

本好きの 下剋上

司書になるためには
手段を選んでいられません

第一部 兵士の娘Ⅱ

香月美夜

miga kazuki

イラスト：椎名 優
you shiina



Ascendance of a Bookworm

– Honzuki no Gekokujou –

**- Book 1 -
Volume 2**

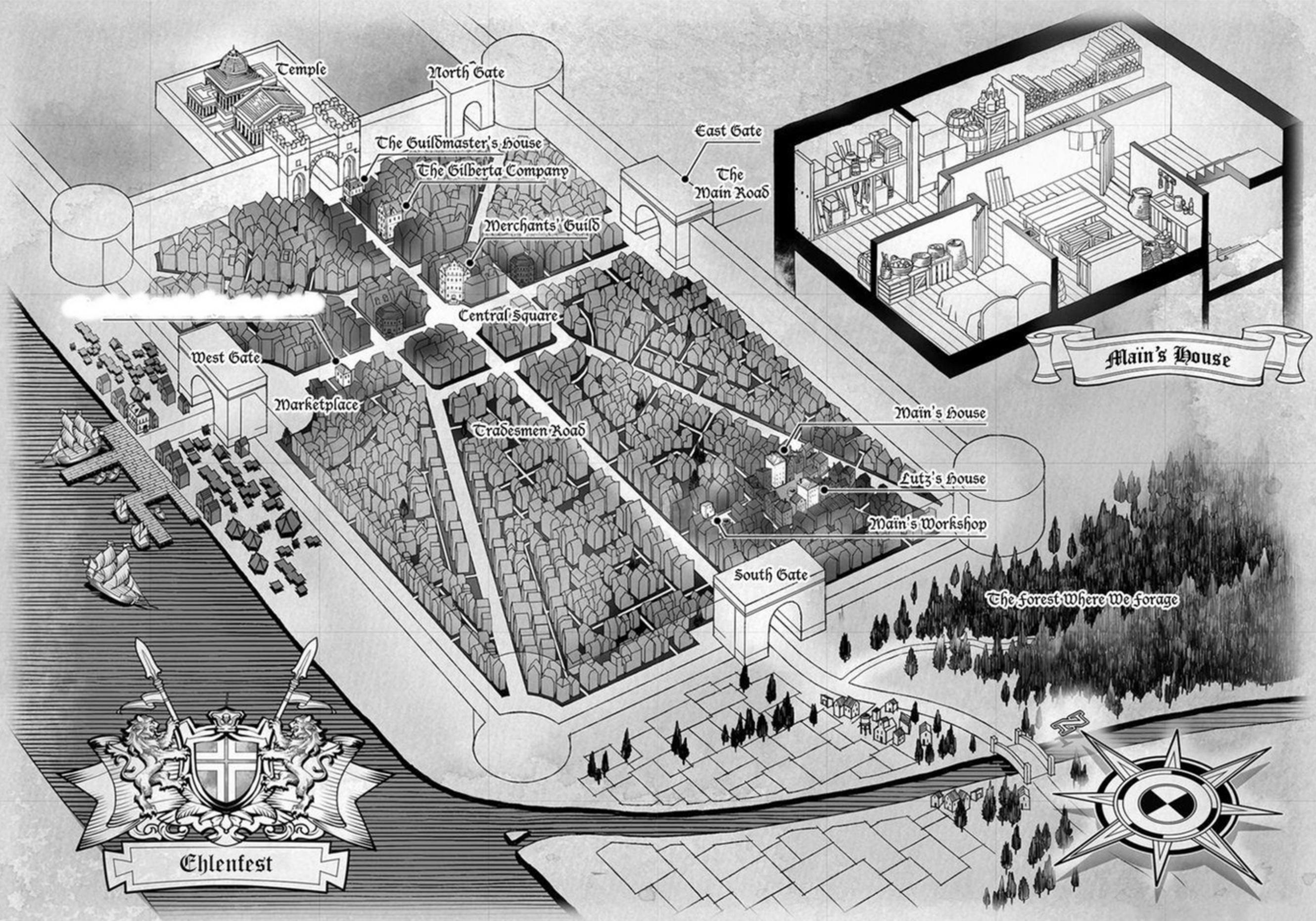
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[blastron]







Temple

North Gate

East Gate

The Guildmaster's house

The Gilberta Company

Merchants' Guild

The Main Road

Central Square

West Gate

Marketplace

Tradesmen Road

Main's house

Lutz's house

Main's Workshop

South Gate

The forest Where We forage

Alain's House

Ehlenfest



本好きの下剋上

司書になるためには手段を選んでられません

第一部 兵士の娘Ⅱ

香月美夜

miya kazuki

TOブックス

Chapter 27

The Road to Washi

I'm going to make *washi*.¹ My circumstances have finally come together to let me do that. On top of that, it's not something I'm going to make, but something that Lutz is going to make for me. As a step forward in his job search, of course. Right now, I'm soaring, like a figure skater leaping in the air to spin in a full circle... no, a circle and a half!

Don't you dare snark about the idea of me jumping! It's *hard* in this body!

"Eheheheh. Heheheh."

"Maïne, I'm glad you're in a good mood, but... you're kinda getting a little too excited! Aren't you going to get sick again?"

"It's not like I can help it! We're going to make *paper*, you know? We can actually make paper, you know? And, if we make paper, then I can make books! Woohoo!!"

Now that books are finally almost in my grasp, how could I possibly *not* get excited? As I make my way home, practically jumping with every step, Lutz lets out a sigh, like he's at his wits' end.

"...Maïne, sure, we're going to make it, but... how exactly are we going to do that? I definitely have no idea. Are we going to need tools? Can we really actually do this?"

Sighing, Lutz grumbles out his objections. In an instant, I come crashing back down to the real world.

...That's right. If we don't make all of the tools ourselves, we have nothing!

I'm pretty sure I know the process for making *washi*. I even remember the names of all the tools we need. However, when it comes to making those tools, I might have read a few books about the sorts of things those obsolete craftsmen used, but I can't actually remember the fine details. If I don't have the tools, I won't be able to make any paper.

...Whoa, our first step is to make the tools, huh... Immediately starting to make paper seems pretty impossible. Aaargh, once again, my modern knowledge just isn't quite good enough!

"...Hey, Maïne. You just got really quiet. Don't tell me that, after all of that, you can't actually make it?"

Lutz has a look of extreme worry on his face, so I emphatically shake my head.

"Don't say that! I definitely know how to make paper. It's something I've been wanting for a very long time. But, I don't have the strength to cut up enough wood, I still don't know how to use fire, and I can't crush the fibers like I need to. I couldn't ask you to make it for me before, because that would have been too selfish..."

"I told you I was going to help you out, so I would have been fine with that..."

Lutz pouts, looking a little bit chagrined. I'm happy he's so willing to help, but making paper is going to be very physically intensive work. It's going to be on a level far above helping me dig up some clay or helping me cut some wood down to size.

"Um, Lutz, all I can do is teach you how to do it. It's not like the things we've been doing before, where I can do them myself but you helped me out, this is going to be something where you do everything by yourself, from the very start to the very end. Do you still want to do it, if it's like that?"

"Of course. I told you: you come up with things, I'll make them."

Lutz immediately nods his head, but I need more confirmation. I can't help but think that he might be getting carried away.

"That's the thing, Lutz. We have to start all the way back with making the tools first. Can you stick with that?"

"...You'll be helping too, right?"

"Of course, I'll do whatever I can!"

As I say that, I start thinking. Even when we're just getting started making the tools, I'm going to have to figure out what kind of tools we're going to need to make the tools. While I'm at it, I should try searching my house for anything we could use as a substitute. I might make my mother mad again, but we're going to have no choice but to find substitutes for anything that we don't have the wherewithal to make ourselves.

“I’m going to write down a list of all the tools we need, and try looking for things we can use for those. If I can’t find any, we’re going to have to make them, though... Lutz, I’d like you to search for wood that we can use to make paper.”

“We can find all the wood we need in the forest, right?”

“That’s true, but I don’t know what kind of wood is suitable for making paper.”

I know that plants like the paper mulberry, Oriental paperbush, or ganpi are suitable for making *washi*, but I don’t know what trees in this world would make good paper.

“Ummm, so, wood that would be easy to use in paper would have long, durable fibers. They’d need to be sticky, too, and easy to bond together, and we’d need to be able to extract a lot of them... and so on, but I don’t actually know how exactly to spot what kind of tree has long, durable fibers.”

On top of that, a paper mulberry’s wood is only suitable if it’s less than a year old. I remember reading that after two years the fibers start to stiffen and become very difficult to use for making paper.

However, I can’t tell if a tree is one or two years old just by looking at it.

“...You’re telling me to do something complicated like that, but I don’t know how to do it either.”

“I guess you’re right. For now, I know that there’s soft wood and hard wood, but wood is softer when it’s younger, right?”

“And then it gets harder as it gets older, yeah.”

Lutz, having more experience than me, knows much more about wood than I do after all. For me, every kind of wood is difficult to cut, but Lutz knows what kinds of wood are easy or hard for him to cut, so it seems he can tell the difference between the softer and harder woods.

“Well, there’s paper we could make that uses either bamboo or bamboo grass, and there’s pros and cons to doing that, but for now, since I think we can make paper out of other kinds of vegetation, we should probably focus on a paper that’s the easiest to make for now, right? Plus, if we’re going to commoditize this, that’s all the more reason that we need to pick a wood that’s easy to use.”

“Huh...”

Lutz nods slightly, mumbling to himself about woods that might be easy to use.

“If we can find one, it would be even better if we could find trees that we could cultivate, so we could make acquiring the raw materials even easier, but we don’t know what kinds of trees are easy to cultivate, right?”

“No, trees that are and aren’t easy to grow are pretty different. There’s definitely trees that can be easily grown.”

“Really?!”

I gnash my teeth at how low Maine’s XP total is after having never gone outside. I’ve only been able to go out to the forest since a month ago. I can’t even cut any wood right now, let alone pick what kinds of wood we should be using.

“Alright, I’ll leave finding the wood to you, Lutz. I want to test a lot of different types and compare their pros and cons, so try coming up with a few kinds of soft-ish wood. After that... I want to find some ‘*sunset hibiscus*.’”

“What the heck is that?”

