked.

“Milady, you are looking truly magnificent this evening.”

“Even the gods must be jealous!”

Compliments were flying at the countess and her daughters from all directions as they made their way to where the earl was waiting for them. It was almost like watching Hollywood stars walking up the red carpet.

“Charlotte, my love! Come and show me your beautiful hair!” the earl exclaimed, as if he couldn’t wait a moment longer to see his wife’s hair up close.

“Look, dearest! Look at how smooth it is!” the countess crowed as she threw her hair back to give everyone in attendance a good look at it.

“Father, please look at my hair too!”

“And mine!”

Just like their mother, the earl’s daughters threw their hair back too. Cheers went up from the crowd at the display.

“Gorgeous! You’re all *gorgeous!*” the earl declared, and he started clapping.

I almost couldn’t believe this was the same man who had looked so placid sitting in his chair earlier. The difference between the before and after images was striking. He must have been really taken aback by the transformation in his wife and daughters.

“You said your name was Shiro, yes?” the countess asked me.

“It is,” I confirmed with a nod.

“That soap of yours is incredible,” she remarked.

Hell yeah! The countess praised my wares! I cheered internally, though I made sure my joy didn’t show on my face, my polite business smile unwavering. “Thank you very much for your kind words, milady,” I said.

“Are you a soap merchant?” was her next question.

“I don’t usually specialize in soap, no. However, I heard public bathhouses were a prominent feature of Mazela, so I decided to try my hand at selling soap while I was in town. The shampoo set I gave you is actually only one of many wares I carry,” I explained.

“Only one...” the countess mumbled, swallowing audibly. “I-I would like to purchase some more of that soap. How much of it do you have left?”

Just like earlier, her folding fan was spread wide in front of her mouth, but her eyes were those of a hunter eyeing its next prey. Her first target had been Karen, but it seemed I was now in her sights. And it wasn’t just her either. All of the ladies I’d given a shampoo set to had the same look in their eyes, determined not to let me—or the shampoo sets—escape their grasp.

“Hm, that’s a good question...” I said, pretending to be deep in thought while I gauged their reaction.

Their collective gaze grew even more intense, if that was actually possible. Yup, I was sure of it now: these ladies would be more than willing to part with plenty of money to get their hands on another shampoo set. In fact, I was pretty sure they’d purchase it even if I stuck an outrageous price tag on it. This got the gears in my head whirring, and I decided to give up on my original plan altogether, replacing it with a new one I was thinking up right on the spot. By the time I’d come up with it,

the ladies thronging around me had started to grow impatient, and the entire place had fallen silent, all of the guests hanging on my every word.

“The soap I gave you is *very* special, you see,” I said slowly. “At the moment, I’m afraid I only have about ten more—”

“I will buy them all!” the countess announced, cutting me off before I’d even finished my sentence.

“*All* of them?” I asked.

“Yes, all of them!” she repeated. Behind her, her daughters and other relatives seemed to be rejoicing internally at this, and I had to admit, so was I.

“Hold on a moment, Charlotte.”

Well, until the earl himself butted in, that is.

“Dearest!” his wife exclaimed, outraged by the intervention. “The soap this merchant stocks is absolutely exquisite. Whatever the price, I am *determined* to get my hands on it! Imagine the royal family’s reaction if we offered them some of this soap! Or better yet, we could lend it to other noble families and have them indebted to us,” the countess explained to her husband, her eyes sparkling.

Wait a minute. Was my shampoo set so amazing, she was planning to use it for *political purposes*? Damn, man. Luxury shampoos sure were something.

“Darling, I have a marvelous idea!” the countess continued. “How about making this merchant our *exclusive* soap purveyor, and—”

“My dear Charlotte, let us not be rash,” the earl softly chided his wife. “All transactions must be made through a merchant guild, remember? Unfortunately, we are no exception to that rule.”

“Oh. You’re right,” his wife muttered, seemingly having been brought to her senses.

“My lord is quite right, Lady Charlotte. It would indeed be somewhat *embarrassing* for me if you were to do business with this man without going through a merchant guild first. Why, it would put all of us guildmasters in rather an awkward position!”

The man who’d raised his voice above the general buzz of the crowd was the guildmaster of the Ruby and Jade, the largest merchant guild in Mazela—aka the bastard who’d chucked water all over me.

“After all, here in Mazela, every purchase and sale has to go through the merchant guilds. Isn’t that right, milady?” the man continued.

“Yes, it is. I apologize. It seems I got a bit hasty,” the countess said,

hiding her face with her folding fan before stepping back to allow the Ruby and Jade GM to take the floor.

“Oh, please don’t apologize, milady. I’m sure this soap must be *truly* incredible for you to be so beguiled by it,” the man said before turning to me. “Well, now. You said your name was Shiro, correct?”

The difference in his attitude toward me now versus our first meeting five days ago was night and day. Back then, he had been curt, cold, and seemingly completely indifferent toward me. But here at the banquet, he was acting as if he were chatting with an old friend, an affable smile plastered across his face.

“Yes. My name is Shiro Amata. I’m a merchant from *Ninoritch*,” I said, putting extra emphasis on the final word. Perhaps that would help him remember me.

“From Ninoritch, you say? Oh!” he exclaimed, clearly having thought of something. “Is it possible that you’re the merchant who first started selling matches as well?”

“Yup, that’s me,” I said with a nod.

“So it really *is* you! Matches are such splendid things. I actually sell them myself, you know,” he said with a smile.

“Oh, really? That’s *very* interesting, because I’ve never sold them anywhere apart from my own store,” I answered bitterly.

The man had the audacity to chuckle at my response. “Well, as a fellow merchant, I’m sure you know how it is. Sometimes, an item you sell ends up being so popular, you have no real control over its distribution anymore.”

“I’ve noticed, yes.”

Judging from his reaction, he clearly didn’t remember me, even though only a few days had passed since he’d poured water over my head.

“First, those matches, and now, this soap...” he marveled. “I can hardly believe an adept merchant like yourself has been tucked away in a remote little town like Ninoritch! Although, now that I think about it, I did actually hear some rumors about a remarkable merchant opening up a shop there several months back,” the man mused before shaking his head.

“Those rumors were mostly nonsense, though.”

“Oh, were they now?” I said.

“Yes, total nonsense. For instance, someone said this merchant had even managed to get his hands on the legendary alcohol known as fairy mead.”

The Blue Flash crew and I had actually just polished off the latest batch of fairy mead Patty had made a few days before I'd departed for Mazela. If I recalled correctly, Kilpha had been drunk as a skunk by the end of it, and well, I won't go into too much detail, but drunk Kilpha was seriously a sight to behold.

"Someone else said this merchant was also a relative of Alice the Immortal Witch!" the guildmaster continued.

Yup, she's my grandma. What are you gonna do about it?

"Honestly. It makes you wonder who in their right mind would even believe such bizarre tall tales!" he said, and he shook his head once more for good measure.

"People often tend to make things sound a lot grander than they actually are," I said with an understanding nod.

"A truer word never spoken. And to think, if these rumors had been just a *little* more plausible, I would have jumped in a carriage bound for Ninoritch months ago to ask you to come and join my guild." He paused and took a step toward me. "I don't believe I've introduced myself yet. I'm the guildmaster of the Ruby and Jade merchant guild. My name is Bard Furst," he said as he forcefully grabbed my hand and shook it. "The soap you gave to Lady Charlotte and her daughters is absolutely wonderful! It would be a pleasure to have you in our guild, Mr. Shiro."

"You'd like me to join your guild?" I asked.

"Yes, naturally." He was still smiling, but I could tell by the look in his eye that he was absolutely determined to get me to join his guild.

"I've heard you need letters of recommendation to join the Ruby and Jade guild, though," I said. "If I remember correctly, I either need letters from three merchants already registered at your guild, or one from a noble."

"I see you're quite well-informed," he said with an approving nod. "Is it possible you were already planning to join our guild?"

I laughed. "You found me out. I *was*, actually," I said, putting extra emphasis on the "was" part.

"Well, that's wonderful news! It's almost as if fate has brought us together this evening," Bard rejoiced, failing to pick up on my tone. "It is true that I usually require guild hopefuls to produce letters of recommendation, but you and I are friends now, meaning you won't need any because I will personally vouch for you," he said. He grabbed two glasses of wine from a tray held by a server who happened to be passing

by. “Now, Mr. Shiro, let us toast and celebrate you joining our guild!”

“What about the contract?” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“We can deal with all that later. But rest assured, I’ll make sure I consult you over the percentage the guild receives from your sales, and I’m even willing to lower it until you are satisfied with it. Now...” He paused and raised his glass, as if waiting for me to join him in a toast.

However, that wasn’t in my plans. “I apologize, Mr. Bard, but I have zero intention of joining your guild. Therefore, I must decline your offer of a toast.”

He froze. “What did you just say?” he asked, a bewildered look on his face.

“I said I have zero intention of joining your guild,” I repeated.

As soon as these words left my mouth for a second time, the garden was abuzz with chatter as everyone voiced their confusion all at once.

“Might I inquire as to why you don’t wish to? The Ruby and Jade is the biggest merchant guild in Mazela. We have branches all over the kingdom,” Bard said.

“Is that so? Well, let me ask *you* a question, Mr. Bard. How would you feel about working with someone who’d poured water over your head?” I said.

“Water? What are you...” He stopped, then gasped in surprise, his eyes comically wide. “Oh! D-Don’t tell me you’re...”

“Ah, I see you finally remember me!” I said, breaking out into a wide grin.

“No, that’s impossible...” he muttered, utterly dumbfounded by this revelation.

“How long has it been since our last meeting? Five days, I believe?” I said. “You really did a number on me back then, splashing water all over my head like that! I could’ve caught a cold, you know.”

He didn’t say a word. He just stared at me as if I’d grown a second head.



“I trust you now understand why I don’t wish to join your guild, yes?” I said sarcastically.

“I-I profusely apologize for what I did! I didn’t...”—he stumbled over his words as they rushed to his mouth—“I didn’t know! I didn’t know you were *the* merchant from Ninoritch I’d heard so much about!”

“Oh, really? Well, that’s interesting. Because I’m *pretty* sure I told you at the time that I was working as a merchant in Ninoritch,” I said, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

In an instant, Bard turned as white as a sheet. “Th-That’s, um...” he mumbled. “Well, I had my reasons, and...”

“Oh, don’t worry. I understand perfectly,” I said with mock sympathy. “As you told me very clearly when we first met, you have to deal with so-called ‘merchants from Ninoritch’ demanding to join your guild almost on a daily basis, right? It’s only natural you’d get annoyed by one more person turning up at your door and doing the same.”

“Yes! Exactly!” he blurted out, sounding relieved that I was seeing it from his perspective.

“How-ev-er,” I said, pausing between each syllable for emphasis, “that doesn’t give you the right to pour water over someone’s head when you’ve only just met them, does it? I might still be a novice at this peddling lark, but I’ve already decided to *only* do business with people I fully trust. Let’s call it ‘self-respect,’ shall we? And well...”—I paused as I looked Bard straight in the eye—“I don’t plan on joining your guild. Not now. Not ever. And I refuse to do business with you in any capacity.”

Bard clenched his teeth and treated me to a glare that was full of venom. *Looks like someone’s true colors are finally coming out, huh?* I thought to myself as he burst into a reedy laugh.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that if I were you,” he said. “I will say it again: I’m the guildmaster of Mazela’s biggest merchant guild. Just one word from me is enough to ensure you never do business in this city again.”

“Oh? Is that a threat?” I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

He laughed again. “Of course not. Consider it a warning. Oh, and don’t bother applying to any of the other guilds either. The other guildmasters and I are all very well-acquainted, you see, so while I do honestly believe this soap of yours is incredible, unfortunately, you won’t be the one selling it in Mazela.”

“I see,” I said before letting out an exaggerated sigh and turning to

address the countess, who'd been watching the scene unfold. "I apologize, milady, but as Mr. Bard here just said, it looks like I won't be able to sell you the soap you were interested in purchasing."

She gasped, then glared at Bard—quite intensely, as it happened. In fact, if looks could kill, Bard would have been toast. And it wasn't just the countess either; every single noblewoman in the garden was staring daggers at him. Like grandma had told me, a woman's hair was her life, and anyone who deigned to try to mess with it was immediately classified as an enemy.