“The thing I’m thinking of is the root of that tree, but I don’t know if there’s anything like that around here. What I want is a tree that has a goopy, sticky sap... a fruit would do too, I guess. Do you know of any?”

Lutz ponders for a moment, but nothing seems to come to mind immediately.

“No... , I don’t think so.”

“We’re going to be using it as a glue to stick the plant fibers together, so there has to be something.”

“I’ll try asking someone who knows a lot about the forest.”

“Alright, then! I’ll go and work on remembering the process and writing down all the tools we’ll need to make it happen. After that, I’ll start figuring out how we’re going to make everything.”

By the time we’ve finished laying out what we’re each going to be doing next, we’ve arrived back at my house.

“We’re here,” says Lutz. “Alright, let’s do our best!”

“Yeah!”



Just making paper seems daunting, but the work of developing a prototype that could actually be turned into a salable good looks like it will require a lot of patient work. As soon as I returned home, I went straight for my slate. What I need to do now is try my best to remember the entire process involved in making *washi* and write out a list of all the tools I think we'll need.

The first step of the process is to harvest the trees or plants that we'll use as raw materials. Lutz has a knife that's kind of like a machete, so we don't need anything else in particular here. Right, next step.

When using paper mulberry, you need to steam the dark-colored bark off of the wood first, I think. If that's the case, we'll need a steamer. Since I haven't seen our family use a steamer, if we happen to have one in the kitchen, I'll be able to borrow it. I quickly search through the kitchen, but don't find anything. Well, I haven't tried to drag out any steamed recipes yet, so it's no surprise that we don't have a steamer. I add "steamer" and "pot" to the list on my slate. Right, next step.

When the wood is steamed, we immerse it in cold water, then immediately skin off the outer bark while the wood is still hot. In other words, it'll be best if we don't have to go far from where we do the steaming to the river, but since we already have knives, we don't really need any other tools. Right, next step.

Neither letting everything fully dry out nor stripping off the white bark after exposing it to the river for a day requires any particular tools. Since we have a knife, we can make do. Right, next step.

Then, we boil the white bark with ash, making it soft, then remove the excess. In other words, we need a pot and some ash. We can use the same pot that we needed in order to do the steaming, but getting the ashes is going to be difficult. I'm pretty sure my mother isn't going to give me any, and I don't know if boiling the wood will produce ash in a sufficient quantity. I add "ash" to the list on my slate. Right, next step.

Then, we expose it to the river for over a day again in order to remove all of the ash, then leave it out in the sun to whiten it. Then, we remove all of the chips and knots. This is, generally, all physical labor. We don't particularly need any tools here. Right, next step.

Then, we beat the fibers until they have a consistency like cotton. Here, we'll need some sort of rectangular timber that we can use for that. We should be able to make this out of either fresh wood or firewood. I add "rectangular timber" to the list on my slate. Right, next step.

Next, we thoroughly mix the beaten fibers with water and the sunset hibiscus sap, then spread the resulting pulp on a special frame and let the water drain out. Mixing everything together will need a bucket, tub, or some other kind of bowl. After that comes the wooden frame with a removable bamboo mat, called a *suketa*, we'll need in order to spread everything out. I think our *suketa* is going to be our number-one problem. I add "tub" and "paper frame" to the list on my slate. Right, next step.

Then, we remove the mat from the frame, then transfer the drained paper to a drying bed. We let these stacks of paper dry on their own for a full day. I add "drying bed" to the list on my slate. Right, next.

After that, we slowly apply pressure to the paper using either weights or a clamp to wring the last of the water out. After pressure is applied, we leave everything as-is for another full day, by which point the stickiness from the sunset hibiscus sap will have completely disappeared. I wonder what we could use for weights? Certainly, there's the big stone weight we use for pressing oil, but is Lutz able to use that? For now, I just add "weights".

When we're finished pressing the paper, we carefully peel it from the stacks on the drying bed one at a time, then stick it to another board. I add "flat board" to my list.

Then we let it dry in the sunlight, remove it from the board when it's dry, and then we're finished.

"Hmmm, now that I'm thinking everything out, we're going to need a lot of things, huh..."

The things we need: steamer, pot, rectangular timber, ash, tub, paper frame, drying bed, weights, and a flat board. Also, the raw wood and the sunset hibiscus sap.

I've seen photos and illustrations of the process, so I can generally remember how everything fits together, but since I've never actually done it for myself, I don't know any of the finer details. In our pulp, for example, what ratio of fibers to water to sap are we going to need? However, I recall watching a TV show where a particularly un-

pop-idol-like pop idol went to a rural village and made some paper, and if a pop star can do it, then there's no way that I can't do it too.

I need to remember more details about that program. Memory, do your best!... Well, hmm, that pop idol... was borrowing someone else's tools, right? She didn't have to make her own? And she had someone guiding her through the process, didn't she? Rrrrrrgh.

It's not just like I only have theoretical knowledge. I have indeed personally made paper before: in home economics class once, we made a sheet of recycled paper the size of a postcard out of a milk carton. I think it's better than nothing at all, but it's certainly not something I can actually rely on.

For now, let's try taking on the production of a postcard-sized sheet. It'll be easier to build the tools at a small scale as well, and when we're experimenting with different kinds of wood, small batches are better to make than large.





“So, Lutz,” I say, “how about we start making the steamer first?”

In Chinese cooking, they use a round wooden basket to steam food. Making something like that would be very difficult, but making a four-sided wooden box shouldn't be quite so hard. I sketch out the design on my slate and show it to Lutz.

“Making it should be really simple, but do you have any nails?”

“Uh?! Can't you... put notches in the wood and join them together with those?”

“What are you talking about?”

Making the tools has hit a snag. We don't have the tools we need to make the tools.

We may be able to cut wood to size, but we don't have nails. Plus, nails here are not priced such that a child could buy them if they decided they wanted to use some. Plus, although we have the tools to cut wood, we don't have any of the smaller implements we'd need for any fine work.

It would be great if I could just borrow my dad's tools, carve out some joints, and put everything together like an old-school carpenter, but there's no way I have enough knowledge of that kind of skilled labor to actually make use of it. Incidentally, although Lutz can do many things for me if I just give him an explanation, I can't call any of it skilled labor.

Nails are something people use in their day-to-day life, so there's no way we wouldn't be able to go to a hardware store and just buy them. The problem is our purchasing power. All of our options are suddenly closed.

“What are we going to do, Maïne?”

“Um, I'll consult with Otto. He's familiar with things like market prices and tradesmen, so I might be able to get nails if I help out...”

Since I can't even do any labor for my family, I have no choice but to go to the one place where someone will actually pay me for my efforts.



The next day, I go to the gates and ask Otto about it.

“Mister Otto, I have a question... Um, do you know how much nails tend to cost? Also, if you know a tradesman that sells them cheaply, I’d really appreciate it if you could introduce me to them...”

“...Why nails? I don’t think you’re going to be able to make use of them, Maïne.”

That’s right. I don’t have enough strength to actually use a hammer.

For someone who used to ask for slate pencils and ink to suddenly start asking for nails must be incomprehensible to him. As he tilts his head to the side in wonder, I sigh, then start to explain.

“I want to start making the tools I’ll need to make paper, but I don’t actually have the tools I’ll need to make those tools.”

“Ahahahahaha...!” Otto bursts into laughter, slapping the table as he laughs wildly.

“It’s not funny!” I say, pouting at him. Of course, just the other day, I harshly declared to Benno that I was absolutely going to make it by spring, so for me to immediately turn around and say that I can’t even start on the tools might actually be really hilarious. For me, however, it’s a really serious matter.

Otto wipes a tear from his eye as he calms down, a wide grin spreading across his face. I can clearly see that this is the slightly menacing smile of a calculating merchant. As he chuckles pleasantly at me, I’m suddenly very much on my guard.

“If you teach me how to make whatever it is you put in your hair, how about I finance your nail purchases?”

The value of what he’s asking for does not at all match what he’s offering. This is an absurdly huge ripoff. If Otto were to then let that information slip to Benno, then I would lose one of my most important cards that I could use against him. The price of that is far too high.

“...Just for some nails, I can’t tell you how to make it. When I think about Benno’s reaction the other day, I think it might be something very profitable.”

“...You’ve got good eyes,” he mutters, with the tiniest gleam of admiration in his eyes.

As I stall with a vague sort of answer, I frantically start to think. I've got no other rope to cling to besides Otto's, so if I lose him, I've got nothing. I have to come to some sort of compromise here.

...Why would Mister Otto be so interested in my simple all-in-one shampoo?

Otto, unlike Benno, is not a merchant. Therefore, I don't think he wants to bring it to market as a new commodity. It might make sense if he wanted to get Benno indebted to him.

...Otto is a comparatively neat person, but he doesn't seem to be the type to care enough about his appearance that he'd go to the trouble of making something just for it. If I really had to say it, the people who'd want to do that would be women... his wife?! Is it his wife?!

"...Mister Otto, it's too much for me to tell you how to make it, but if you wanted to exchange goods, I'd be okay with that."

"Yeah?" he says, raising his eyebrows a little bit.

Based on his look of interest, it seems like learning my methods might not actually be the important thing here. I fix my gaze on my tiny chance of victory and take another step forward.

"...Ummm, that's right. I can teach Miss Corinna how to use it, and show her how to make her hair smooth and glossy. I could just give you the product, but it would be useless without the instructions, so that's what I can offer you."

"Sounds good to me. It's settled, then!"

Otto nods in agreement, looking like he didn't even give it a second thought. I had thought that bringing up Corinna would be my most effective move, but I didn't think that such a simple thing would take me quite that far.

"Well then," he says, "come over to my house on my next day off. Let's make the exchange then, alright?"

"Alright!"

Just like that, it was decided that I'd bring my simple all-in-one shampoo to Otto's house on his next day off, then play beautician (a shampoo-only beautician) for the day.

I breathe a little sigh of relief at having somehow managed to secure some nails, but my own stock of shampoo is already almost entirely gone. On top of that, because this shampoo is a consumable good if you can't make more of it, from now on it's very likely that Otto will insist on making more trades in the future.



“Lutz, I got us some nails.”

“Seriously? Wow, Maïne, you're really amazing, aren't you?”

“Yeah, I'm going to get some in exchange for giving Otto some *'simple all-in-one shampoo'*, but... I don't have much of it left. Would you mind helping me make some for me today?”

“Sure, sounds good.”

Better yet, if I make a little more of it to put aside, why couldn't I use it as a source of additional fundraising?

“If we had a little more time, we could gather melil to use for this, but in this season, rio is the best fruit for it.”

Lutz and I gather rio fruit from the forest, then go back to my place to squeeze the oil out of it. Lutz still can't use the big stone weight to press it down, so we smash it out with a hammer. I take the freshly-squeezed oils and throw various herbs in one by one.

“Hmmm!” says Lutz. “That's really simple to make, isn't it?”

“That's right. The important part of this is the kind of oil you use and the kinds of herbs you mix it with. So, Lutz, even if we're going to be selling the finished product in exchange for the things that we want, we can never show anyone how it's made.”

“Why?”

“Since it's so simple, once you show someone how to do it, they can make it themselves, right? You won't be able to trade with them ever again, you know?”

“Ah, okay! I get it.”

I take a portion of the completed shampoo, put it in a somewhat small container, and hold it out for Lutz. He looks down at it dubiously, head tilted to one side.

“I don't need any, though? Maïne, you're the one getting money and buying things, so you should hold onto that.”

“This is your share after making it, Lutz. How about you use it to make Mrs. Carla happy? Hasn’t she been pestering you about what you did to your hair?”

After I made Lutz’s hair look good to prepare for his interview with Otto, his mother started persistently assaulting me with questions. I haven’t met her since then, so I’m sure that she’s turned her questioning on Lutz.

“Oh, thanks a bunch! You’re a lifesaver, Maïne.”

With a happy look, he takes the container from me. I grin broadly at him, imitating Otto’s smile.

“Mrs. Carla is a very forceful woman, so you have to make sure that you don’t let her get the secret of how to make it out of you. This is good practice for giving someone something without telling them how it was made. When we become merchants, we’re going to have a whole lot of things that we’re going to need to keep secret, after all.”
“...I really want to practice on something easier, though...” he says, smiling dejectedly.

I still don’t have those nails in hand. The road to *washi* will be a long one.

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. *Washi is a kind of paper that was made in Japan, using primarily manual methods.*

Chapter 28

The Invitation To Otto's Residence

The invitation to Otto's residence is a formal invitation from Corinna, delivered to me through Otto. It's a thin board on which words have been written.

"This really isn't something I should respond to by myself," I tell him. "If I don't ask my mother first..."

It is probably very strange for a child such as myself who hasn't yet been through their baptismal ceremony to receive a written invitation like this. Wouldn't this ordinarily be something addressed to one's parents? That would mean that my parents would be the people who'd decide if I would actually attend.

Otto raises his eyebrows slightly at my remarks, then shakes his head. "Out of your entire family, aren't you the only one who can really read? On top of that, this isn't something you can refuse. If you did, there's a chance that your mother and your sister would suddenly see their work dry up, after all."

"What?! Wh... what are you saying?!"

Corinna's parents run a successful company, and she herself is quite skilled, so she must be a fairly influential member of the tailor's guild. Based on the various explanations I've been given, if Tuuli's seamstress apprenticeship is like being a part-timer, and my mother's work at the dyery is like being a line manager, then Corinna can be thought of as being an executive.

Hierarchical societies are *scary*. I can't turn this one down. Got it.

This, though, isn't an invitation from Corinna, but one from Otto, so my father might be able to reject it using his own authority. This is very complicated.

"Besides," says Otto, "I thought that now would be a great chance to study written invitations, too."

"Oh, I see! Thank you very much."

With Otto's help, I look over the invitation, learning about both invitations themselves and how to reply to them.



“Did you just say a written invitation from Madam Corinna?! What? Seriously?! Why?!”

“She heard about my *‘simple shampoo’* from Otto, and wants to try it for herself.”

“Well, I’ll be!”

When my mother saw me return home bearing an official written invitation, she flew into a huge panic. I try asking her if I should decline after all, but in her excessive panic her eyes go wide with rage.

“Turning it down would be unthinkable! We have to be polite!”

“Okay! I’ll be careful.”

Somehow, this seems less like an invitation, and more like an official summons.

After that, my mother frantically starts making me a brand-new apron. It seems that going to Corinna’s dressed in my usual clothes would not be proper. As she works, she warns me about every breach of etiquette she can think of, so that I won’t accidentally be impolite. All I had planned to do was teach Corinna how to use my shampoo, but it’s somehow turned into this huge uproar.

“You’re so lucky, Maïne... You’re going by yourself, even though I’m the one who made it...”

“Mommy, can Tuuli go with me too?”

“Absolutely not! She doesn’t have an invitation.”

Although I’m the one who thought up the simple shampoo, Tuuli’s been the one doing the manufacturing up until now. I think she’s more than qualified to come along with me, but since bringing an uninvited guest along with you is rude even here, Tuuli is going to be stuck at home no matter how jealous she may be.



Otto and I have arranged to meet in the central plaza at the ringing of the third bell, just like last time. On top of my usual clothes, I put on the brand new apron my mother made for me, and head off with my father towards the plaza. I bring my tote bag with

me, into which I made very sure to put a little jar full simple shampoo and a comb.

When we arrive, Otto is already waiting near the fountain. My father promptly turns me over to him.

“Squad Leader,” says Otto, “Don’t worry, I’ll take proper care of her. Now, Maïne, shall we?”

“Yep. See you later, Daddy!”

“Yeah.”

After waving farewell to my father, Otto starts walking towards the castle walls. It seems that his house is near the castle. The closer you get to the castle where the nobility live, the higher the rent becomes, so it looks like Otto’s house is in what you might call an exclusive residential district.

“Mister Otto, you live near the castle walls, even though you’re a soldier?”

“I live in an apartment above Corinna’s parents’ home. Her older brother couldn’t bear to let go of his adorable little sister, so he told her to live there.”

“Huh, I see...”

Now that he mentions it, I think I remember hearing that it’s almost like he married into her family. Certainly, without the financial support of his wife’s family, he wouldn’t be able to afford living in such a place on a low-ranking soldier’s wages. He told me that he’d used up all his life’s savings to purchase his citizenship, so perhaps was everyone connected to his wife extremely concerned about how penniless they were immediately after getting married?

Gradually, the kinds of people I see walking around start to change from what I’m used to. Their clothing is less and less patched together, and incorporates more and more fluttering, decorative fabrics in their design. The shops on the first floors of the buildings we walk past are different, as well. The shops themselves are bigger, with more employees and more customers going in and out. Along the roads, the number of coaches and wagons has been increasing, while I’ve been seeing fewer and fewer donkey-drawn carts.

It’s an almost physical shock to see that such a clear class divide exists in a single city, and just within walking distance for me, too. I’d read about things like this, so I kind of had an idea of what it was like already, but there’s a night and day difference between imagining it and seeing it right in front of me. Eyes gleaming, I take in as much

of the surroundings as I can.

“It’s on the third floor here,” says Otto.

“The third?!”

Otto’s residence is on the third floor of a seven-story building. When the first floor of a building is a store, the second floor is generally the residence of the store’s owner. The third through sixth floor are rented out, and it’s very common to see the seventh story used for housing for the live-in apprentices and other employees of the store. The closer a floor is to the road, and the closer it is to a well, the more expensive it is. If I had to say it, my home is on the fifth story of a building out by the gates. (Please understand my financial situation.) For Corinna to have a place reserved for her right above her parents’ residence, she really must be this store’s beloved princess.

...I wonder how he was even allowed to marry her. This is surprising! A trader and a rich young woman surely have very different social stature, I think, so how did something like this happen in this world?

“I’m home, Corinna! I’ve brought Maïne with me.”

“Welcome, Maïne. I’ve been waiting to meet you. My name is Corinna. I’m Otto’s wife.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Corinna. My name is Maïne. I’m grateful to everything your husband has done for me.”

This is my first time seeing Corinna, and I’m startled by how pretty and lovely of a woman she is. Her hair is a pale cream, as if the light of the moon had gathered in it. She has it gently gathered behind her, accentuating her slender neck. Her eyes are a silvery gray as well. Her whole color scheme is very light, making her seem almost ephemeral.

In contrast, her boobs are huge. Everything she’s got that sticks out sticks *way* out, and her waist is very narrow.

Otto, you’re so *shallow*!

As I’m lead into the parlor, I let out an appreciative breath as I see the patchwork tapestries, Corinna’s handiwork, that decorate the walls. This is my first time since coming to this world that I’ve seen a house with anything ornamental in it. This is probably the room she uses to meet with potential clients, so it’s filled with both a large quantity of clothes as well as these decorations made from the fabric remnants.

The colors throughout the room are put together with a good eye, giving the room a relaxing atmosphere.

However, even in the house of a wealthy merchant, there are still more subtle concessions to frugality than I would have otherwise thought. The round table and chairs in the center of the room are neither finely engraved nor gleamingly polished, but are a simple, unornamented wooden design, with the wood left as is.

If I remember correctly, the furniture of Northern Europe tended to be simple. Also, because people are often shut inside for long periods of time during the winter, perhaps the furniture is designed such that it's possible to use it for long periods of time without getting tired of it.

“Thank you for coming all this way,” says Corinna. “I’ve been very much looking forward to this ever since I heard you were coming to work on my hair.”

As Corinna pours us some herb tea, the gentle voice she directs at me oozes the feeling of a well-raised daughter of a rich family. Her calm demeanor is one that could stir up a desire to protect her from harm.

“I’m very flattered. I’ve heard so many things about you from Mister Otto as well, so I’ve also been looking forward to meeting you. He’d told me how beautiful and adorable you are, but the way you’ve decorated this room and the quality of the clothes you have laid out is beyond what I had heard.”

“...You really are a very well-disciplined young lady. And, your hair is just as pretty as I had heard. I wonder, will my hair become like this as well?”

Enraptured, Corinna gently strokes my hair. Last night, in order to make sure the value of this shampoo as a commodity was plainly visible, both my mother and Tuuli worked hard to make my hair practically shine. Today, my hair is even more glossy than it usually is.

“Shall we begin immediately?” I ask.

As I pull the small jar from my tote bag, Corinna’s face lights up with excitement. She’s absolutely adorable when she’s expressing herself so openly. I can definitely see why Otto dotes on her so much.

“I would like to wash your hair, so I’ll need to make the necessary preparations for

bathing. If it isn't too much to ask, may I bother you for a bucket full of water and a cloth for washing?"