"Mr. Bard, do you not think you are going a little *too* far there?" the countess asked.

"Charlotte is right," her husband upbraided him. "As the administrator for this region, I cannot possibly allow you to say such outrageous things."

Well, it looked like *someone* had gotten so consumed by his anger, he'd forgotten we were in the middle of a party and that everyone else—including the earl and his family—had been listening to our conversation.

"Th-This isn't what you think!" Bard said hurriedly, seemingly coming back to his senses. "W-We were just negotiating!"

"It seems I need to have a discussion with the other guildmasters regarding how you negotiate with them, then," the earl said coldly.

"But Lord Bashure!" Bard started to protest.

The earl clearly didn't want to have anything more to do with him, however. "Get out of my sight," he said. "Guards! Throw this man out!"

The second these words left the earl's mouth, several armored knights moved toward us.

"Lord Bashure! Lady Charlotte! I beg you! Please pardon me for my transgression!" he said, but seeing that he wasn't about to get the response he wanted, he turned to me instead. "And Mr. Shiro, please forgive me for what I did to you! Wait, I have an idea!"

He raised his glass of wine above his head and dumped the contents of it all over himself. *This guy really likes to waste perfectly good water and wine, doesn't he?* I thought to myself, semi-amused by this turn of events. He then grabbed several more wine glasses from the table and, one by one, poured each of them over himself.

"Look, Mr. Shiro! Can you forgive me now?" he said, staring wildly at me with bloodshot eyes as he reached for the bottle of wine that was sitting on the table, and yup, you guessed it: he poured the entire thing over himself.

Everyone in the garden stared at him with a mix of shock and horror. Even the advancing knights had stopped in their tracks, completely taken aback by the unfolding situation.

“Look, Mr. Bard,” I said. “No matter how many times you apologize, I’m not joining your guild.”

“But—” he started to argue, but I cut across him.

“Besides, I’ve heard that here in Mazela, you can only be part of one guild at a time. Isn’t that right?” I asked.

The earl was the one who answered my question. “That’s right. I’m the one who came up with that rule to ensure things would be fair,” he said, glaring at Bard as the last word left his mouth.

“That’s what I thought,” I said with a nod. “You see, I’m actually already part of a merchant guild.”

People started muttering to each other again on hearing this.

“And the good news is, starting tomorrow, you’ll *all* be able to buy the soap I gave to the countess through that guild!”

The chattering intensified.

“Might I ask which guild you are a part of, Shiro?” the countess said. “The Bountiful Prayer, perhaps? Or maybe the Golden Scale?”

“Nope, neither of those.”

“The Diamond Chalice, then?”

This is the second time I’m having this exact same conversation today, I noted as I shook my head to indicate it wasn’t that guild either.

“I see. Then, it *must* be the Gods’ Whimsy.”

“As a matter of fact, it isn’t,” I said, shaking my head once more.

I paused. Everyone was staring at me intently, waiting for me to tell them all the name of this mysterious guild I had joined.

“I’m a member of the Eternal Promise merchant guild,” I finally declared after dragging out the suspense a few seconds longer.

No one said a word. I could tell from the looks on their faces that everyone was wondering the exact same thing: *where the hell even is that guild?*

Chapter Sixteen: Business in Mazela

“Wh-Wh-What in the world is going on here?!” Zidan, the Eternal Promise’s guildmaster, shrieked in surprise when he turned up at Rag Street that morning. His reaction wasn’t all that surprising because...

“I want some shampoo!”

“I heard this is the place to buy soap that can make my hair all smooth and shiny. Is that true?”

“My wife keeps pestering me to buy some of that soap of yours!”

“Same here, except it’s my daughter who’s been talking my ear off about this ‘shampoo’ thing.”

“I’m here to buy some for my fiancée!”

“Ever since that nice young lady let me use some of her soap in the bathhouse, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it.”

“Out of my way! I want some of that soap and I want it *now!*”

The usually deserted Rag Street was absolutely teeming with people, and they all seemed to be here for the same reason: they wanted shampoo.

“Th-That’s an awful lot of people, Mister Shiro,” said Aina, who was standing next to me. She gulped audibly.

I nodded. “It sure is.”

“Shiro...” Karen began, looking every bit as nervous as Aina. “Surely you don’t plan on just the three of us dealing with *all* these customers, do you?”

“Of course not,” I quickly reassured her. “I anticipated something like this might happen, so I asked Zidan to send some people over to help us man the store.”

It was still really early—about seven in the morning—but that hadn’t deterred people from coming all the way to Rag Street to get their hands on some shampoo. I didn’t know exactly how many people had shown up to my stall that morning, but judging by the sheer size of the crowd in front of us, I estimated there must have been a good three thousand men and women all waiting to make their purchase.

“Sh-Shiro! Bawk-bawk. Bawk-bawk. Ba-kawk!”

Poor Zidan was so shocked by the thronging masses, he’d started clucking like a chicken. Which was pretty ironic, considering he was an

owl.

“Take a deep breath, Zidan,” I suggested. “Just try to calm down, yeah?”

“C-C-C-Calm down? How in the world do you expect me to do that?!” he squeaked. His usual lethargic tone had disappeared entirely, and for some reason, the shock of seeing so many people gathered on Rag Street at the same time appeared to have made him a lot more aggressive.

“Wh-Why are there so many people here?!” he cried, before suddenly gasping as if he’d just thought of something. “Shiro! Y-You did something, didn’t you?” he said, shooting me an accusatory glare.

“Well, I can’t say I didn’t,” I said with a shrug.

When I’d asked him to send some workers my way the previous day, I’d said around fifty should be enough, but looking at the situation in the here and now, I came to the realization that I might have *slightly* underestimated the number of people who would show up on the day. We could definitely have done with maybe another hundred or so workers on top of the fifty I’d already asked for.

“Shiro, h-how in the world did you manage to gather so many people here?!” Zidan continued, utterly shocked by the scene in front of him. “I mean, other than beggars, *no one* ever comes to Rag Street!”

“I just did a little ad campaign for my store. Though, frankly, I wasn’t expecting it to work *this* well,” I said, gesturing to the crowd.

“An ad campaign? What the hell is that?” Zidan wheezed, dumbfounded.

“Oh, it just means I told people about my wares, that’s all,” I clarified.

To be more specific, I had employed three marketing strategies. The most recent of these had been my little stunt at the earl’s party the previous evening, where I had announced to everyone—including the countess and that no-good wretch, the Ruby and Jade guildmaster—that I would be selling my shampoo sets on Rag Street today. This likely explained why there were so many merchants waiting in line, in addition to all the servants and maids who were here on the behalf of their masters and mistresses.

My next idea had been to take advantage of Mazela’s bathing culture. Aina, Karen, and I had spent the five days leading up to the banquet going around the various bathhouses of Mazela and offering bathers the chance to try out the shampoo sets for free. Now you might be sitting there thinking these were all good PR moves, sure, but they *definitely* wouldn’t

have attracted a crowd as huge as the one in front of my stall right at that moment. And you would be right about that. There had been one final piece to my plan.

“Still, this is all rather unexpected,” Karen said. “I didn’t think so many people would be interested in buying shampoo.”

“Really? Honestly, I’m not so surprised myself,” I said. “Quite the opposite, actually. After all, I don’t think a woman exists who *wouldn’t* want to buy some shampoo after seeing how beautiful your hair is after using it, Karen.”

Yup, that’s right. My final bit of PR had been Karen herself. Just having her walk the streets of Mazela with her smooth and glossy hair was enough to turn heads, with people even stopping her on occasion to ask her what the secret to her beautiful hair was, and it was then that they would hear about “shampoo” for the first time. Shampoo became the talk of the town in no time. On top of that, the lucky few who’d actually gotten to try it at the bathhouses wouldn’t stop talking about how absolutely amazing it was, which in turn got people increasingly curious about it and, ultimately, led to the huge crowd of customers standing in front of me at the present moment in time. All of them had gathered here with the same objective: to get their hands on some shampoo.

“Shiro...” Zidan started. “Did you know there would be this many people?” He clearly still hadn’t recovered from the shock of seeing so many people gathered on Rag Street.

“To some extent,” I said.

“What do you mean, ‘to some extent’?” the owl hooted. “To *what* extent, exactly?!”

“Well, at any rate, this has all the hallmarks of turning into a riot if we don’t start serving people soon,” I said, ignoring his comment. “Oh, if you’re free, Zidan, please help us with the calculations.”

“Listen to me, Shiro!” the owl protested.

Once again, I paid no attention to his objections. “Aina, you’re in charge of the regular shampoo sets, okay?” I said to the little girl.

She replied with a vigorous nod and an excited little “Kay!”

“Karen, your job will be to sell the high-end sets. Most of the customers wanting those will probably be noble ladies, so be sure to keep that in mind,” I told her.

“Understood,” she said.

I turned to the crowd and raised my voice so that everyone could hear

me. “All right, everyone! Thank you ever so much for waiting! We are now ready to start selling our special soap for hair, also known as ‘shampoo’!”

The crowd instantly erupted into cheers.

“These shampoo sets are limited editions, so we kindly ask you to limit your purchases to no more than two per person,” I continued.

Once again, the people in the crowd showed their agreement by letting out another burst of loud cheering.

“I said *listen* to me, Shiro!”

With Zidan’s outraged shrieking still echoing around Rag Street, I finally got the chance to do business in Mazela.

Chapter Seventeen: Keep in Touch

In the end, we made quite a bit of money. A crap ton of money, in fact. It went so well, we were all sold out by noon.

“Here you go, Zidan. Your cut of today’s sales,” I said, dropping a heavy leather bag onto the counter. It had been a few hours since we’d run out of shampoo, and we were back at the guildhall. “There’s 600 silver coins in there,” I added.

“S-Six *hundred*?!” Zidan shrieked in shock.

“Yup, six hundred. Twenty percent of today’s total sales, as stated in my contract. And in *here*...” I said, lifting up a second leather bag with a little “Heave-ho!” and placing it down on the counter next to the first, “...there’s 150 silver coins. That’s for all the workers who helped us deal with that crowd and assisted us with the sales. There were fifty of them, so that works out at three silver coins each. Today was pretty hectic in the end, so I decided I’d pay them a little more than I’d initially planned to,” I told him with a smile.

Zidan simply stared at me with a blank look on his face and his mouth gaping.

“Zidan?” I said.

I didn’t get an immediate answer, but after a few seconds, he seemed to pull himself together.

“You’re an incredible merchant, Shiro,” he said simply, in his usual lethargic tone.

“Of course he is. And I’m very proud that he chose to start up his business in *my town*,” Karen said, placing extra emphasis on those last two words.

“You’re from Ninoritch, is that right?” Zidan said to her. “I never would have guessed there would be a merchant as adept as Shiro in such a little town out in the middle of nowhere.”

“Well, maybe people will finally start realizing that they should stop looking down on little towns,” Karen said, puffing her chest out with pride. “Besides, we’ve seen some significant growth in Ninoritch’s economy ever since Shiro arrived in town.”

“You really are something else, Shiro,” Zidan sighed as his gaze shifted

back to me. “I’ve never seen a merchant as skilled as you.”

“Hey, Mister Shiro, Mister Zidan is saying lots of nice things about you!” Aina said to me excitedly.

“Yeah...” I said slowly before shrugging. “Though I don’t think I’m as incredible as he’s making me sound.”

Zidan, Karen, and Aina all had looks of accomplishment splashed across their faces, clearly satisfied with how things had gone that day. If it hadn’t been the middle of the day, I would have suggested going for a couple of beers to celebrate a successful first day of business.

“Well, anyway, thanks for these, Shiro,” Zidan said, indicating the two bags filled to the brim with silver coins, which he picked up and put in a drawer that he immediately locked. “Still, I can’t emphasize enough how much you seriously impressed me today.”

He sighed, then cracked a smile. “I had a really good time. It reminded me of when I used to work with my pa. Just that feeling of being so busy, you barely have time to catch your breath. Plus, seeing all that money piling up...” He briefly got lost in his reminiscences, before adding, “It almost felt like I’d gone back in time.”

He paused briefly as his smile grew even wider. “Thank you, Shiro. I mean it. Thank you so, so much. When my pa died, I thought I’d never get to see Rag Street so bustling again. It made me really very happy.” His eyes were glittering brightly with unshed tears. Thinking about his father had obviously made him quite emotional.

“I had a good time today too. My favorite part was seeing you lose it when you showed up at Rag Street this morning,” I teased him.

“That’s because what you did was so stupidly over the top!” the owl hooted.

I laughed, and he glared at me.

“Stop laughing!” he huffed, but I could tell by his tone that he wasn’t actually mad.

We stood there and just looked at each other for a few seconds before he continued. “I’ll never forget what happened today, Shiro. I’ll always remember what it was like working with you.”

“Why are you suddenly talking like we won’t ever see each other again?” I asked.

“Because we won’t,” Zidan said matter-of-factly as he placed a sheet of paper on the counter. I glanced down at it, saw my signature at the bottom of the page, and immediately understood what was happening. He was

giving me back the contract I had signed with the guild.

“Here, take it,” Zidan prompted, pushing the contract toward me.

“Why?” I asked, puzzled.

“What kind of question is that? A merchant as incredible as you doesn’t belong in this puny little guild,” he scoffed, as if this was something that went without saying. “Go join another guild. You’ll make a lot more money. Besides, you’re too much for us to handle.”

“Hey, that’s not a very nice thing to say,” I replied.

Zidan ignored me. “Hurry up and take it,” he said, holding up the signed contract and prodding me with it repeatedly. “If you don’t, I’ll just destroy it myself.”

“Fine,” I said after a few seconds and took the contract from him.

“Took you long enough,” Zidan scoffed.

“Well then...” I said, then paused for dramatic effect and looked him straight in the eye. “I would like to apply to join the Eternal Promise.”

“Wh-What?!” Zidan spluttered. “What the hell are you *saying*?! Do you even realize what words are coming out of your mouth, Shiro?!”

“I do.”

“Then—”

I held up a hand to put a stop to his protests. “When you told us your reasons for running this guild, your words really moved me. You don’t really like this job, yet you keep doing it for the sake of your father and the poor people who live on Rag Street. I find that really admirable. That’s why I want to carry on being a part of the Eternal Promise guild. I want to carry on working with you, Zidan,” I said.

Zidan looked taken aback by my words. “Shiro, you...” he started, but he couldn’t finish his sentence.

“So what do you say? Can the two of us keep working together?” I asked, smiling at him.

“Are you really sure you want to carry on doing business with someone like *me*?” the owl said.

“I do,” I confirmed. “Granted, you can be a bit awkward, but I really admire you for all that you’ve done to honor your promise to your father. That’s why I would love to keep working with you.”

“You’re an idiot,” he said, but there was no hint of malice in his voice.

“Yeah, I get that a lot.”

“A colossal idiot,” he corrected himself. “But well, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to work with you as well, stupid as you are.”

“So?” I prompted with a grin that threatened to split my face in two.
“Welcome back to the guild,” he said, and we shook hands to signify the start of our business arrangement for the second time that week.



“Oh, I almost forgot,” Zidan said after a while.

He headed over to the corner of the room and started rummaging through a few drawers, before coming back with a metallic band in his hand.

“Shiro, I want you to have this,” he said, showing me the Bracelet of Promise Aina had said she’d wanted last time we were in this room. “But you probably don’t want it, so how about giving it to your little apprentice here?” he added.

Aina jolted in surprise at Zidan’s mention of her. She stared at the bracelet, her eyes as wide as saucers. “But...” she stammered, perplexed. “That’s...”

Well, it was only natural she’d be shocked by this sudden suggestion. It wasn’t even a week ago that Zidan had told her the bracelet wasn’t for sale when she’d told him she wanted it.

“I...” she mumbled. “I can’t accept it.” She shook her head vigorously.

“Oh, c’mon, you’re a kid. You shouldn’t be saying things like that. I *know* you want it,” Zidan encouraged her.

“But...” the little girl uttered quietly, looking lost. She looked up at me, hoping I’d tell her what she should do.

“Zidan, didn’t you say that bracelet was a memento from your father?” I asked.

“It is,” he said with a nod as he gently caressed the bracelet with a sentimental look on his face. “But remember the promise I made to my father? He told me if I ever met a merchant I could fully trust, I should give this bracelet to them.”

He paused and looked at me, then at Aina.

“But to be honest with you,” he continued, “I don’t think this bracelet would really suit you, Shiro. And well, it might still be a bit on the big side for your little apprentice, but all the same, I think she should have it.”

I was pretty sure Zidan was just using me as an excuse so he could give the bracelet to Aina, since she’d looked like she really, really wanted it the first time we were here.

“Are you sure about this, Zidan?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yup. I never go back on my word.”

“Well, Aina, you heard the man,” I said to the little girl, smiling.

She didn’t answer. She still looked very unsure of what she should do, but I could see in her eyes that she wanted the bracelet ever so much. The poor thing must have been really conflicted.

“Hey, stop overthinking it, kid,” Zidan told her, most likely having reached the same conclusion as me. “Listen. When you’re in a store and you see something you like, before you even think about the price and all that, the first thing you should ask yourself is: ‘Do I really want it?’ You got that?”

The little girl nodded and mumbled a quiet “Yeah.”

“So then, kid, what do you say? Do you *really* want this bracelet?” Zidan prompted.

Once again, Aina silently looked up at me for help. I placed my hand on her head and gently petted her hair.

“Well, I guess in that case, I’ll take the bracelet myself,” I said, fishing it out of Zidan’s hand. Aina let out a quiet “Ah!” as I did so. “Zidan, you’re giving this bracelet to me because you trust me, right?” I said to the owl to get confirmation.

He nodded. “Yup. You’re a total weirdo, but I trust you.”

“Thank you.” I turned to the little girl next to me. “Here you go, Aina,” I said with a grin as I dropped the bracelet into her little hands.

Yet again, she was speechless, her little face scrunched up in confusion.

“I want to give this to you as proof that I trust you,” I said softly. “Will you accept it?”

Tears instantly rushed to her eyes and started rolling down her cheeks. “Can I really have it?” she asked, sounding all choked up.

“Of course you can. Ever since I came to Ninoritch, you’ve been a huge help to me,” I explained. “I’m glad I’ve finally found a way to show you just how much I trust you.”

She nodded, but she was too overcome with emotion to speak.

“Thank you for everything, Aina,” I said.

She nodded again before closing her hand around the bracelet and hugging it to her chest.

“Thank you, Mister Shiro,” she said, once she’d finally regained the ability to speak.

I smiled at her. “You’re very welcome.”

“And thank you, Mister Zidan,” she said to the owl with a little bow.

“No worries, kid,” he replied. “You’d better take good care of that bracelet, mind.”

“I will!” she said with a firm nod, a beaming smile splashed across her face. Still clutching the bracelet to her chest, she turned to me again. “I’m really, really happy I came to Mazela with you, Mister Shiro!”

I decided I would give the Eternal Promise guild the exclusive rights to the distribution of soap and shampoo in Mazela. When I was all done signing the appropriate contract, it was time for us to go. Zidan walked us to the door.

“See you soon, Zidan,” I said, flashing a huge smile at the owl.

“I hope so! Bye, you guys!” he said, waving us off.

Not long after that, Karen, Aina, Peace, and I climbed into the wagon that would take us back home to Ninoritch, while the cat meowed loudly at the setting sun.

Chapter Eighteen: Unexpected Visitors

It had been about half a month since I'd left for Mazela with Karen, and I was finally back in my own house. The morning after I got back, I woke grandma up bright and early so we could give the place a deep clean, and by the time we were done, the house was spotless and sparkling. Quite literally, in fact. While we were cleaning, grandma cast a spell that made sparkles appear all over the place. Apparently, it was supposed to prevent the house from showing its age or something along those lines.

“And well, as you can see, a lot happened in Mazela. But what surprised me the most was just how popular that dress you chose was,” I said, concluding the tale of my little adventure to the feudal capital while my grandma and I had a late lunch seated opposite each other at the low dining table.

Grandma chuckled. “Well, I *did* tell you not to underestimate my fashion sense, didn't I?” she boasted.

She wasn't wearing head-to-toe beige like she had been the last time I'd seen her, instead opting for a T-shirt with a picture of Mel Kipson in *Dead Max* on it, which she'd ordered online before I went off on my trip. Yup, grandma was such a fangirl of the guy, she even ordered *clothes* with his face on them. She'd also reverted to her original youthful appearance, claiming she couldn't possibly show her “dear Mel-sama” a wrinkled face.

“I also really wasn't expecting those shampoo sets to sell so well!” I said.

“Well, remember what I said? A girl's hair is her life. Any girl would jump at the chance to make her hair look prettier.”

I recounted everything that had happened during my trip to Mazela while chowing down on the Japanese rolled omelet grandma had made (which tasted great, by the way). I grabbed my now-empty bowl and was about to stand up to get myself some more rice from the kitchen when I heard a loud “ding-dong” noise.

“That was the intercom, right?” I asked grandma.

“Looks like someone's come to visit you. Could you go answer the door?”

“Yeah, sure. Though I'm a little bit puzzled. This is the first time it's

rung since I moved in. I wonder who it could be...” I mused.

“Well, you’ll find out when you answer the door, won’t you?” grandma pointed out.

I nodded. “I guess. But didn’t you tell me you’d put a barrier around the house so only your blood relatives could come near it or something like that? Did you take it down?”

“Nope.”

Ding-dong!

“Then who can it be?” I wondered aloud.

“Well, isn’t it obvious? It must be one of our rela—”

Diiiiing-dooooong!

Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

Diiiiing-dooooong!

“Oh, for the love of...” I muttered. “Who the hell is it?!” I snapped as I got more and more irritated by the sound of the intercom.

“This is murder on my ears,” grandma moaned. “Hurry up and get the door, Shiro.”

I put my bowl on the table and angrily slammed my chopsticks down on top of it before getting to my feet with the intention of going to give the person incessantly ringing the doorbell a piece of my mind, when all of a sudden, I heard voices from outside.

“Hey! Come out, come out, big bro!”

“Open the door, bro-bro!”

Those voices...

A sentimental smile instantly appeared on grandma’s face.

“Is that...” she started, but she trailed off before finishing the thought.

I let out a deep, deep sigh and nodded. “Yup. It’s Shiori and Saori. No doubt about it.”

That’s right. The two idiots yelling outside the front door were grandma’s so-called “adorable” granddaughters, otherwise known as my little sisters.



“Bro! Can’t you at least text us from time to time to let us know you’re still alive?” Saori chastised me.

“You *never* answer when we call,” Shiori added. “We were starting to wonder if you were actually dead for real, bro-bro!”

The two of them had rushed me the second I’d opened the door.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to my little sisters: identical twins, Shiori and Saori. The one with her hair tied into high buns on either side of her head was Shiori, who was born first of the two. She was kind of the lazy, easy-going type, while Saori, whose hair reached down to her shoulders, was a heap more mischievous and sassy.

“Jeez, do you even *know* just how many times we’ve tried calling you since you moved in here?” Saori said, clearly mad at me.

Oh, yeah. I completely forgot about my smartphone. Since I’d been spending so much time in Ruffaltio, I really hadn’t needed (or been able) to use it all that much recently. I quickly grabbed it—it had been plugged in and charging for who knows how many days now—and took a peek at my incoming call history. Sure enough, it was absolutely littered with the names Shiori and Saori. Seriously, just how many times had they tried to call me? They might have been my little sisters, but it was still kind of creepy.

“Sorry, my bad,” I said, chuckling. “I haven’t been using my phone much recently.”

“Mama and papa have also been wondering what happened to you, bro-bro,” Shiori added. “They said maybe you’d gotten so depressed about not being able to find a new job, you’d ended up *killing* yourself!”

“Mom and dad worry way too much,” I sighed. “Can’t they have a little faith in me? It’s not like I’d commit suicide over something like *that*.”

“Saori and I were worried too! You *never* pick up your phone, and it made us think maybe we’d done something wrong and you hated us!” Shiori said, puffing her cheeks out and pouting. I could see tears welling up in her eyes. They must have really been concerned about me, huh?