"Bathing, you say?"

Otto, not Corinna, shouts out in astonishment, his eyes going wide.

"...I'm only going to be washing her hair, Mister Otto. Umm, Miss Corinna, while Mister Otto is getting things ready, would you please change into clothing that is okay to get wet?"

"Yes," she replies.

"...Oh, she's going to be wearing clothes, huh."

Corinna isn't just a child like Lutz, so it's only obvious that I'm not going to tell a woman such as herself to strip down.... Wait a minute, why are you talking like you're hugely disappointed?

Otto stands up to get everything ready for bathing, saying that physical labor is the man's job. He spreads out a cloth in the bedroom and brings in some water, then sets a small washcloth next to my jar of shampoo.

"...This is it, huh. What do you do with this?"

Otto, with keenly interested eyes, picks up the jar, shakes it a bit, peeks inside, and takes a sniff. I'm suddenly keenly aware that if he were to stick around while I'm working on Corinna's hair, he'll try to help out with everything, keep opening his mouth, and otherwise constantly butt in on the two of us, making the whole process extremely bothersome.

"This isn't for men to see," I say. "If you're done with setting up, Mister Otto, please wait in another room."

"What? I'm her husband!"

"If you're the husband, then it's even better for you to wait outside. When we're finished, you can look at how beautiful your wife has become and shower her with compliments. Please don't do something as un-gentlemanly as watching a woman pretty herself up."

"That's right," says Corinna. "Otto, please do wait in another room."

The two of us join forces and drive Otto, who still clearly wants to stay, out of the bedroom. I can hear his footsteps through the door as he wanders aimlessly around

outside, but I ignore him, pouring some of the contents of the little jar into the washing bucket.

“This is called a *'simple all-in-one shampoo'*. To use it, you first fill up a bucket with about this much water, then pour about this much *'shampoo'* into it.”

“Ahh...”

“Next, we’ll drench your hair in the bucket, and wash it. Could I ask you to untie your hair, please?”

Corinna loosens her hair, and I timidly lower it into the bucket. Somehow, it’s not as dirty as I thought it would be; perhaps it hasn’t been that long since she last bathed. In order to make sure her scalp is thoroughly cleaned, I pour water over her head over and over as I wash.

“Please make sure you make extra effort to clean this part,” I explain as I work.

“...Letting someone else wash my hair feels really nice. I never knew that before.”

“I think that Otto would be happy to do it for you if you asked, you know?”

Or, rather, I’m pretty sure he’d try to jump in even if she didn’t ask.

“Oh? But didn’t you say that it was ungentlemanly for him to watch?”

“...I just thought that it would be a problem for him to be bothering the two of us, that’s all.”

“My! Heh heh, I wonder what in the world Otto has been saying around you for such a young girl as yourself to say things like that?”

It’s harder for me to wash Corinna’s hair than it is for me to wash Tuuli’s, since Corinna is so much bigger. I know without a doubt, however, that Otto is going to base the number of nails he gives me on how satisfied she is with my handiwork. I work diligently, to the very best of my ability.

“...Maïne, do you mind if I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

I hear a hint of sharpness in her voice, and I’m suddenly put on edge.

“What’s Otto like, at the gate?”

“...Huh?”

I was totally preparing myself to deflect a question about how to make my simple shampoo. Her question caught me completely off-guard, and what she was asking didn't immediately register in my mind. I tilt my head to the side in confusion.

Corinna frowns. "He gave up on his career as a trader all because of me," she murmurs. "Sometimes I worry..."

"There's no need to worry," I say. "Even working at the gates he's still very much a trader."

He handles all of the accounting work by himself, even though it's so busy. He haggles with traders over the prices of goods and furnishings. He uses his position at the gate to its fullest to gather useful information. Truly, his guiding principles are that of a trader.

"Really?... He's a trader, at the gate?"

"Yes, he is. For example, when merchants come to deliver things to the gates, the wicked smile on his face while he drives down the price of the order is very trader-like."

"Heh heh, so you can see the trader in him. Yes... yes, of course. It's a big weight off my chest to hear that."

I use the washcloth to dry off Corinna's cream-colored hair. As I start to comb it out, it starts gleaming like a pearl.

Just like when I was washing Lutz's golden-blond hair, I'm envious of how pretty Corinna's hair looks. It would be great if my hair looked like that, wouldn't it...

"If you can, please use a wooden comb when you comb out your hair. As you continue to use it, the wood of the comb will absorb moisture from your hair, and will make it shine even brighter."

"Alright.... It's really become quite beautiful, hasn't it," she murmurs appreciatively as she runs her fingers through her hair.

"The color of your hair was already very nice, so all you need to do is maintain it to bring out its natural beauty. I recommend that you wash it like this every five to seven days."

I gesture at the pot, which contains the rest of the shampoo, as I give my recommendation. Corinna frowns slightly, tilting her head to the side.

“Are you really alright with giving me this? I feel rather bad, not giving you anything in return...”

“That’s alright. Mister Otto is already paying me for it, in nails.”

“...Nails? Huh? Isn’t he getting the better end of the bargain? Are you alright with that?”

Even though he might be profiting more right now, I haven’t given up the recipe for how to make my shampoo, I’m getting my hands on the nails that I wanted to get, and since I know that Corinna is going to want more shampoo in the future, I’ll be able to get more things I want in the future, too. There’s really no problem here.

“Um, Maïne. My clothes have gotten a bit wet, so I’d like to change. Would you mind waiting with Otto in the other room?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

I leave the bedroom so that Corinna can change her clothes in peace. As I open the door to leave, though, I see Otto, loitering by the bedroom door like a hungry bear waiting for his food to appear.

“Corinna?!” he exclaims.

“My clothes got a bit wet,” she says, poking her head around the door just a little bit, “so I’m going to change into something else. Otto, take care of Maïne for me, would you?”

Her hair still hasn’t completely dried, so it slips along her damp clothes as she peeks around the corner. Her shy demeanor radiates a certain kind of appeal.

“I’m sorry to let you see me like this,” she says. “I’ll get changed right away.”

Corinna hurriedly ushers me out of the room, then quickly closes the door. Otto had caught only a glimpse of her just now, but he’s staring at the door with a completely blank expression. When I see Otto’s longing reaction after only seeing a little bit of her, I strike a triumphant victory pose in my heart. Without a doubt, he’s falling in love with her all over again.

“Eh heh heh, hasn’t Corinna become even more beautiful than before? Her creamy hair is shining like a jewel...”

“Ngh! Corinna!”

“She’s still changing!!”

Otto unthinkingly starts charging towards the bedroom door, and I hurriedly try to block him. Of course, with my strength, I can't do anything to stop him. The only one who can stop his rampage now is Corinna.

"Otto," she says from the other side of the door, "do you really want Maïne to see me while I'm in the middle of changing?"

As soon as he hears her gentle voice, he suddenly stops moving, like his batteries got yanked out. After a brief moment of silence, he turns to me. He gives me a beautiful, *terrible* smile as he firmly squeezes my shoulder.

"...Maïne, didn't you have something important you needed to go do?"

I get it. *I want to make out with my wife, so get the hell out of here*, he's saying.

I glance over at the bag sitting on the kitchen table. "I might remember something, depending on the number of nails I get," I say, smiling sweetly.

He looks at the bag of nails, then back at me. In his eyes, I can see a battle raging between his cool, calculating trader's senses and his burning love for his wife.

"..."

"If you give me *all* of them, I might even give my father a good excuse for why I'm going home alone."

Otto, who'd promised he would properly look after me, presses the entire bag into my arms, and I quietly head out the door.

...Go get 'em, tiger! Well, I acquired even more nails than I was hoping for, so, whatever. Please, do whatever it is you're going to do!



Gripping the bag full of nails tightly in both arms, I struggle my way down the street, all alone. Nails are *heavy*. A single one is pretty light, but when you pile them up like this, they're heavy as hell. Even after just walking a little bit, my arms are already trembling.

It's no use. I need a break.

At this rate, I'm not going to be able to stumble all the way home. I manage to make it to the fountain in the central plaza, then sit down to take a break.

My arms *hurt*.

As I shake out my trembling hands, then rub them together, Lutz comes into view, on his way home from somewhere. He walks past me, briskly.

"Oh? Lutz, what're you doing here?"

"Maïne?! What are *you* doing here? Uh... all by yourself?!"

Fundamentally, my usual area of action is confined to my home, the gates, and the forest. Since I only ever take the shortest possible distance anywhere, I'm never out here in the central plaza. On top of that, since I have a habit of unexpectedly collapsing at any time, anywhere, it's unheard of for me to be anywhere by myself. Lutz's eyes go wide.

"Hm? I'm on my way back from Mister Otto's place. I was able to get all these nails from him. They're really heavy, and it's really far, so I'm taking a break."

"Argh," he grumbles, "I'll carry those for you. Man, why didn't he make sure bring you back safely?"

As he mumbles under his breath, he picks up the bag full of nails. I may have found that bag so heavy that it physically hurt me to carry it, but Lutz lifts it up like it isn't even that big of a deal.

"Thanks a lot, Lutz."

As the two of us walk back home, we tell each other about everything that happened today. While I was exchanging my shampoo for these nails, it looks like Lutz was asking around, checking with people who know a lot about the forest or know a lot about handling lumber to see if there might be any kinds of wood that would be easy to make paper with, or any plants that might be a reasonable substitute for sunset hibiscus.

When making *washi*, you traditionally use sunset hibiscus as a binding agent, but here, if you're looking for a sticky liquid, it seems that your best bet is either edil fruit or the bodily fluids of a slarmo bug.

Ur... urgh. I'd much, much prefer to use edible fruits than squeezing out an insect's fluids. Bugs, though, might be more resilient to the changing of the seasons...

I shake my head to clear out the unwanted thoughts of juicing bugs, then change the topic of conversation.

"Now that we've got nails, we can start working on the steamer."

"Hm? How big are we going to be making it? Didn't you say you wanted it to match the pot we'll be using? Did you get your mom to say we can use yours?"

Our steaming basket doesn't need to be very large at the moment, since we're just starting out, but if we can I'd really like to match it up with the pot we'd be using. However, both of our families use their pots only for cooking. Even if we ask to borrow one, it's unlikely they'll lend it to us.

"...No, I didn't. Actually, one time she got really mad at me and told me not to use the pot for anything that wasn't food."