“Sorry for making you worry. I just, uh...”—I paused as I searched for the right words—“I just went on a little trip to somewhere pretty far away with a few friends. I ended up being really busy and didn’t have time to look at my cell.” Well, that wasn’t *really* lying, was it?

I placed my hand on Shiori’s head and gently stroked her hair as she stood there with her cheeks still puffed out. I tried doing the same to Saori, but she slapped my hand away before it got anywhere near her head. *Looks like someone’s in her rebellious phase*, I thought, chuckling inwardly.

“Anyway, what are you doing here? Surely you didn’t come all this

way just to check up on me, right?” I asked.

“Of course not,” Saori said, then shoved an envelope into my hand.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s from papa. He said they’re holding a big event to mark grandma’s passing. We’re having the funeral, memorial service, and the ceremonies for the first, second, and sixth anniversaries of her death all on the same day,” she explained. In Japan, it was customary to mark a relative’s passing by holding ceremonies involving prayers on various anniversaries of their death.

“Since you never answer the phone when we call you, we came to tell you in person,” Shiori explained.

I glanced down at dad’s letter, which basically stated the same stuff Saori had just told me, plus the date of the funeral. I stayed silent for a good minute as I considered how to reply to this news. It wasn’t like I could just turn around and say, “*You know, grandma’s actually alive and well, and there’s no need for a funeral at all,*” now could I?

“All those ceremonies in one day? That’s pretty drastic,” I finally said.

“I know, right? But papa said it’d be cheaper this way,” Shiori explained.

I sighed at length. “Of course that’s the reason. What else should I have expected from our cheapskate of a father, huh?”

“He also said to tell you to come and say hi every once in a while. You didn’t even come home for New Year’s Eve, bro!” Saori pointed out, shooting me an accusatory glare.

“Well, that was because of my former job,” I explained. “I never got any time off for New Year’s.”

The two of them simply nodded at this. Now that they had: 1) made sure I was alive; and 2) given me dad’s letter, I figured they’d be heading off home, but Saori seemingly hadn’t finished speaking.

“Hey, bro-bro...” she started, sounding a little bashful.

“Hm?”

“So, um...” She hesitated. “I’ve been meaning to ask you since we arrived, but um...” She trailed off, and I could see her eyes moving from my face to something behind me. “Well, you see, um...” she started again, but try as she might, she just couldn’t put her thoughts into the right words. Whatever was going through her head, it was clear she couldn’t take her eyes off of whatever had caught her attention behind me.

“Bro...” Saori said, coming to her sister’s rescue. “Who’s that girl?” she

asked, pointing behind me.

I spun on my heels, and sure enough, there was grandma standing in the corner of the room, calmly sipping her hojicha.



“C’mon, bro, spill. Who is she? She’s so pretty!” Saori asked again once the four of us had moved to the room where grandma and I had been eating lunch not long earlier.

“Yeah, who is she?” Shiori echoed.

Their eyes were sparkling with interest as they stared at me and waited impatiently for me to answer. *Crap, crap, crap! What should I tell them?* I thought to myself, panicking slightly. Grandma, on the other hand, was simply watching the situation unfold with a smile on her face. *She’s really enjoying this, isn’t she?*

“Wait a minute, Shiorin!” Saori gasped, pointing at grandma again. “Look at her T-shirt. It’s so *ugly!* There’s no way that’s hers. Which means she’s wearing our *brother’s* T-shirt!”

Shiori answered her sister’s observation with another gasp. “And look, Saorin! She’s not wearing any makeup either!”

“Oh. Em. Gee. You’re *right!* So she’s hanging out in our brother’s house with no makeup on and wearing his clothes...” Saori summed up. “Shiorin, does this mean what I think it means?”

“I think it does, Saorin,” Shiori said with a nod. “It looks like bro-bro has finally gotten himself a *special someone!* Congrats, bro-bro!” she said excitedly as she turned back toward me. “I’m so happy for you!”

They had gotten it so, so, so, so wrong, it was almost painful. Every fiber of my being was screaming at me to say, “*No! She’s not my girlfriend!*” so it didn’t come back to bite me later on, but what would I tell them instead? I spent a grand total of two seconds thinking how I should introduce this younger version of our grandma to the twins, before settling on what seemed like the safest option.

“Oh, I didn’t introduce you yet, did I?” I said casually.

The twins gasped.

“Shiori-chan, Saori, this is...” I started.

“‘This is...’” they repeated impatiently, cutting across me.

“Th-This is my f-friend, Alice-san,” I managed to stammer.

Yup. I’d decided to introduce grandma as my “friend.” Well, what *else* was I supposed to do? Tell them the truth? “*Hey, girls, I know she’s*

looking about sixty years younger than the last time you saw her, but this pretty girl here is actually our grandma! Yup, that's right. She's alive! So no need to hold that funeral after all! Isn't that great?" As if I could say that!

"Alice-san?" Saori repeated.

"So she's your friend, then, bro-bro?" Shiori said.

As one, they both tilted their heads to one side in confusion.

"Y-Yeah! Her name is Alice-san and she's my friend," I stated again.

The two of them stared at me in silence. After a while, Saori turned to her sister. "Shiorin, we need to have a crisis meeting."

"I agree, Saorin," Shiori said with a firm nod.

They stood up and left the room, with Saori closing the door behind them. I could hear them discussing the situation in the hallway.

"What do you think of that girl, Shiorin?"

"Well, I was *sure* she must be his girlfriend, but bro-bro said she was just a friend. Does that mean they haven't made it official yet?"

"B-But she's wearing bro's *T-shirt*! That means they must be, like, p-pretty close already, right?"

"Maybe? I don't really know. Oh, but I've heard that when you're an adult, you sometimes do *other* stuff before you officially start dating."

"Wh-What?! Do you really think our brother did that? He *sucks*! Poor Alice!"

For some reason, the two of them sounded like they were mad at me, even though they used to love me so much before. Did this mean they hated me now? As I sat there, wallowing in self-pity, the door opened again and the twins came back into the room, their "crisis meeting" presumably concluded. The pair knelt in front of me with their backs straight, their hands resting on their knees, and deadly serious looks on their faces. I was a little taken aback by the sudden change in their attitudes.

"Um, what is it?" I asked. I was starting to feel uncomfortable at being stared at for so long.

They didn't say a word.

"Saori?" I ventured.

She didn't move an inch.

"Shiori-chan?"

Nothing. They just sat in silence for a whole minute before Saori finally opened her mouth.

“B-Bro!” she said with a slight stutter.

“Y-Yes?”

“I think...” she started hesitantly. “I think what you’re doing is n-not good!” she declared, her brow knitted. “You’re a man, aren’t you? So you should be more, um...” She paused and tried again. “You should...”

“You should take responsibility for your actions toward Alice-san, bro-bro,” Shiori jumped in, helping out her sister.

“R-Responsibility?” I said, dumbfounded.

“Yeah, responsibility!” Shiori repeated with a nod. “See, the thing with us girls is we tend to be a bit *afraid* of talking about our feelings in front of the person we like. Alice probably just hasn’t dared to tell you what she really wants.”

“Tell me what, exactly? What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Jeez, have you always been this dense, bro? It’s obvious, isn’t it? Alice-san wants to...” Saori paused and looked across at her sister.

“She wants to...” Shiori repeated.

“She wants to be your girlfriend!” they both declared at the same time.

“What the hell are you two *saying*?!” I screeched in sheer and utter horror. Seriously, what was this? Some kind of skit?

I heard laughter from beside me. I spun around to find that grandma had dropped her “this-conversation-doesn’t-concern-me” act completely and was guffawing loudly at the scene, her arms wrapped tightly around her midsection. The gazes of the twins had also shifted to her, a puzzled look on both their faces.

“Good grief. I haven’t laughed so much in ages,” grandma panted when she’d finally managed to calm down again. She had been laughing so hard, her eyes had started watering, and she’d had to bring a finger up to them to wipe away the tears that were threatening to stream down her cheeks. She smiled softly at the twins. “So you two cuties are Shiro’s little sisters, hm?” she said, pretending that she didn’t know them.

Shiori nodded. “Yup. I’m the older twin, Shiori, and this *dirtbag* is my big brother.”

“And I’m Saori. I’m also this *idiot*’s little sister.”

Ouch. Why the sudden hatred toward your loving big brother, girls?

“You’re absolutely adorable,” grandma said, her smile growing even wider until it was practically threatening to split her face in two. “Like Shiro said, I’m his friend. My name is Alice. Your brother and I have known each other for a very long time.”

“Really?” Shiori said, her eyes widening in surprise. She seemed very interested in this new bit of information.

“Yeah. We even used to take baths together!” grandma said smugly.

The twins let out a garbled sound of surprise in unison and looked at me in bewilderment, as if silently asking me if this was true.

I reluctantly nodded. “Oh, but hold on a minute, gra—Uh, I mean, *Alice-san*. You’re telling them stuff from when I was really, *really* small. I don’t think I was even in elementary school at that point!” I said, trying to clarify the situation a little.

Grandma chuckled. “Yeah, you’re right. Ah, the good old days.”

The twins looked at each other with matching expressions on their faces that were a mix of shock and excitement.

“Shiorin, did you hear what I just heard? They used to take *baths* together!” Saori whispered loudly to her sister.

“I heard! That means...”

They both nodded in unison.

“She’s his childhood friend!” Saori exclaimed.

“Bro-bro’s childhood friend!” Shiori repeated with a nod.

“I didn’t know bro had such a cute friend!”

“Now that you mention it, I don’t think I’ve ever seen her before...” Shiori said contemplatively. “Still, bro-bro’s got a really cute childhood friend, hasn’t he?”

“So *that’s* why they were acting all couple-y! I see now!” Saori said triumphantly.

Well, those two certainly seemed convinced that grandma and I were childhood friends. *You know what?* I thought. *Let’s just roll with it.*

“Yup, gra—I mean, *Alice-san* and I have known each other for a really long time,” I confirmed. “A-A few days ago, she told me she’d be back in Tokyo for a bit, so I told her she could stay here instead of wasting money on a hotel,” I lied.

Thankfully, grandma decided to go along with my story. “Yup,” she said with a nod. “Shiro’s house is pretty big, so he said I could crash here while I’m in town. I’m really grateful to him.”

“Huh? Then, *Alice-san*—Ah, can I call you that?” Saori asked.

“Of course you can,” grandma replied.

“Thank you. So, um, does that mean you’re also staying here?”

Wait. “Also”?

“Um, Saori, what do you mean by ‘also’?” I asked, confused. “Is

someone else planning on staying here?”

“Well, *duh!*” she said, rolling her eyes at me like the moody teenager she was. “Did you really think Shiorin and I came all the way over here *just* to give you papa’s letter?”

“Yes?” I said tentatively.

Shiori chuckled. “No way. Lots of universities are having open house events at the moment, and Saorin and I wanna go check ’em out!”

“Open house events?” I repeated.

The twins nodded before going into a bit more detail. Basically, they had decided that, since they had to come all the way here *anyway* to give me dad’s letter (and make sure I hadn’t hanged myself), they’d take this opportunity to stay over with me during their break and go check out some prospective universities, since my house was closer to the center of Tokyo than our parents’ house was.

“So...” I started, trying to make sure I’d understood the situation. “You two are going to be staying here for a while?”

The two of them shot me wide grins.

“Yup! Thanks for letting us stay, bro!” Saori chirped, despite me not agreeing to anything of the sort.

“Can we have hot pot tonight?” asked Shiori, who was seemingly already making herself at home.

And with that, I’d somehow gotten roped into letting my little sisters stay over with me and grandma for a bit.

Chapter Nineteen: Revisiting Old Memories

At everyone's request, dinner that night ended up being hot pot. After an intense battle where all four of us fought over the last piece of wagyu beef, it was time for dessert.

"Hey, bro. What was grandma like?" Saori suddenly asked while we were enjoying some sherbet.

"I wanna know too!" Shiori piped up, raising her hand at the same time like she was asking a teacher a question.

"Grandma?" I repeated.

The twins nodded.

"Yeah, grandma. Shiorin and I were kids when she disappeared, so we don't remember her all too well," Saori explained.

"What are you saying? You two still are kids," I quipped.

"That's beside the point," Saori said sassily, giving me a swift kick under the table.

"Sorry, sorry," I said, laughing. "But why are you asking about her, all of a sudden?"

"I just thought maybe you could tell us a bit about her, since you remember her better," Saori said with a shrug.

"Saorin's been a bit emotional, what with grandma's funeral coming up and all," Shiori whispered in my ear.

"Besides, you two were pretty close, weren't you?" Saori continued. "I mean, you liked her so much, you even moved into her old house."

"Oh, my. Is that true?" grandma asked, shooting me a teasing smile.

What a pain in my backside you are, I thought.

"Yup, they were *super* close, Alice-san!" Saori said, nodding enthusiastically. "Oh, bro, did you tell her about grandma? Like, about how she disappeared and all that."

"Yeah, she knows. In fact, we've been friends so long, I wouldn't be surprised if she knew grandma even better than I did," I deadpanned while staring straight at grandma, who was still smirking at me.

"Wow! Well, that's childhood friends for you, I suppose!" Saori

chirruped.

“So you knew grandma too, Alice-san?” Shiori asked.

The twins were staring at grandma in her younger form, their eyes sparkling with excitement.

“In that case, I’m gonna ask both of you some questions!” Saori decided, then cleared her throat. “Ahem. First, how would you describe grandma?”

She made a fist and brought it up to my face as if she were holding a microphone in it.

“Wait, before all that, I have a question for the two of you,” I said to the twins. “Why this sudden interest in grandma?”

The two of them looked at each other and wistful smiles appeared on their faces.

“It’s just, uh...” Saori started. “Shiorin and I don’t remember grandma very well. Well, no, that’s not true. We *do* remember her. Of course we do. We remember her taking us to festivals, and taking baths with her, and even that time we went on a boat together to Odaiba.”

“But we were only nine when she went missing,” Shiori explained.

“Yeah,” Saori said with a nod. “So, um...” She paused. “We didn’t understand what was going on at the time. We didn’t really understand what it meant when we heard she’d disappeared, and that she may be...”—she paused again—“...that she may be dead.”

“We have lots of memories of grandma, but we wanna know more about her as a *person*, you know?” Shiori said, taking up the baton. “A few days ago, we asked mama about her and she told us all these stories about her. She seemed like she was a bit of a weirdo, but it made us want to find out more about her.”

Ah, so that was why they wanted us to tell them about her. Grandma had gone missing when the twins were still little, so they’d never really gotten to properly know her. They wanted to create an image in their own minds of what kind of person she had been, which they could only do by mixing their own memories of grandma with stories they heard about her from others who had known her. It had been seven years since anyone had last seen her (if you discounted recent developments), and she had finally been declared dead after all this time. With the funeral coming up, the twins must have come to the realization that they were never going to get to see her again.

“So that’s why you two wanna know about her, huh?” I muttered.

The twins nodded in unison.

“C’mon already, bro! Spill!” Saori demanded.

“Tell us about her, bro-bro!”

I nodded. “Okay then. Hm...” I mused. “But where should I start?”

“What about your little *accident* in the movie theater?” grandma suggested with a knowing smirk splashed across her face.

“N-No way!” I spluttered. “That is *highly* confidential information!”

“Ooh, what happened? What happened? Tell us about it, bro!” Saori piped up.

“Yeah! Or maybe Alice-san can?” Shiori suggested.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” grandma said, breaking out into a huge grin.

“No, don’t! You absolutely *cannot* tell them about that!” I protested.

“Tell us! Please!” the twins pleaded.

We ended up celebrating our first family reunion in a really long time by chatting until the small hours of the morning.



“I’m so damn tired...” I muttered to myself as I hauled myself out of bed.

It was six in the morning. I had only gone to sleep at four. I dragged myself to the bathroom and took a nice hot shower before brushing my teeth and getting dressed for the day. I tiptoed to the room with grandma’s memorial altar in it—which was where Shiori and Saori were sleeping—and discreetly opened the closet door.

“Bro-bro...”

“Bro...”

My breath caught in my throat when I heard the twins calling out to me. I spun on my heels and was met with the sight of my two little sisters blissfully asleep on their futons with drool dribbling down their chins.

“Oh, they were just sleep-talking,” I muttered to myself with a sigh of relief. “I panicked there for a second.”

I continued sliding the closet door until it was fully open, then stepped inside—“logging back in” to Ruffaltio—and closed the door behind me.

“Phew, that was a close one! Thank god they didn’t wake up just then,” I said, stretching my arms above my head as I stepped out of the portal and into the break room of my shop.

“C’mon, Shiro. You’ve got work to do,” I muttered in an attempt to pump myself up for the day ahead. I walked downstairs and went to the

front door, but when I opened it, I was greeted by the sight of...

“Huh? A-Aina?”

The little girl was sitting on the ground right in front of the door.

“What are you doing here so early?” I asked her, positively baffled.

“You’re not supposed to be at work for...” I trailed off as I finally noticed her eyes were all red and her face was tear-streaked. “Hold on a minute. Have you been crying? What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

Another droplet rolled down her cheek. She was still crying. What could have happened to her?

“Mister Shiro, I... I...” she sniffed before throwing herself into my arms. “I... I...”

“What’s happened, Aina?” I asked her softly, rubbing her back to try to comfort her.

“I... Mama... I...” the little girl stammered.

“Did something happen to Stella?” I asked.

Aina burst into another bout of sobbing.

“I... I made mama cry,” she finally managed to tell me in a feeble voice.

Intermission

When Aina was just four years old, her papa went away and never returned. She had been so small at the time, she didn't really remember him all that well. But there were some memories she had of him that she would never forget: the trip they had taken to a town they'd never been to before; the many head pats he had given her; the warmth of his hand as it clasped hers every night without fail until she fell asleep; the shiny bracelet he always wore around his wrist, which was very pretty and had weird symbols engraved on it. Every time he made a promise to her, Aina's father would always say the same thing: "I swear it on this bracelet."

Aina remembered him saying that while holding the bracelet out toward her so she could run her little fingers over it. She remembered him softly stroking her hair as he said it.



"Well, that was a long ol' trip! I'm going to keep the shop closed until tomorrow, so you go home and take the rest of the day off, Aina, you hear? I'm gonna head back to the store now. See you soon, Aina and Karen," Shiro had said when they finally made it back to Ninoritch late in the afternoon of the sixth day after leaving Mazela.

Just like he'd said he would, Shiro headed off in the direction of his shop, while Karen went directly to the town hall. Aina slowly started for home, with Peace—the little black kitten—perched on her shoulder. Going to Mazela with Shiro sure had been fun for the little girl. She'd never been to a big city before, and she'd learned about so very many things that she had never even heard of before. Everything had been so wonderful! But the most wonderful thing of all had to be the Bracelet of Promise that Zidan had given her.

"I wonder what mama's reaction will be when she sees it," she said to the air around her as she hugged the bracelet to her chest.

The second she had caught sight of the bracelet, Aina had felt the world stop. Shiro and Zidan had been mid-conversation, but their voices didn't

even reach her ears anymore, and all the weird items on the guild's shelves—which had seemed so fascinating to her only moments earlier—suddenly weren't all that interesting. The only thing on her mind had been that bracelet, and it had taken several long minutes for her to come back to her senses. But who could really blame her? She had just laid eyes on a bracelet that was identical to the one her father used to wear. Anyone would have had the same reaction in her position.

"It's the exact same bracelet papa always wore. Mama's gonna love it! Right, Peace?"

The kitten meowed and gently rubbed his head against Aina's cheek. *That probably means he agrees with me*, the little girl thought. She responded with a little "I know!"

Aina's mother also had a similar bracelet to the one her father had owned, but unlike her husband, she'd only worn it on what she deemed to be "special occasions": New Year's Eve, Aina's birthday, their wedding anniversary, etc. Only on those days had she put on her bracelet and danced into the early hours with Aina's father.

"I'll be back. I swear it on this bracelet," Aina's father had said to them both before he left, the bracelet fastened snugly around his wrist like always. But he never came back.

From that day onward, Aina's mother stopped wearing her bracelet altogether. Aina had an idea why that was. She figured her mother probably felt it'd be too lonely if she put on her bracelet without its other half being there. That must have been why she'd stopped wearing it.

"Now that we have another bracelet, she'll be able to wear hers again!" Aina said, explaining her little theory to the kitten.

Her mother had always looked so happy whenever she was wearing her bracelet. Aina innocently thought that if she gave her the bracelet she had found in Zidan's shop, maybe her mother would be happy again, just like when it was the three of them. Of course, it wasn't as if her mother didn't smile *at all*. She did. Every time she looked at Aina, she would always smile gently at her. She was very kind. In fact, Aina thought her mother was the kindest person in the whole wide world. But Aina had noticed that, sometimes, when her mother thought she wasn't looking, she would gaze up at the sky, and in these moments, she always looked really sad. And Aina knew why.

"Papa..." the little girl mumbled.

Her mother was sad because she missed her husband. So Aina thought

that if she gave her mother the bracelet, maybe she would be happy again. The little girl really hoped she was right.

“Aina...” her mother whispered breathlessly when Aina showed her the bracelet later that evening. “Where did you find this?”

“A kind man in Mazela gave it to me,” the little girl explained, beaming broadly.

Stella stared at the bracelet. “Why...” she started. “Why have you...”

She couldn’t finish her sentence. Her throat tightened, and before she even realized it, she had dropped to her knees with rivers of tears flooding down her cheeks. The second she saw her mother’s reaction, Aina understood that bringing back the bracelet had been a huge mistake.

“I finally...” Stella hiccuped, sobbing uncontrollably. “I finally managed to forget about him and you...” She sniffed. “And you...”

“Mama...” Aina murmured in horror.

She’d just wanted her mother to be happy.

“He’s... He’s not here anymore... He’s never coming back!” her mother cried through her tears.

She’d just wanted her to smile again.

A long, pained wail escaped from Stella’s lips.

“Wh-What’s wrong?!” Patty called out as she flew into the room and made a beeline for Stella as fast as she could.

But Aina had already gone. She had turned away from her mother and her fairy friend and started running. She had made a huge mistake and she couldn’t stay. So Aina ran and ran and ran as fast as she could, through the steadily darkening town. When she came to her senses again, she found that she had run all the way to the place that was almost like a second home to her. The sign above the door read “Shiro’s Shop.”

When her mother started crying, Aina’s brain had frozen up. All she could think to do was run as fast as her little legs would carry her, while tears streamed down her face. She’d run all the way to the person she trusted most in the entire world—well, after her mother, of course.

“Mister... Shiro...” she sobbed as her legs gave way underneath her and she dropped to the ground in front of his store.

She wrapped her arms around her knees and let the tears flow down her face unabated. She didn’t seem to have the strength to wipe them away. Peace let out a little “meow” and started licking Aina’s cheek.

“Are you trying to comfort me, Peace?” the little girl sniffed.

Meow.

“Thank you...” she said, then hugged him. Even through her clothing, she could feel the warmth of the little kitten. In that moment, she was very thankful to have him by her side.

“Hey, Peace...”

Meow.

“Do you think mama hates me now?”

The cat let out two consecutive meows, as if to say “No way!”

“I love mama so, so much...” the little girl sobbed, and she hugged Peace as tight as she could, taking comfort in how warm the little kitten was.

Morning was still a long, long way away.

Chapter Twenty: Tears

“Here,” I said, setting a cup of milky coffee down in front of Aina. “It’s really hot, so blow on it before drinking, you hear?”

The little girl nodded and did as she was told, blowing on the steaming liquid a couple of times before taking a sip. “It’s good,” she mumbled.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Thank you,” she said after a few seconds.

“Don’t mention it. Are you feeling a little better?” I asked, and she answered with a slight nod.

When I found her sitting on the ground in front of my shop, she had been hugging Peace and crying. I’d brought her up to the second floor and gotten her to sit down on the sofa in the break room before wrapping her up in a warm blanket and heading off to the kitchen to make her a nice warm cup of coffee. By the time I came back into the break room, her sobbing had receded into quiet sniffles.

“Aina, could you tell me what happened?” I asked softly.

Once again, she answered with a feeble nod.