If my mother won't even let me cook dried fish, I don't think she'd lend me a pot so that I can steam or boil any wood to make paper.

"That's no good," he says.

"It really isn't.... So what do we do?"

"Well, it's not like I can make one myself..."

Pots are expensive. Extremely expensive. They're always in use, even when they're in need of repair. This isn't the kind of thing that we can easily get our hands on just because we want one. Manufacturing one out of metal would also be very difficult.

"That's right, isn't it... maybe we should make the paper frame first. We already know how big it'll be, so we can start on that now."

"...I guess we have to build what we know we can build, yeah."

We got even more nails than I'd hoped for, and we've tentatively identified some materials we can use as a substitute for sunset hibiscus sap... so that's a step forward, at least... right?

Chapter 29

Benno's Summons

While doing our gathering in the forest, Lutz and I start work on building the paper frame. The basic part of it is just a wooden frame, which we can build relatively easily out of wood and nails. The hardest part will be cutting lumber to size and making sure it's straight; apart from that, the rest of the construction isn't particularly difficult. In particular, since we're not making a particularly large sheet of *washi*, just something about the size of a postcard, we don't need to have any extra beams to support the paper mat.

I'll try constructing this following the pattern of the little frame I used when I made paper in home economics class.

"Umm, if you could make it kinda like this..."

On my slate, I show Lutz a sketch of the general shape of the frame, then write out the list of necessary components. As he looks it over, we head off to start cutting timber.

"We have to make sure they're perfectly straight, or it's not going to work. It's okay if we have to shave things down to make them fit together at the end, though."

"That's harder than I thought. Straight, huh..."

He cuts the wood into pieces for two rectangular frames, so that the inner dimensions are about the same size as a postcard. Once we finish building the structure for the upper and the lower frames, we attach boards to prevent the upper frame from sliding around as we spread out the pulp and a handle so that we can easily hold the upper frame by hand.

"That's it! Lutz, this is looking great!"

"Is this what you wanted?"

"Yeah! We're going to put the paper mat between these frames like this, then grab the handle and rock it back and forth to spread out the fibers evenly. This is about the right shape for that."

"Shape?"

Seeing Lutz's dubious expression, I set the two frames on top of each other, then rattle them a bit to point out the uneven gaps between the two of them.

"We need to make sure that there's as few gaps between the two frames as we can get. Once we shave and polish these down so that they're precisely flat, it'll be perfect."

"Precisely?! I can't ask my dad or brothers for help, and I don't have the tools for that, you know..."

"...Can you borrow the tools?"

"I dunno..."

Although Lutz may have given up on becoming a trader, he is still refusing his parents' wishes for him to find a job relating to the woodworking or construction industries and has instead decided all by himself that he's going to become a merchant's apprentice. He must be getting an incredible amount of pressure from his parents. He's not really in a circumstance where he can just walk in and ask to borrow some tools or get some help building something.

Lutz's father thinks that merchants are cold-blooded people who think about nothing but money, and is absolutely opposed to his son becoming someone like that. His mother, Carla, is very glad that he's given up on being a trader and is instead looking for a job in the city, but she still wishes Lutz would give up on being a merchant, too.

No matter what kind of opposition he might face, Lutz isn't going to give up his dreams and will just keep forging ahead, despite his family's disapproval. As for me, there's not much I can actually do. My interactions with his family are usually restricted to indirectly talking about his tenacity and grabbing hold of their appetites with my recipes.

Since we were able to get the frames in more-or-less the right shape, in the worst-case scenario we can whittle them down if it turns out we can't actually use them. The biggest problem now is probably the mat we'll be spreading the paper on. It's a series of thin, rolled cylinders, almost like calligraphy pens, and we're going to need to make it entirely from scratch. We need both bamboo rods of equal diameter and thread. Strong thread, at that, stronger than the kind of thread that Lutz and I ordinarily have access to. Getting bamboo rods down to the right size is going to be difficult as well. Even though we're only making something postcard-sized, it's easy to see that this is going to be an extremely difficult process.

“Since we were able to make the frame today, tomorrow let’s start whittling down bamboo in order to make our rods. Although, can we actually make them round so easily, I wonder? Since we need them to be about the same size and thickness, I wonder if we should make them rectangular, instead? What do you think?”

“I can’t really say I know anything about either making or using them...”

Since I’m still not very good with my knife, I’m not particularly useful, but that doesn’t change the fact that we’re going to need a lot of these, and that they need to be very thin. However, I’m still very happy, since we managed to meet our goal for the day and make our frame.



As we pass through the gates on our way home, Otto calls out to us. “Maïne, ah, Lutz, too! Could you come here for a minute?”

It wouldn’t be unusual if he were just calling me over, since it could be something relating to my job as his assistant, but this is the first time he’s called Lutz over as well.

“Me too?” Lutz asks as we walk over.

“That’s right. I have a written invitation for the two of you.”

He delivers us another invitation, just like the one Corinna sent to me the other day. My studying has born fruit, and I quickly skim it, picking out who the sender and addressee are. It’s an invitation from Benno, addressed to me and Lutz.

“From Mister Benno, to me and Lutz?”

“Huh, I wonder why?” says Lutz.

I thought we wouldn’t see him again until we’d successfully made paper. I have no idea what this invitation could be about, since the two of us aren’t his apprentices yet.

“This says tomorrow,” I say, “so this must be really urgent. What could it be?... Maybe, is he rejecting us without even seeing our product?”

Perhaps someone with a stronger connection to him asked for a favor and he decided to take someone else as an apprentice, or perhaps he was able to piece something together from bits of information I’ve let slip and intends to make it himself so he doesn’t need us anymore... all of the worst-case scenarios start tumbling around in my

head.

“What?!” exclaims Lutz. “Are you serious?!”

“No, no!” says Otto, quickly. “It’s not that!”

I frown up at him. “Mister Otto, do you know what this is about?”

“...Aaah~, well, so after Benno saw Corinna’s hair, he started hammering me for information, so I just kind of let my part in all of it slip out, so it’s about all that.”

“So this invitation is your fault, then! Why would you just let that slip out?!”

“Isn’t it only natural for a husband to brag about how his wife has become so beautiful?”

Did he specifically go to Benno’s place to brag about Corinna to get back at me for taking every last nail from him?

Although I have plenty of complaints for Otto, that doesn’t change the fact that this invitation has been delivered into our hands, and since we’re hoping that he’ll accept us as his apprentices, this isn’t something that we’re going to be able to decline.

“This says we’re supposedly going to meet him for lunch,” I say. “I wonder if we’ll be able to eat something amazing?”

“Ohh! I’m going! I’m absolutely going!!”

Lutz is suddenly one hundred percent all-in on going to this thing. A poor child who is always hungry would be dazzled in a single instant by the thought of a sumptuous meal. I’m also actually fairly interested in what rich people eat.

The written invitation also lists the time and place at which we should meet. Benno would like us to meet him at his shop, when the fourth bell chimes.

“...Where is Benno’s shop?” I ask Otto. “We don’t know where that is, you know?”

“It’s on the first floor of my building.”

Otto’s home is above Corinna’s family’s home, and was prepared for Corinna by her much older brother who was worried about his adorable little sister. So, Corinna must be Benno’s younger sister, so Otto and Benno must be...

“...Is he your brother-in-law?”

“That’s right.”

I guess it isn't strange at all for the things I talk about with Otto to go straight through to Benno, then. I don't really feel like saying anything more.



The next day, Lutz and I put on the nicest clothes that we can, then start heading towards Benno's shop. After we pass through the central plaza, the buildings around us start steadily becoming nicer. Lutz has never gone past the plaza to the castle walls before, so he is constantly looking around, taking in everything he can see.

"Wow, this is amazing..."

"Yeah, it's totally different, even though it's still the same town. I was super surprised as well, back when I went to Otto's house."

"If the town can change this much, I wonder if lunch is going to be this much better than what I get at home! I'm really looking forward to this."

Lutz's smile is both broad and innocent. I sigh lightly, and give him some advice.

"You should be careful about how you eat."

"Hm?"

"I think he's absolutely going to be checking our table manners, like how we eat."

"What?! I don't know anything about that, though!"

I don't know anything about it either. More accurately, I don't know whether or not I'll be able to pass my own table manners off as what they have here. We have only a single countermeasure.

"Be careful about your posture. Then, instead of just immediately shoving food into our faces, let's watch how Mister Benno does it first. I don't think it'll be a big mistake to copy what he does."

"...Aw maaan, now I'm nervous!"

Uneasy with uncertainties over what might lie in store for us, the two of us continue forward, holding hands for some reason. We arrive in front of Benno's shop well before the fourth bell has rung. Since our meeting is at the fourth bell, we need to kill some time waiting by the shop.

"What do we do now?"

"Hm? Well, since we're already in the area, I want to take a look at the shop. I don't

know anything at all about how it's managed, how many people work there, what apprentices do there, or anything at all, really."

"...You're right."

I'm used to using the internet or magazines when it comes to researching a potential place of employment. Here, though, I have neither of those things. Instead, you have to either pick things up by word of mouth or go to see things with your own eyes. If you don't do either of those things, you can't get any useful information.

Normally, you'd learn about how a particular industry worked by hearing about your parents' jobs, and then you'd learn about the place you'd be working by listening to what the person to whom you were referred had to say. However, since Otto kept the fact that he and Benno were brothers-in-law, I don't know if he'll let any useful information flow. When I brought Lutz to hear Otto talk about being a trader, even Benno introduced himself as "an acquaintance from when Otto was a trader". He didn't say a single thing about the actual job, perhaps because he had every intention of rejecting us outright. So, since I've got an opportunity right now to observe how this shop works right now, I want to make the most of it.

"They don't have very many things lined up for sale," I say.

"There's also way fewer people going in and out than at the town market. I wonder if this shop really is profitable?"

"I think it has to be. It's very tidy, and the employees' appearance and manner are much nicer than shops closer to the wall, I think. Since they're so well trained and well groomed, maybe they do business with rich people or the nobility."

Even the man standing in front of the store like a guard is dressed in better clothing than we are. That alone is proof that this shop is frequented by those who care a lot about appearance. It seems like there are many barriers that Lutz and I will have to overcome if we want to work here, since we come from such different worlds.

Da-dong, da-donnnng...

The fourth bell rings through the town, telling everyone that it is now noon. At the same time, the shop's employees start closing everything down.

"Huh? Huh?! They're closing down?!"

I grab Lutz by the hand, then frantically run towards Benno's shop, pulling him along

behind me. If everything is closed down and everyone goes home, I'll have no idea what to actually do. I call out to the guard as he turns to head into the shop, holding up my invitation.

"Excuse meee! The two of us were invited here by Mister Benno; would you be able to tell us what we should do next, please?"

"Ah, there's no need to panic. I hear you, but would you mind waiting a bit until we've finished closing up?"

After they finish closing the shop for lunch, all of the employees head off to get some food, leaving just the one guard behind. It seems like I didn't need to call out while they were in the middle of closing the shop, I could have just greeted the guard afterward. Immediately after the shop is closed and the employees have all scattered, the guard leads us inside.

"Sir, you have guests," he says.

"Ah, show them in," comes a voice from another room.

The guard opens a door, lets us in, then closes it behind us with a respectful bow. At a single glance, it's obvious that this room is used for business discussions. The shelves around the room are lined with a variety of things that I'm not used to seeing. Behind the wooden desk at which Benno is seated are more shelves, where piles of wooden boards and scrolls have accumulated.

Are those *bookshelves*?!

There aren't any books, so it might be more accurate to call them document shelves, but those are shelves that are packed with *writing*. I start to unsteadily wander over towards them, but when Benno stands up I manage to stop myself, planting my feet firmly to the ground.

"Sorry for calling you out here on such short notice," he says. "I thought I absolutely needed to have a talk with you."

"About what, sir?"

"How about we have lunch first? We can talk afterwards."

I take the seat Benno offers me, though my line of sight to the bookshelf-like shelves is cut off. Lutz sits next to me, looking just a little bit nervous.

“I’ll have it brought right in.”

Benno picks up a small bell from the desk and rings it three times. A door at the back of the room opens, and a young woman comes out, bearing food on a tray. It seems like there must be a stairway to connect this floor to the second floor above.

“Maïne, Lutz, welcome,” she says. “I hope you’ll enjoy your meal.”

I thought she might have been Benno’s wife, but since he didn’t introduce her at all, it could be that she’s one of his employees or perhaps a servant.

“Thank you very much,” is all I say as I study the tableware set out in front of me. We each have an empty plate, a fork, and a spoon. There isn’t a great difference between the amount of cutlery we’re using here and that I use at home; the only difference is that Benno is the only one with a knife in front of him. It seems like it’s the responsibility of Benno, the master of the house, to serve our plates. He serves salad and meat onto our plates, and gives us bowls of soup.

“Please, enjoy.”

Lutz had been trying his best in his own special way, but as soon as we start eating it seems like all of my advice immediately spills out of his head, and he starts shoving food into his face with great gusto.

Perhaps Lutz should also learn some table manners before we start working.

I pick up my fork, then start to eat. I keep an eye on Benno as I do, but it seems that his table manners aren’t much different from mine. Although I think this to be the case, for some reason Benno keeps studying me closely. I wonder if I’m making some sort of mistake? I eat timidly, nervous that I’m making some small errors that I just can’t notice. I don’t think I’m doing anything exceptionally rude, though, so I have no idea what he could be quite so focused on.

For today, at least, the manners I know tell me that leaving just a little bit of food left on the plate would show that I’m full to my satisfaction. I had been thinking that leaving any leftovers would be rude, so I kept eating, but at some point my mouth just clamped shut when I tried to eat any more.

I’d had some degree of expectation for a rich man’s lunch, but the only real difference

is in the quantity, not the flavor. It seems like their cooking methods are still the same. Yet another letdown. Lutz, however, thinks quantity is king, and looks absolutely satisfied.

“Now that our bellies are full, shall we talk?”

“Yes,” I reply.

Benno sips on some dark, coffee-like beverage with an unusual scent, and we’re given herbal tea as we start our conversation.

“First, I’d like to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“Why did you rely on Otto for that?”

Benno’s expression and tone show both irritation and a little bit of anger. Lutz draws back, and I tilt my head to the side a little.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t quite understand what you’re asking. I’ve always relied on Otto for many things, so to what and to when are you referring?”

“Otto told me that he’d lent you nails, and that you’d exchanged that liquid you put in your hair for it, didn’t you?”

“Yes.... Was there a problem with that? I don’t think there was anyone else I know that I could have asked to get me nails.”

I have no idea why Benno would be upset that Otto gave me nails. Perhaps he’s upset that I gave him some shampoo? I sit there, head tilted to the side and not understanding at all. Benno lets out an enormous sigh.

“This is common sense to a merchant, but it would have been best for you to consult with me first.”

“With you, sir?”

“That’s right,” he says, with a solemn nod.

It seems like it this would indeed be common sense for a merchant of this world, but I still don’t understand it.

“But, the two of us aren’t your apprentices yet, right? I thought that making paper was going to be our test, so asking you for help seemed to me like it would be illogical.”

“Not true. If you can make that paper, then you’ll work here as an apprentice, and it’ll

be a good sold through this shop. The first person you should be consulting is thus *me*, and not Otto.”

Although we’re still not officially apprentices, it seems that we should perhaps still be thinking of him as our superior, since we have a conditional employment agreement. I had thought that making paper was our test, but I should consider it to be an extension of our jobs. If I think of it like that, then this matter is simple: Benno’s sub-apprentices asked someone who was not him for assistance in a matter related to their work, which reflects poorly on him as a supervisor.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “I understand what you mean. We damaged your reputation, or, rather, hurt your honor as our supervisor. We’ll be more careful of this in the future.”

Seeing that I’ve understood and reflected on my actions, Benno nods several times, then straightens up in his chair.

“Now then, let’s negotiate. I’m prepared to offer you all of the materials you think necessary to make paper in exchange for the manufacturing method for the liquid you use in your hair.”

“Huh? Making paper is our test to become your apprentices, isn’t it? Are you okay with supplying us like this?”

I thought that the test was to see if we could put everything together on our own. If Benno were to provide us with the materials we need, then our task suddenly becomes much easier.

“There’s no way that you could start a new industry like that when you have no tools, no manpower, and no prior investment. Still, you can’t be asking someone who, at least on the surface, has nothing to do with the project for assistance. If you had some form of collateral, you could get a loan, but you don’t have anything to offer, do you?”

It goes without saying, but Lutz and I, the children of poor people, have absolutely nothing we could use as collateral on a loan.

“Information isn’t something you could return to us when we’re finished, so we can’t use it as collateral, right?”

“That’s why, in this case we’re not discussing a loan, but a trade. I’m buying your recipe. In exchange, I’ll provide you with everything you need to make paper... Surely you don’t think this is a bad deal?”

“It certainly doesn’t seem to be a bad one.”

If we commission the custom tools we need and purchase the materials through Benno’s suppliers, there’s a chance the paper manufacturing method might leak out, but for someone like me, who can’t even procure a single pot, getting this assistance would be like removing the noose from my neck.

“Lutz, what do you think?”

He’s been sitting next to me this entire time, wordlessly listening. Making paper is both of our jobs. It wouldn’t be right for me to make a decision like this without getting his input as well. However, he looks away a little bit, shaking his head.

“...Thinking about these things is your job, right? Whatever you think is fine by me.”

“Really?”

If that’s what Lutz thinks, then I should try to get us the best terms for this arrangement that I can. If Benno will agree to provide us with both tools and, of course, raw materials, then we can focus entirely on making the paper itself.

“I’d like to clarify something, sir. When you say you’ll provide us with what we need, do you mean just the tools, or does that include the raw materials as well?”

“I don’t mind if we include the materials. You want to experiment with a variety of things, correct? I heard that Lutz was asking a lumber dealer about different kinds of wood.”

That’s right, a merchant’s broad network of connections can be terrifying. If unfamiliar children are wandering around and gathering information, that news is of course going to immediately start to spread.

“How long will this support continue?”

“Until your baptismal ceremony. Before then, you can’t become apprentices, after all. To keep appearances, I’ll sell whatever you manage to bring me. From the gross, I’ll withhold the cost of the materials and the sale, plus a commission; the rest will be yours. After your baptisms, you’ll come to this shop to operate the paper trade, and ten percent of the net profits will be added to your wages as a bonus.”

There’s no problem with what he’s proposing for before the ceremony. We come to him with any completed paper we make, and he sells it. Even if the commission he

charges is relatively high, our profits will still be assured.

However, I'm somewhat uneasy about what would happen after the ceremony. Having our share of the profits added to our wages sounds good, but, what happens if we're dismissed? If he's no longer paying us any wage, then it's possible that he won't pay us our share of the profits, either. It feels like there's an enormous gap between the common knowledge we should have in this circumstance and the knowledge we actually have from our daily lives. If paper production goes according to plan, once its profitability is realized we don't actually have any guarantees after that.

"In addition to the bonus to our wages, please let me retain the exclusive rights to manufacture the paper, and let Lutz retain the exclusive rights to sell it."

"...What do you mean?"

"Once we're able to make paper, it's possible that you'd fire us as soon as you got your hands on the actual goods, and that would be very bad for us. I would much rather have a long-term guarantee over the chance for immediate profits."

Benno's eyes briefly glimmer as he strokes his chin.

"Well, looking out for yourself wasn't bad at all. Your childish reasoning is, however, full of holes."

"Urgh... I'll have to study."

Since I still lack the necessary bits of local common sense, no matter how hard I wrack my brain, my reasoning will always still be childish.

"So, then, if we leave the rights to the paper at that, are you going to stake any claim with regards to the rights to your hair-glossing liquid?"

"No, sir, I won't contest you for the rights to my *'simple shampoo'*. I'd be selling those to you."

I have no intention of demanding rights to something I am trying to sell. To me, the circulation of paper is the best possible outcome, and I'd like to be able to offer Lutz's family some kind of guarantee of his long-term success as a merchant's apprentice, since they're still opposed to this path.

"Well, that's fine. The various rights relating to the manufacturing and sale of the paper will be yours. However, as long as the two of you are working here, you'll do all of your sales through this shop. You'll have no right to determine either the price of

sale or your profits, and there will be no bonus to your wages. That should cover everything, right?”

“That sounds alright to me. This is simply just insurance, after all.”