“You don’t have to, if you don’t want to,” I clarified.

This time, she shook her head. “I want to,” she said quietly.

So I sat down on the sofa and listened as she told me what had happened the previous evening.



“I see. So when she saw the bracelet, Stella...” I trailed off.

Aina nodded, tears welling up in her eyes again. “Yeah...” she sniffed. “I made mama cry.”

I finally understood why she had been so adamant about wanting that bracelet.

“I thought mama would be happy again if I brought her back this bracelet, because it looks just like the one papa used to wear.”

In the end, it had all been for the sake of her mother.

I hadn’t heard a lot about Aina’s father. The only thing I really knew for sure was that he wasn’t with us anymore. But I understood why the

little girl felt the way she did. She had been so young when her dad died, she didn't have all that many memories of him. But she remembered his bracelet. That explained why, when she'd found a bracelet that looked practically identical to the one her dad used to wear, she had felt drawn to it, and had wanted her beloved mother to see it too, thinking it would make her happy again.

"I don't remember a lot about my papa," the little girl continued.

"No?"

"Not really. I remember going on walks and going to festivals with him, and celebrating mama and papa's wedding anniversaries, and my birthday, and um..."

She had been counting up each of her memories on her fingers while she was talking to me, but all of a sudden, she stopped.

"I..." she said quietly, "I used to remember a lot more. But I've started forgetting stuff. It's like..." She paused. "It's like I've almost completely forgotten papa," she explained, her voice wavering.

"I see," I said softly.

"That's... That's weird, isn't it?" she sniffed as tears started streaming down her cheeks again. "I love my papa, but..." Another sob interrupted her momentarily. "But..."

Meow. Peace started licking the tears off Aina's cheeks, almost as if he was trying to comfort her. I reached around with my hand and gently rubbed her back while her little body quivered.

After a few minutes, she started speaking again. "When I was little..." she started, and I nodded a few times to encourage her to keep going. "I... I..."

"Yeah?"

"I... I asked mama about papa," she said. "I thought maybe she would remember more things about him than I did. I thought she could tell me stuff."

"And what did Stella say?"

"She..." Aina sniffed. "She started crying."

I stayed silent for a while, before breathing a quiet "I see."

"This is the..." the little girl said. "This is the second time I've made mama cry."

It was obvious she wanted to know more about her father. She had come to the realization that she would never see him again, and all she had left of him were her memories, but over time, even these were getting

fewer and fewer in number. So she had asked her mother about him, in the hopes that it would help her remember what kind of person he was. My thoughts drifted to how Shiori and Saori had asked me to tell them about grandma. I got up from the sofa with a quiet “All righty!”

“Aina, could you wait here for a bit?” I said to her.

She looked at me with wide, uncomprehending eyes and tilted her head to one side. I gave her a reassuring smile and gently stroked her hair.

“I’m gonna go talk to Stella,” I said.

“To mama?” she asked, blinking repeatedly with a confused look on her face.

“Yup. Can you be a good girl and wait for me here with Peace?” My gaze shifted to the hard-to-love cat who was still perched on the little girl’s shoulder. “Peace, can you look after Aina while I’m away?” I asked the cat.

The kitten meowed as if to say “You can count on me!”

“I probably won’t be back for a while, so why don’t you take a little nap, Aina?” I suggested.

“Kay,” she said quietly.

I shot her another warm smile before leaving the room and heading over to Stella’s house.

Chapter Twenty-One: Shiro and Stella

After around fifteen minutes of walking, I made it to my destination. “Stella?” I called out as I knocked on the door. “Are you in there?” There was no answer.

“Maybe she’s sleeping...” I muttered to myself. “Ah, who am I kidding? I can’t imagine she’s asleep right now.”

I decided to try knocking one more time. If I didn’t get an answer this time, I’d just try forcing the door, but just as I was about to bring my fist up to the door for a second time, it swung open.

“Oh, it’s just you, Shiro,” said the person who answered.

“Boss?” I said.

Patty—who was currently staying at Stella and Aina’s house—was hovering on the other side of the door, but she didn’t seem her usual bubbly self. Her eyebrows were knitted together and she had a look of deep worry on her face.

“Is Stella in there, boss?” I asked her.

“Y-Yeah, she is. She’s been crying in her room since yesterday,” the little fairy said, the crease between her brow deepening.

“So she’s been crying too, huh?” I mused aloud.

Patty shot me a quizzical look. “What do you mean by ‘too’?”

“Aina was in tears when I found her this morning,” I explained. “She’s probably still sobbing as we speak.”

“Sh-She’s at your store right now?”

“Yup.”

“I see,” she said with a slight nod. “She just suddenly bolted out of here last night, and I didn’t know what to do.”

“Yeah, she told me what happened,” I said. “She feels really bad for making Stella cry.”

Patty’s shoulders slumped. “Maybe I should have gone after her,” she mumbled.

“Maybe, but that would have meant leaving Stella by herself. I know you could never have brought yourself to do that.”

She responded with another feeble nod. “Yeah. Plus, Aina had that monster on her shoulder. What’s that thing called again? A cat? Is that

right? So she wasn't alone. But if I'd left..." Patty paused and chewed her lower lip. "If I'd left, Stella wouldn't have had anyone here with her."

I couldn't help smiling at this. "You're very kind, boss. You really are."

"Wh-Why are you saying *that* all of a sudden?!" she snapped, her face turning red.

"Hm? Oh, no particular reason," I said, my smile growing wider. "Still, I'm sure Stella must have really appreciated having you there by her side."

Just from hearing what Aina had told me, I could already tell how much the incident had shaken Stella. It really had been a good thing that Patty had stayed with her, because who knew what might have happened if she hadn't?

"Thank you, boss. I'm gonna talk to Stella now, so could you go keep Aina company in the meantime? I'm sure she'd love having you by her side right now."

"D-Do you really think so?" she asked, sounding uncertain.

I gave her the most enthusiastic nod I could muster. "Yup, I'm sure of it. So could you please go and look after her for me?"

"O-Of course! Leave it to me, Shiro!" she said, whacking her fist against her chest to show how confident she was.

I thanked her and she took off at top speed toward my shop. I was in no doubt that having the always-bubbly Patty by her side would help lift Aina's spirits a little. But for her to properly go back to her usual cheery self...

"She needs to see her mom smiling," I said firmly.



"Stella? It's Shiro. Can I come in?" I called out when I reached Stella's bedroom door.

My question was met with silence, but even so, I could tell she was in there. Well, I didn't really have much choice now, did I?

"I'm coming in," I said and pushed open the door even though I hadn't been given permission to intrude.

I glanced around the room and immediately noticed the two Bracelets of Promise, one—most likely the bracelet Aina had gotten from Zidan—lying on the floor, while the other was being hugged tightly to Stella's chest. She was half-kneeling on the floor with her upper body leaning against the bed. The bracelet she was clutching must have been her own—

the one that reminded her of her husband. Just like Aina had said, the two bracelets were identical.



“Stella...” I called out to her softly.

Even though her face was buried in the bedcovers and she wasn't making a sound, I could tell she was sobbing because her shoulders were shaking. I slowly padded over to her and, after a couple of seconds' hesitation, I started rubbing her back as gently as possible, just like I'd done for Aina. She grabbed my hand without saying a word and squeezed it as hard as she could. I squeezed back and we stayed locked together like that for a long moment. When she finally raised her head, I had no idea how much time had passed.

“Mr. Shiro...” she mumbled, looking up at me with damp eyes, her face streaked with tears. In that moment, she looked exactly like her daughter.

“What is it, Stella?” I asked gently.

“Is Aina...” she started. “Is she all right?”

I smiled at her. “She's over at my shop. Boss and that little kitten, Peace, are both with her, so she's not alone.”

“I see,” she whispered.

I nodded. Stella closed her eyes and started chewing on her bottom lip.

“I'm a terrible mother,” she said after a little while. “I made Aina cry again.”

“Aina said the same thing,” I told her. “‘I made mama cry’ are the exact words she used.”

Stella didn't say anything, just silently brought the bracelet she was clutching up to her face and rested it against her cheek.

“She brought me that bracelet over there. It looks just like the one my husband had, and...” She paused, then continued. “I just couldn't help it. I broke down,” she explained in a feeble voice.

“Yeah?” I said in response, to show I was listening intently to what she had to say.

“I'm sure she thought the bracelet would make me happy. She had good intentions. But I...” She sniffed. “I ended up hurting her.” She seemed full of remorse.

“This sort of thing happens, Stella. Trust me, it's all right,” I reassured her. “You two just had a little communication issue, that's all.”

She stayed silent.

“You can fix this, Stella,” I continued.

“Can I really?” she asked, a wistful smile on her face. “I'm Aina's mother. I'm the only family she has left, and yet, I...” The next words seemed to come painfully. “I hurt her.”

“Hey, it’s all right. These things happen, *especially* among families.”

“But...”

“No buts,” I gently chided her. “There isn’t a single family anywhere that doesn’t argue, right? You two are going to fight occasionally. You may even end up hurting each other. But afterward, you’ll make up, and your love for each other will grow even stronger. That’s what being a family is all about, isn’t it?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Now isn’t the time for dwelling on your mistakes, Stella,” I continued. “You need to figure out what you’re going to do to fix this.”

“Do you think...” she started. “Do you think Aina will forgive me?”

“I’m sure she’s probably wondering the exact same thing right now.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s feeling a great deal of remorse over making you cry. She’s been saying over and over that she should never have brought you this Bracelet of Promise,” I said, picking up the metal band that was lying on the floor.

Stella’s gaze shifted from the bracelet she was clutching in her hand to the one in mine.

“My husband...” she breathed, “...was from the Kozma tribe.”

Stella's Grief

I'd only just come of age when I first met him. That day, I had gone up into the mountains to gather some wild vegetables when I was suddenly attacked by a wolf. Fortunately, someone came to my rescue, and that someone was him. After slaying the wolf, he carried me all the way back to town, as I'd been injured and could barely walk. My heart was pounding so loud, I remember wondering if he could hear it.

He was wearing beautiful bracelets on both wrists, and when I asked him about them, he told me they were of great significance to his tribe. Yes, that's right. This metal band here is one of the bracelets he was wearing that day. He took the other one with him when he went off to war. He told me he was a traveler and was just passing through.

"Do you mind staying in this town a little while longer?" I'd said to him. He *had* saved my life, after all, and I wanted to thank him properly. Besides, I had an empty room in my house that I had no idea what to do with.

All right, fine. Those were all just excuses. Thinking back on it, I probably fell in love with him at first sight and was desperate for him to stay by my side. At that time, he could barely speak my language and he would often say the wrong thing, which led to all sorts of misunderstandings with the other townsfolk. Whenever that happened, I had to step in and try to calm down both parties. In fact, I had to stop fights from breaking out more times than I can count on one hand. It was starting to get out of hand, so I decided to do something about it and began teaching him new words. Every day, we would chat for hours on end, and eventually, thanks to my lessons, he learned how to communicate a lot better and stopped getting into so many fights. Things were nice and calm for quite a while after that.

Then, one day, he suddenly said he wanted me to have one of his bracelets. He explained they were called "Bracelets of Promise," and that the true reason he had been traveling was to find a spouse. He also told me that, in his tribe, giving someone a Bracelet of Promise was how you asked them for their hand in marriage. Well, it goes without saying that I said yes. I was elated! I'd been smitten with this man ever since I first laid eyes

on him. There was nothing in the world I wanted more than to become his wife.

The following year, I was blessed with a beautiful baby girl, whom we named Aina. It was so endearing watching him teach her new words when she eventually started speaking. Both Aina and I loved that man with all of our hearts, and he loved us right back. But those days wouldn't last.

War broke out. He had to go off to fight for our nation, and he never came back. He promised on his bracelet that he'd come home and asked me to take care of Aina until he did. But he never came home. Every day, without fail, Aina would sit in front of the door for hours on end and wait for him to return. It broke my heart to see her that way.

One day, she came up to me and asked me to teach her how to write. By that point, I'd run out of ideas for how to get her to stop sitting in front of the door all day long, so I jumped at the opportunity. Every day after that, we'd sit together for hours and I'd teach her how to read and write, her little face scrunched up in concentration. During those moments, she reminded me so much of her father, it almost pained me to look at her. After a few weeks, she was more or less able to write, and it was then she told me she wanted to write a letter.