Right now, guaranteeing a place where we can work and earn a steady wage is the most important thing. I’m fine with earning our profits slowly, over the long term. Beyond just the hairpin that first caught Benno’s eye, my recipes, and even my beauty products, I can think of quite a few things off the top of my head that I can turn into serious profits if I can first get the necessary raw materials, after all.

“Alright then. That’s all for now, then. I’ll be heading out to the noblemen’s residences for the afternoon. I’ll be back in the evening, so until then, the two of you should stay here and fill out the orders for your supplies. Write out everything you’ll need in order to make your paper.”

I’m happy with how quickly our work is progressing now, but I still haven’t learned how to write up supply orders while working at the gates.

“...If I don’t know how to write a supply order?”

“I’ll have someone teach you. If you’re able to finish by this evening, I’ll show you something nice, as a prize.”

“Something nice?”

“When you are absolutely serious about ensuring your own profits, or making deals with the nobility, there is a way of forming a contract that is almost never used outside of extremely profitable, high-stakes transactions. This isn’t something either of you would have seen if you’ve just been doing your business in the town markets. This isn’t just a verbal agreement, I’ll guarantee you your rights.”

Certainly, I was hoping for a written contract, not just a verbal agreement, but I hadn’t thought Benno would be the one to bring it up.

“...Why would you go that far for us, sir? Wouldn’t it leave you in a better position if this were to remain a verbal agreement only?”

Benno shakes his head, smiling broadly.

“What I want is to promptly and contractually protect my rights to this ‘simple shampoo’. If we simply had a verbal agreement, then it would be quite problematic for me if you were to assert your own claim on it once it started to become profitable. This

contract will guarantee your own rights to the paper, in exchange for completely giving up your rights to the 'sham-poo'”

“Thank you very much.”

I wonder if he wanted to say that we shouldn't be fully trusting each other, since the two of us have only ever met twice. If we have a written contract, then both of us can rest easy.



As the employees start returning from their lunch break one by one, Benno appoints one person to serve as our teacher for the afternoon. The prim aura of a butler practically rolls off of him, so heavily that I instinctively want to call him Sebastian.¹

“Mark, this is Maïne and Lutz. Please teach them how to write up a materials order. I'll leave them in your care until I'm back.”

“Very well, Master Benno,” he replies.

Benno gives further directions to the other employees as he gets ready to leave. As he heads out the door, he stops briefly and turns his head to call out to Mark.

“Ah, I almost forgot. Mark, while I'm out, get everything set up for the contract magic.”

Contract magic?

I think I heard him correctly.

Huh? Was this... a fantasy... setting?

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. “Sebastian” is the name of the title character from the anime *Black Butler*. He is a butler.

Chapter 30

Contract Magic

At Mark's request, one of the female employees clears off the table in front of us. As she does so, he brings over a platter, bearing various things. It might be more accurate to call the thing he's holding a "tray", but since he's so incredibly butler-like, it's difficult to refer to the round, flat, wooden disk as anything but a platter.

Mark sets out the objects he brought on the table in front of us: a number of thin boards, a pot of ink, some kind of pen made from something like bamboo or reed, a slate, a slate pencil, and a cloth. He lines them up perfectly, without the slightest bend in the line, then looks up at us.

"Now then, I shall teach you how to write a materials order."

"Thank you very much," I reply.

"Th... thank you," mumbles Lutz.

Mark glances back and forth between the two of us, comparing us.

"Lutz, are you able to write?"

"...I can just write my name."

It seems that Lutz has held on to the name-writing lesson I taught him back when we were making clay tablets. However, the writing we'll need to do here isn't just limited to one's own name, so he turns away to hide an embarrassed expression. Mark nods once, with a thoughtful hum, then picks up the slate and places it neatly in front of Lutz.

"You say that you are able to write your name? I had heard that you were not the children of merchants, so... you've surprised me. You'll have no problems with the contract. However, if you were to work as an apprentice here, you would be expected to know how to write every letter. While Maïne and I work on preparing the materials order, why don't we have you practice writing some basic letters?"

It seems that Mark had thought Lutz, having not come from a merchant family,

wouldn't be able to write his own name, and had planned on having him learn how so that he could sign the contract. Changing his plans, he writes five or so letters on top of the slate, and has Lutz start practicing those. I wonder if he's in charge of teaching the apprentices how to write? He seems very used to this teaching method.

"Maïne, are you able to write?"

"There are definitely words that I won't know, but if you can teach me those, I'll be able to write them."

"Very well."

Mark places two boards in front of me, one with nothing written on it at all, and one that already has some things on it. Some sort of copybook, perhaps. There are a few words I don't understand, but I can read about seventy percents of it.

"This reads 'order for goods,'" he says, indicating the words at the very top. He also teaches me about the general format of the document. Once he shows me the words for "ordering proprietor", "goods requested", and "quantity requested", the rest of it is not particularly difficult.

"Now then, do you know what materials and tools you need to order?"

"Yes, sir."

With a big nod, I start to write. The board clatters as I write on it, though, making it harder than I thought it was going to be. On top of that, this unfamiliar pen is very difficult to write with, making this rather unpleasant. Compared to a pen like this, the soot pencils I made were far easier to write with, although the letters did crumble and smudge into an illegible mess of black at the slightest touch.

"Urgh," I say, "this is so different from writing on a slate."

"You're doing very well for your first time," says Mark.

Being praised like that lifts my spirits, and I press on. As my pen slides crisply across the board, Mark looks over my shoulder at what I'm ordering, frowning slightly.

"...Maïne, we can purchase a pot, but how big do you need it to be?"

"Ummm... I think one the same size as the second-biggest one we have at my house would be okay, but..."

Mark's frown deepens. It's clear to see that my explanation did nothing to clear things

up for him.

Right, I see. There's no way he'd know what I meant when I'd talk about my family's pots, right? However, I have no idea how to express the size of the pot I want. I don't think they use centimeters here, so how should I explain it?

"Hey, Lutz," I say. "About how big is the pot you use to carry water?"

"Hm? Oh, um... about this big," he says, making a circle with his arms.

After I pass the buck completely to a little kid... ahem, ahem, I mean, after I ask Lutz, the most knowledgeable expert on the matter for his opinion, Mark immediately takes out something like a tape measure and quickly measures the circle Lutz has made.

"And its depth?" he asks.

"Lutz, how deep is it?"

"About this deep," says Lutz, spreading out his hands. Again, Mark takes a quick measurement.

Since there's never been any sort of measuring device around, until now I've been doing all of my measurement by eye. There's never been any need for anything precise. However, although that might be fine when we're making things on our own, when we're placing orders for other people to fill, that kind of ambiguity is unacceptable. I hold my head in my hands, and let out a small groan.

I raise my hand, looking at Mark. "...Mister Mark, before I write out this order, would you please teach me the units of measurement for length?"

"Of course," he replies.

"Also, after we leave today, we won't be able to place any more orders since we don't have any way to make measurements ourselves. Could you lend us a measuring tape?"

If we can't measure the frame that we've already built, we can't make the paper mat.

"Let us order a tape measure for you as well. It seems like you'll be needing one now."

When we're making trial runs in order to determine things like the types of wood we'll need and the mixing ratios we'll be using, we'll be making postcard-sized sheets. However, when we've managed to perfect it, we'll be making much larger sheets. When we do, we will, of course, need larger tools. A measuring device is necessary.

Mark lends me a measuring tape. As he explains how to use it, I start working on writing out the order.

Steamer, pot, squared timber, ashes, tub, paper frame, drying bed, weights, flat board. Also, raw wood and sunset hibiscus sap.

Since I want to start making paper as soon as I can, I want to list out absolutely everything right now, but until we actually get our pot, I don't know how big the steamer will need to be. And, if we don't know how big the steamer will be, we don't know how large the wood we'll need the wood to be, either.

I describe the squared timber to Mark and explain how it's used, and we decide how large and heavy it will need to be. For the ashes, we don't know how much we'll need until we actually try making paper, so for now we order a small bag of it. For the rest of what we need, I wrack my brain madly, trying to figure out how best to explain it.

"Aaargh, this is hard. For the paper mat, I actually want to bring the frame we've already made directly to the craftsman and talk with him myself."

"I agree," replies Mark. "I'm not entirely certain what would would serve well as this paper mat that you describe. Even after looking at this diagram you've drawn for me, I still don't quite understand it."

Aside from the paper mat, which made even Mark give up, we somehow manage to get everything else written into out into an order.

As I've been grappling with this supply order, Lutz has been valiantly practicing his letters. I'm actually shocked to see that, even though I'm fairly certain he's not used to sitting down and working for long periods like this, he's showing an amazing ability to concentrate. This is very different from the apprentice soldiers that came to study at the gates. It's only natural, though: of course you'll be able to concentrate harder on something you think is important to you.

However, Lutz's facial expression is completely blank. I wonder if he's been pushing himself too hard?

"Now then, since we still have some time remaining, how about you learn how to calculate? Here, we add our sums using calculators like this."

After taking a brief break, Mark starts instructing Lutz in how to use a calculator. Since

I don't know how to use calculators in this world either; I sit next to him, watching and listening as well. As I mentally compare this simple device with an abacus, Mark briefly pauses his explanation and looks at me, head cocked slightly to one side in curiosity.

"Maïne, aren't you already able to do calculations? I have heard as much from the master."

"Oh, I, don't actually use a calculator."

"Then, how do you perform your calculations?"

"I do them on my slate."

On my slate, I start working out by hand the calculations Mark gives me. He calls my ability to work out large sums unbelievable, so, somehow, I wind up teaching him a little bit about how to do complex calculations by hand.

"If you have a calculator," he says, "you wouldn't need to know how to '*work things out by hand*', as you call it, correct?"

"There are times when you *don't* have a calculator, and it's useful then. Also, though I can see how you use a calculator, I don't actually know how it produces those numbers. It's very interesting to me."

I marvel at Mark, who seems completely mystified by an arithmetic lesson usually reserved for elementary school students. The things I think of as completely obvious aren't completely obvious at all. Once again, I'm struck by how awesome Japan's public education system is.

Maybe it would be a good idea to not spread around this kind of thing too much?

In my view, sharing knowledge is a good thing, but I don't know if that meshes well with how things are commonly done in this world. Perhaps I've gone a little bit overboard, this time.



"It's almost time for the master to return. I'll start making arrangements for the contract magic."

"What's 'contract magic'?"