Hm? Oh, no. Not to me, no. She wrote to the head priest of our local temple. I was curious about her letter, so I decided I'd give it a quick read before delivering it to the head priest. After all, what if she'd written something rude? Aina's always been a good girl, but you never know with kids. "To the Head Priest" was written on the envelope, and when I opened it, I noticed that, in addition to the letter, there was another envelope with the words "To God" written on it. All right, I admit it. I read it. And to this day, I vividly remember what it said.

Dear God

Please give me back my papa

If you give me back my papa I promise I'll be a good girl

I hadn't said anything to her about it, but she somehow understood her father wasn't coming back. After that, I decided to leave that town, and I took Aina with me. For the first time in my life, I left the nation I was born and raised in, and just like my late husband had, we traveled the world together. In short, I betrayed him. He promised he'd come back. But I didn't wait for him. I ran away.

I've failed. Both as a wife and as a mother.

Final Chapter: I Hope These Feelings Reach Her

“I’ve failed. Both as a wife and as a mother.”

The moment those words passed Stella’s lips, tears started streaming down her face once more. I placed my hand on her shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“You didn’t. You absolutely didn’t,” I said firmly.

“But—” she started to argue, but I cut her off instantly.

“No ‘buts.’ What do you mean you ‘failed’ your husband? You didn’t,” I repeated. “You promised him you’d look after Aina, and that’s what you’ve been doing all these years. You love her very much, right?”

She didn’t say anything in response, but I’d been expecting that.

“Aina loves you too,” I continued. “Ask anyone in this town and they’ll all tell you the same thing: Aina loves you, and you love her.”

Please let my feelings on this reach her.

“I made her cry,” she said feebly.

“Sure, but you cried too, so let’s call it a tie. What do you say?”

Please let Aina’s feelings reach her.

“I didn’t wait for him to come home,” she said quietly.

“You didn’t,” I admitted. “But look at Aina now. She’s been laughing and smiling so much lately. That’s proof you made the right decision by leaving.”

Please let her husband’s feelings reach her.

“I…” she stammered. “I…”

“Stella, stop beating yourself up over this, okay?”

“Mr. Shiro…”

“You can’t be the perfect mother one hundred percent of the time,” I said softly. “Besides, you’ve only been a mother for eight years. Or let’s call it nine, ’cause we should probably count the nine months you were pregnant with Aina too. There’s still so much you won’t know. And that’s fine. You’ll keep on growing as a mom.”

“Will I?” she whispered.

I nodded. “You will,” I assured her. “It’s fine to worry. It’s fine to

make mistakes. What matters is the bond between you and Aina, and also...”—I paused and let my gaze drop to the bracelet in Stella’s hand —“the bond between you and your husband.”

A choked sob escaped her lips.

“Hey, listen. It’s all fine, Stella,” I reiterated. “The bond between you and your husband is still strong. You haven’t betrayed him by leaving your old home. The two of you are still husband and wife.”

“You’re right,” she said.

Tears started crawling down her cheeks again, but unlike before, her gaze was warm, and she seemed a lot less distressed.

“Aina brought you back this bracelet because she thought it would make you happy,” I continued. “But I don’t think that was the *only* reason.”

I thought back to my conversation with Shiori and Saori.

“I think she wanted to use it as an opportunity to ask you things about her father,” I said. “She wants to know more about him.”

I paused again and gently took Stella’s hand in mine.

“More specifically, she was interested in hearing about *your* memories of him. I’m sure of it. She must have thought that bringing you this bracelet would make you talk openly with her about her father.”

Stella remained silent as I helped her to her feet. “Mr. Shiro,” she said finally, a determined expression on her face.

“Yes?” I said.

“I’m going to go get Aina,” she declared firmly.

I nodded. “Okay.”

“But...” She paused as her voice wavered slightly. “I’m scared. Could you come with me?”

I squeezed her hand. “Of course. Come on. Let’s go.”

“Yes, let’s,” she breathed, squeezing my hand back. “Thank you so much, Mr. Shiro.”



Stella and I headed back to my shop and went straight up to the break room on the second floor. I pushed the door open and we were met with the sight of Aina sleeping peacefully on the sofa. Perched on the back of the sofa, Patty immediately brought a finger up to her lips to tell us to be quiet, and I nodded before tiptoeing into the room, trying to make as little noise as possible. Unfortunately, Peace hadn’t gotten the memo, as he let

out a pretty loud meow as soon as he caught sight of us. Patty and I quickly tried to hush him, but the damage was done.

“Hm? Mister Shiro?” Aina mumbled as she groggily opened her eyes.

“Hi there, Aina,” I said.

Stella went over to stand in front of her daughter and began gently stroking her hair.

“Mm...” the little girl mumbled before suddenly exclaiming “M-Mama!” in surprise when she realized who it was.

She instantly stiffened, likely because she was unsure what reaction to expect from her mother. After all, the little girl had made her cry, then bolted out of the house as night was closing in. I could see her little face scrunching up in confusion. The poor thing clearly didn’t know what to say or how to react in this situation. Stella took a step forward and wordlessly wrapped her arms around her.



“I love you, Aina,” she finally whispered.

Aina’s eyes grew wide as saucers. “M-Mama...” she whimpered, then promptly burst into tears.

“I’m sorry for crying. And I’m sorry I made you cry too,” Stella said to her daughter in a tender voice. “I love you so, so much, Aina.”

The little girl was full-on sobbing by this point, like you’d expect from a child her age.

“Aina, I’ll tell you everything you want to know about him. About your father, I mean. Everything,” Stella told her.

“You’re going to tell me about papa?” the little girl hiccupped between sobs.

“Yes. What do you think I should start with? Oh, I know! What about how the two of us met?” Stella suggested.

The little girl’s sobs receded until they were eventually just sniffles. “Yeah, start with that,” she said.

“Sure thing, sweetheart,” her mother replied with a smile. “Well, it all started a long time before you were born. I went out into the forest to...”

I grabbed little Peace—who’d already settled on the sofa again, seemingly ready for another nap—by the scruff of the neck and beckoned Patty over to me, then all three of us exited the room. This conversation wasn’t for the ears of anyone other than Aina and Stella.

“Well, looks like I’ll be keeping my shop closed today too,” I muttered to myself as I put the “Closed for the Day” sign on the door.

Then I stepped outside with Patty and Peace in tow and looked up at the sky. The sun was shining brightly and there wasn’t a single cloud anywhere to be seen.

Epilogue

“Hey, grandpa. It’s been a while. Sorry I didn’t come by sooner,” I said as I crouched down in front of my late grandfather’s grave.

Grandma and I had come to the cemetery to visit him. From what grandma had told me about him, grandpa had absolutely hated having his photo taken.

“But we’ll have no photo for your memorial altar!” she apparently used to nag him over and over.

His memorial altar? Seriously, grandma? You couldn’t come up with something better to convince him to have his photo taken?

But being the stubborn old man he was, grandpa had just shrugged and replied that, if his family really wanted to talk to him after he was gone, they could just make the trip to the cemetery to see him. Mom and dad had taken that as a last request of sorts and hadn’t made a memorial altar for him when he eventually passed.

“Here. I brought you your favorite snack: dango. I tried out this new place that’s just opened up in the neighborhood and their food ain’t half-bad,” I said as I lit some incense and placed a box of the sweet dumplings on the Arisugawa family grave. They were filled with red bean paste, just how grandpa used to like them.

“It’s been about three years since I last came to see you, hasn’t it?” I mused aloud.

The Arisugawa family grave was in grandpa’s hometown, a small place surrounded by mountains out in the middle of nowhere a little to the north of Tokyo. It had taken us about three hours to get here from grandma’s house, and the journey had involved multiple transfers, swapping a train for a bus before jumping on another train which took us to the next bus we had to catch. Grandma and I had decided we would stay here for the rest of the day to soak up some of the peace and quiet that was on offer in this backwater where everything was exactly the same as the last time I’d been there. It was almost as if the passing of time had zero effect on this place. Grandpa had been born here, out in the countryside, before moving to Tokyo, where he’d worked like crazy, built a nice house, and started a loving family. When the final curtain had drawn near, however, he had

decided to return to his hometown.

“This place never changes, does it?” I remarked.

“It really doesn’t,” grandma agreed with a nod.

Just like when the twins had come to visit, she’d reverted to her original, youthful form. She’d even put on some makeup.

“It’s still exactly the same as the day I met your grandfather,” she said, a reminiscing smile spreading across her face.

“Oh, so this is where you two met?” I inquired.

“Yup. At the time, I was going through some things, and to put it bluntly, I was exhausted. I’d been messing around with some random spells and ended up accidentally creating a portal to another world. To this world,” she explained.

“That was pretty reckless of you,” I said.

“At the time, I was just a witch from another world and I didn’t know anyone. But then, Masaru-san found me, and even went as far as giving me a name: Mio. Then he asked me to marry him and welcomed me into the Arisugawa family,” grandma continued. “I was so happy. I’ve lived quite a long life, as you well know, but I don’t think I’ve ever felt quite as much joy as I did the day he proposed to me.”

“I see. So you only started feeling *truly* happy the moment you met grandpa? Is that it?”

She replied with a nod and a smile. I couldn’t remember ever seeing her smile so brightly.

“Hey, grandma,” I said.

“What is it?”

“Did you go back to Ruffaltio because grandpa died?” I asked.

Grandma had disappeared off the face of the Earth exactly one year after grandpa’s passing. When I’d asked her why she’d left, back on the night of the harvest festival, she’d simply dodged the question by telling me it was because of something that was “big” to her, but to anyone else, it wouldn’t seem so serious. But grandpa’s death had affected everyone in the family, and while we might not have loved him quite as much as grandma did—he had been the love of her life, after all—he was still very dear to us.

“The way I see it, after grandpa’s death, you started feeling very down, so you decided to—” I said, starting to explain my theory, but grandma interrupted me.

“That’s not why I went back,” she said with a shake of the head.

“So what happened?” I pressed.

She didn’t say anything for a little while before eventually letting out a deep sigh of resignation. “Well, I guess I can tell you.”

Finally. After all these years, I was *finally* going to find out why grandma had just up and left us without a word.

“Well, you see, seven years ago, I found out something very serious that pretty much shattered my entire world,” she started, her tone solemn.

“What was it?” I asked impatiently.

Grandma didn’t answer right away, opting instead to stare off into the distance. After about two minutes of total silence, she finally spoke again.

“Seven years ago, I read that my dear Mel-sama had announced that he was retiring from acting.”

I was silent for a few seconds. “What?” I finally managed to blurt out.

“I desperately hoped that it was a hoax, but it wasn’t. He really was retiring. And it was such a huge shock, I...”

“You decided to go back to Ruffaltio,” I said, finishing her sentence for her. “Is that it?”

She nodded solemnly. “Yes, that’s right,” she said. There wasn’t a hint of embarrassment or anything of the sort in her tone.

For a while, neither of us said anything, but it eventually got to the point where I couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“What the hell, grandma?!” I yelled at the top of my lungs right in front of grandpa’s grave. “What kind of reason is *that*?!”

“Well, I *did* tell you, didn’t I?” she retorted huffily. “It was a huge deal to me, but I knew it wouldn’t seem all that important to you.”

“Yeah, and you were damn right about that!” I hollered. “Who the *hell* just walks out on their family for a reason as nonsensical as that?!”

“I-I told you! It was very important to me!” she argued, puffing out her cheeks indignantly. She didn’t seem the least bit sorry for her actions.

“Apologize! Apologize to grandpa this instant!” I ordered, gesturing to the family grave.

“I’m sure he would have understood,” she retorted.

“Hey, grandpa! Can you hear the words coming out of grandma’s mouth right now? You need to come and yell at her!” I called out in the direction of the grave.

“It’s not like Masaru-san’s actually in there, you know,” grandma said pragmatically. “His ashes are, sure, but his soul isn’t.”

I gasped. “Grandma, you’re awful! How can you say something like

that about your own husband's soul?!"

She chuckled self-importantly. "All I'm saying is his soul isn't in *there*. You wanna know why? It's because his soul is always by my side!" she declared, and she grabbed hold of the necklace she was wearing as if she wanted to show it off to me.

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused. "What's that necklace got to do with grandpa? Oh! Have you got a photo of him in there or something?"

"Nope, not a photo. But there is something else in here," she said mysteriously.

"What is it?" I asked tentatively.

Oh boy. To say I had a bad feeling about this was an understatement. Grandma was grinning impishly like a child who'd just gotten caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

"Masaru-san's soul," she said.

"What the..." I spluttered.

"He could've just gone up to heaven, but he kept on moaning that he wanted to stay by my side forever, so I used a *teensy* bit of forbidden magic to transfer his soul into this necklace," she explained rather matter-of-factly.

"What do you *mean* you 'used a teensy bit of *forbidden* magic'?! I exclaimed, and I could feel my face going red out of sheer exasperation.

"You want more of an explanation?" She stuck out her tongue and flashed me a mischievous grin. "Tee hee! How's that for an explanation?" she said.

"Why don't you act your age for once?" I snapped back. "Put that tongue back in your mouth! And anyway, if you're walking around with grandpa's soul in that necklace, why'd you bring me all the way out here to visit his grave?"

"Well, *obviously* because this is the place he and I met. I like to come back here every once in a while," she explained with a dreamy look on her face.

I wasn't having any of it, though. "Look at you. You look like a teenage girl daydreaming about her crush," I quipped.

"We women live for romance, dearie," she replied, grinning at me.

I made an exasperated noise, and grandma and I continued to banter in front of grandpa's grave for a good while after that.



“Phew, I’m beat,” I said with a sigh when grandma and I had finally stopped arguing.

Grandma chuckled. “Really? Oh, but I was having so much fun!”

“I’m gonna go gray if I keep arguing with you,” I said before letting out another, much longer sigh.

“Did you tell Masaru-san everything that was on your mind?” grandma asked me.

“I did. Though I wasn’t expecting his soul to be anchored to your *necklace* rather than his grave,” I admitted. “Well, wherever he is, I hope he heard me.”

Grandma grinned at me. “Of course he did. There’s no reason he wouldn’t. You *are* his grandson, after all. He’s always listening to you.”

“Well, if the great Alice the Immortal Witch says so, I guess it must be true,” I joked.

“Stop poking fun at me,” she said and gave me a gentle shove with her shoulder.

I’d missed bantering with her. I still couldn’t believe this was real and she was actually here again. It felt like some kind of miracle.

“Oh, by the way, Shiro...” she said after a few seconds.

“Hm? What is it?” I asked.

“A few weeks ago, I asked you what new ability you’d like to have, remember?” she said. “Have you decided yet?”

“Ability?” I repeated rather ineloquently.

Grandma sighed. “I know that face. You completely forgot about that, didn’t you? I told you I would *graciously* bestow upon you any ability you desired, and yet, you didn’t even have the decency to remember I made you that offer!” she pouted.

“Oh, now that you mention it, you did say something along those lines, didn’t you? It completely slipped my mind,” I admitted.

“I can’t believe you forgot,” she said, sighing again. “You really aren’t very greedy, are you?”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I corrected her. “I love money.”

“Is that so?”

“Sure is.”

A mischievous smile slowly spread across grandma’s face. Oh, great. What was she planning now?

“Wh-Why are you smiling?” I asked.

“Oh, no particular reason,” she said with a shrug. “I was just thinking it’s funny you call yourself greedy when, over the last few weeks, you’ve been prioritizing the well-being of your friends over making money in Ruffaltio.”

“And how would *you* know? You weren’t even over there,” I scoffed.

“You’re right, I wasn’t,” she admitted. “But I *did* see everything.”

I was so taken aback by this, all I could do was utter a quiet “Huh?”

Grandma pulled out her magic wand and pointed it at her shadow.

Meow.

And whaddaya know? A second later, a rather familiar-looking black kitten leaped out of grandma’s shadow.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on a second. *Peace?!?*” I exclaimed, my eyes wide. “G-Grandma! What the hell is going on here?!”

She chuckled. “This little one is actually my familiar.”

“Your ‘familiar’? Like, the ones you see in movies about witches and stuff?”

“I’m sure they must be quite similar, yes,” she said.

I couldn’t help letting out a long and suitably impressed “Wow.” So Peace had been grandma’s spy—I mean, familiar—all along?

“I watched you through his eyes while you were over in Ruffaltio,” she explained with a grin.

“Like, in real time?”

“Yup.”

I was at a loss for words, though I eventually found my voice again. “Grandma, that’s a serious invasion of privacy, you know.”

“Calm down. It’s not like I watched you the *entire* time,” she said.

“Though I do have one piece of advice: you should probably lose your habit of walking around your room butt naked and singing when you think you’re alone.”

“Man, what the hell?” I yelped and buried my face in my hands in embarrassment. That was a onetime thing, I swear!

I suddenly thought of something else and gasped. “Wait, were you watching when I dove into that pile of coins too?”

“Of course I was,” grandma said rather matter-of-factly. “You’ve made quite a lot of money in Ruffaltio, haven’t you?”

“What about when the Ruby and Jade guildmaster poured water all over me?”

“I had half a mind to turn that idiot into a pile of ash, but I managed to stop myself at the last minute.”

“And when I made Peace smell my feet when I thought no one else was watching?”

“The poor little guy almost resigned from being my familiar on the spot,” she reflected.

“Wh-What about the time I had to help Aina put some clean clothes on Karen when she got so drunk, she puked all over herself?”

“Oh, I didn’t know about that one. *Please* tell me you didn’t take advantage of that poor mayor girl while she was drunk,” grandma said, glaring at me.

“Of course not! And...” I paused. “Wait, did I just expose myself? Ah, screw this!” I yelled, hiding my face in my hands again.

Grandma cackled like a hyena. “Well, I *did* say I wasn’t watching you the entire time.” She paused as her smile faltered slightly. “That’s why I didn’t notice that cute little employee of yours crying,” she said. “But, thankfully, you managed to console her. Her and her mother, actually. Just goes to show how strong the bond is between the three of you.”

“Does it?” I mused. “I hope you’re right.”

“I am. You three have a bond that’s just like the one Masaru-san and I used to have.” Grandma paused again briefly. “Anyway, have you decided what ability you’d like?” she said, changing the subject.

“Hm, let me think...” I crossed my arms and pondered the question. “Could I have a little more time to decide?” I finally said.

Grandma looked taken aback by my lack of an answer, but it didn’t take long for a smile to spread across her face again. “What am I going to do with such an indecisive grandson?” she teased.

“I’m sure I’ll land on an ability I want soon. Just give me a little while longer,” I said.

“Sure,” she said. “I’m used to waiting, anyway.”

“Thanks, grandma! I love you!” I said, beaming at her.

“Wha—” she spluttered, her face turning as red as a tomato. “Don’t go saying things like that out of the blue!” She was embarrassed, and not just a little.

I couldn’t help laughing loudly at this. “Ever since what happened between Stella and Aina the other day, I’ve been thinking I should show my own family how much I appreciate them too.”

There’s a reason why I haven’t asked grandma for a new ability yet.

“That doesn’t mean you can just go dropping th-th-the L-bomb on me out of nowhere like that!” grandma yelled. “Masaru-san’s the only person who’d ever said those words to me before!”

To put it bluntly, I’m afraid she might up and leave again once she’s granted my wish.

“Grandma and grandpa sitting in a tree!” I started singing.

Grandma’s face went even redder. “Stop it! If you keep teasing me like that, don’t think I won’t retaliate!”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

But...

“I’ll tell everyone your deepest, most intimate secrets!” she declared.

“Hey, that’s unfair!” I protested.

“I’m a witch. ‘Unfair’ is what we do best,” she cackled. “Now, let’s see...” she muttered, pondering how she would go about getting her retribution. “Maybe I should go and have a word with that pretty mayor girl first, hm?”

Grandma doesn’t need to know that, does she?

“I don’t know what you’re planning to tell her, but I’ll do whatever it takes to stop you!” I declared.

“Oh, will you now?” she teased. “Didn’t you hear what I just said? I’m a witch.”

“I know. But do you know what *I* am?” I said, grinning and pausing dramatically for good measure. “I’m a witch’s grandson!” I stated proudly.



When our little squabble eventually petered out, grandma and I decided to set off home. After an excruciating three-hour journey, we were finally back at the house again.

“Finally! I thought we were never going to make it back,” I sighed.

“You know, we could’ve been back here in less than two seconds if you’d just let me use my teleportation magic,” grandma pointed out.

“For the last time, you can’t use magic in this world, grandma!” I chastised her.

“I know, I know,” she said in a sing-song voice.

I inserted my key into the lock and pushed open the front door.

“Hm? Whose shoes are those?” I asked, pointing to two pairs of shoes just inside the door that I’d never seen before.

“The twins’?” grandma suggested.

“Oh, right. They’re home already? I figured their open house event would last longer,” I mused as I took off my own shoes.

I’d given the twins a spare key so they could come and go as they pleased.

“Well, it’s getting late, so how about we make a start on dinner?” I suggested. “We can cook those dumplings we bought as souvenirs too. What do you think, gra—Alice-san?”

I’d resolved not to call grandma “grandma” for as long as Shiori and Saori were staying in the house with us, even if the twins weren’t actually in the same room. After all, as the saying goes: the walls have ears. And don’t even get me *started* on how social media’s always spying on us.

Grandma chuckled.

“Why are you laughing?” I asked, frowning.

She probably found it funny whenever I called her by her “witch” name.

“Oh, nothing, nothing,” she said, a smug smile plastered across her face. “Let’s go find Saorin and Shiorin, and have dinner.”

The twins thought grandma and I were childhood friends, and while they hadn’t explicitly said it, I knew they were convinced she was my girlfriend.

“Hey, don’t grab my arm!” I protested as grandma wrapped her arm around mine.

“Oh, come on. It’s fine!” she teased, clearly enjoying this situation way too much. I tried desperately to shake her off as we walked into the hallway.

“Shiori, Saori, we’re home!” I called out.

There was no answer.

“Maybe they’re asleep,” I mused aloud. We *had* gone to bed pretty late the night before, so maybe the two of them had decided to get an early night.

“I think they’re in that room,” grandma said, pointing to the room that had her memorial altar in it.

Maybe me going off to visit grandpa’s grave prompted them to burn some incense for grandma or something? I thought as I slid open the door to the room.

“Um, grandma?” I said, calling her into the room, then pointing at the twins, who were sitting on the floor with blank looks on their faces in front of the closet door that led to Ruffaltio. It was wide open.

“Oh, it looks like they’ve found out about the portal,” grandma said in a cheerful tone of voice.



Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the third volume of *Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back to My World Whenever I Want!* I'm the author, Hiiro Shimotsuki.

In this volume, Shiro got to go and do business in a big city! It took three whole volumes, but I finally made him into a proper "peddler," just like the title of the series suggests. Or well, at least I *hope* I did. In the next volume, I will of course have him carry on doing business, but I also want to write a really funny, happy-go-lucky story line!

And now, on to the acknowledgments:

To Takashi Iwasaki-sensei, once again, thank you for the beautiful illustrations for this volume. When I received your illustration of the twins, I got so excited, I accidentally stubbed my little toe on my bookshelf. It was very painful.

To Shizuku Akechi-sensei, great work on the manga. I'm very much looking forward to the first volume coming out!

To my editor and the whole editorial department of HJ Bunko, thank you for the valuable help you gave me this time as well.

To my family, my friends, and my dogs, thank you for your support.

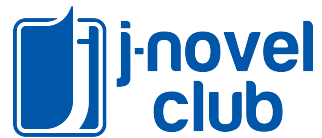
To my author friends, thank you for taking time out of your day to give me advice for this series.

And the biggest, fattest thank you of all goes to you, the reader, for reading up to this point!

Lastly, I will once again be donating part of the royalties from this book to an association that helps children in Japan. By providing them with financial and educational support, I hope I can help give them the life every child deserves. So by purchasing this book, you are also contributing to giving them that life. I think it would be nice if these children became light novel fans when they grow up.

All righty, then. See you all in the next volume!

Hiiro Shimotsuki



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