I can't stop my heart from pounding when I hear those words, the first fantasy-

sounding thing I've heard since coming here. I had never even considered that a world as filthy and unpleasant as this one could possibly contain something as fantastical as magic.

Could I maybe use magic too? Is that my reincarnation-story-protagonist cheat?! Exhilarated, I sit on the edge of my seat, waiting for Mark's answer.

He chuckles at me. "Magic, as you know, is something that only the nobility possess."

"...Only the nobility?"

"Yes, that's right. Since it's so rare for people like us to see, it's not something that we understand very well."

In an instant, my joy at having found myself in a fantasy world is smashed to bits.

Only the nobility have magic? What the hell. They're not just keeping books from me, but magic too? Those damn *aristocrats*.

"Contract magic was originally created as a way to keep the more violent noblemen in check. To perform it, you need a special ink and paper. If you write and execute a contract with those, then you'll be bound to the terms of the contract by magic. It's a powerful way to ensure that neither party breaks the terms of their agreement."

"Huhhh, that really is convenient."

A contract, guaranteed by magic, that can't just be torn up and ignored seems very useful indeed.

"It's convenient, but the paper and ink are magic tools, and are thus both very rare and very expensive, so it isn't used except for the most profitable contracts."

I see. Somehow, it seems that Benno sees a tremendous amount of profit in my simple shampoo.

Certainly, consumable products have that kind of power. If you run out of them, then you'll need to get more. I can't imagine a woman out there who would ever let their supply run out once they got used to having glossy, silky hair. This is doubly true for those women with money, like the noblewomen who put so much effort into their appearances.

...Did I perhaps sell this for too cheaply?

As soon as that thought flashes through my head, I remember that it's not good to be too greedy. What Lutz and I need are security, stability, and a firm financial footing. I should focus on securing that.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," says Benno, walking quickly as he walks through the door of the shop. It seems like he was actually concerned about how long we were waiting.

"Are you finished with the materials order?"

"We've written up what we can for now."

I indicate the pile of boards that we've accumulated behind me. "That's a lot," he murmurs. There's still stuff we need to measure, Benno, so there'll be even more soon. We're counting on you.

"How is Lutz doing?" asks Benno.

Mark proudly places his hand on his chest as he answers. "He was already able to write his name when we began, so ever since then he has been devoted to learning how to write beyond that. This young man has an excellent memory."

"Ah, I see."

Even though Mark is praising him, Lutz only manages a small nod of acknowledgement, as if there's something big on his mind. He's spent a full half of a day studying, so it's likely that he's quite tired by now. Doing something you're not used to is very exhausting, after all.

"Mark must have explained this by now, but for this contract magic we use a paper specifically used for contracts and a special kind of ink. This is something that only merchants who've been approved to work with the nobility can use."

Benno takes out a small ink bottle with a peculiar design. At a glance, it looks like it contains regular ink, but it seems like it must be something completely different. As I watch him intently, Benno neatly spreads the blank contract out on the table in front of him.

"...Is it okay for you to be using that? It looks very rare and expensive."

"I wouldn't be using it if I didn't think this was a very important contract. Don't worry about it."

...If you tell me not to worry about it, I'll worry about it.

Benno dips a pen into the inkwell, then smoothly begins to write out the terms of the contract. The ink is actually not black, but a rich blue. As Benno fills the page with neat, practiced handwriting, I follow along closely.

Maïne agrees to transfer all rights to her Simple Shampoo to Benno.

In exchange, Benno agrees to assume all costs of the paper-making enterprise to be undertaken by Maïne and Lutz, until the date of their baptismal ceremony.

Maïne will retain all rights relating to the manufacturing of the paper, and Lutz will retain all rights to the sale of the paper.

However, they will retain neither the right set the sales price of the paper, nor the right determine their profits.

Maïne carefully reads the contents of the contract from end to end, verifying that nothing strange has been written. This, however, is only a pretense. In reality, I'm taking this time to deeply inhale the intoxicating scent of fresh ink on paper.

Aaah, I want to make paper, then make books, so badly...

"...Is there some sort of problem?" asks Benno, incredulously.

With a sigh, I come back to my senses. I turn to face a suspicious Benno and an amazed Lutz. I think Lutz might have realized that I was captivated by the smell of the ink.

"Wha?! Ev... everything looks fine! You've written things out just like we talked about them, so there's no problems."

"...I'm fine, too," says Lutz.

Benno nods, then dips the pen into the inkwell once more.

At the bottom of the contract, Benno signs his name. He spins the pen around and offers it to me. I exchange a brief glance with Lutz, then accept it.

I run a finger across the parchment. It's so much softer than the paper I'm used to. Satisfied, I adjust my grip on the pen. I carefully dip it into the inkwell, letting the nib absorb just enough ink so that a tiny bead forms on its tip. I sign my name just beneath Benno's. Unlike writing on those wooden boards, this is a very pleasant surface to

write on.

Writing on paper feels far better than those boards, after all...

“Your turn, Lutz.”

Lips pressed together in concentration, Lutz takes the pen from me, dips the pen in the inkwell, and writes his name below mine. The blockiness of his handwriting betrays how unused to writing he is, but he still writes his name clearly and legibly.

“Now then...”

“Aaah! Mister Benno?!”

Benno abruptly pulls out a knife and slashes open his own finger. As Lutz and I watch on, startled, a drop of blood wells up on his fingertip. He smears it onto another finger, then presses down on top of his signature, sealing it with his blood. As he presses his finger tightly to the contract, the bright red blood is absorbed into the paper. In that instant, the blue ink of his signature abruptly turns deep black.

This is some scary magic, yikes!



“Right, and next is...”

Benno looks over at me. I’m paralyzed with fear, staring at the bright red drop of blood that lingers on Benno’s knife. Lutz looks over at me, sighs, then takes out his own knife.

“Give me your hand, Maïne...”

“Eek!”

I shove my hands behind my back without thinking about it at all.

“Maïne, you can’t do it yourself, right?”

“Th... that’s right, but...”

Cutting open my own finger is scary, but having someone else do it is scary too. I really hate pain.

“Whose idea was it to make this contract?” he says, patiently.

“M... mine...”

Steeling myself, I close my eyes tightly, then timidly extend my hands. Quickly, Lutz deftly slices open the tip of my left pinky. Blood starts to trickle down my finger, accompanied by a sharp, hot, stinging pain.

“Spread that blood to your thumb, then press it into the contract,” says Benno.

“Nnngh... guh!”

Trying very hard not to cry, I smear some blood on my thumb, then press it firmly onto the contract, where I’ve signed it. Just like Benno’s, the ink immediately turns pitch black. While Mark stops the bleeding and wraps a small cloth around my pinky, Lutz unhesitatingly cuts open his own finger and leaves his own bloody seal on the contract.

How can he do that without even flinching?! Isn’t that scary?!

As soon as Lutz’s hand leaves the paper, the ink of the contract shines with a brilliant light, as if it’s burning. Spreading from the ink itself, a hole opens up in space, then snaps shut, taking the entire sheet of parchment with it. Even though I saw it happen right in front of my very own eyes, I can’t help but think it’s exactly like some CG you’d find in a movie.

...Wow, this really is fantasy. I can't believe that I've been living in a fantasy world!

As I marvel over this strange new way of signing a contract, I suddenly notice that the contract has completely disappeared, and snap back to my senses.

Aren't I supposed to get a copy of this?

"And, with that, the contract is complete. Violating it is a deadly matter, so don't do it, okay?"

"Deadly?!" I shout, terrified by his dreadful words.

He looks down at me with a broad, amused smile. "Well, if you don't violate it, you'll do just fine. But, this is the kind of guarantee you wanted, isn't it?"

"...Thank you very much," I say. "I'm very grateful."

In the end, I didn't get a copy for myself.



With the contract magic complete, Lutz and I leave Benno's shop. By now, the sun is quite low in the sky, and I watch it slowly sink towards the horizon, its golden hue gradually dimming to red. Lutz and I walk back the way we came, through streets that seem so different in the evening glow.

"It's later than I thought," I say. "Let's get home quickly."

The people around us seem to be in a hurry to get home as well, walking with a bit of extra speed. As we're carried along by the wave of traffic, I turn to Lutz.

"Today was super exhausting, huh?"

"...Yeah."

There's still more material orders for us to write up, but, the orders that I spent so much time filling out today are going to be processed, we'll get our materials, and we'll be able to devote ourselves solely to making paper. On top of that, the contract magic means that Lutz and I have guaranteed our rights. When we finish perfecting our paper, we won't get abruptly fired from the shop.

"Now, we just need to make this paper, then we're totally secure, Lutz!"

“...Mm.”

Lutz’s tongue is so heavy that I can barely hear his response before it disappears amongst the noise of the crowd. Usually, we talk a lot as we walk, to distract from the fact that I’m so slow. I wonder why his responses are so dull right now.

I wonder if this wore him out more than going to the forest? Maybe memorizing letters and learning how to do calculations doesn’t really agree with him?

I look over at Lutz as he walks beside me. His blond hair glows a brilliant red in the evening sun. As I look up at him, though, I can’t really make out the expression on his face through the shadow that falls across it.

“Hey, Lutz. What’s wrong?”

Even though I ask, Lutz doesn’t reply. He opens his mouth a little, looking like he almost wants to say something, but he immediately snaps it tightly shut. He hangs his head a little, as if he’s brooding over something. Like that, we walk in silence for a while.

Lutz always slows down for me, acting like my pace-setter. I wonder if we’re walking at Lutz’s natural speed right now? I’m almost having to jog to keep up. He’s acting so differently compared to how he normally is. I’m getting a very bad feeling about this.

“Wait, Lutz.”

We stop in the central plaza, and Lutz immediately turns to look away from me. He presses his lips tightly together, then turns to look at me. His face, half-shrouded in shadow from the evening sun, is deadly serious. Looking like he’s gathered all of his resolve, he opens his mouth, and speaks in a cracked voice.

“You... you’re Maïne, right?”

“Huh?”

My breath catches in my throat. In an instant, all the blood in my body turns ice cold, and a heavy weight clamps down on my heart. The sounds of the bustling plaza fade away, replaced by a deafening ringing in my ears, pounding with each rush of blood through my veins.

“If you’re really Maïne, then... how could you talk like that?”

“Like how?”

“Like how you talked to the shopkeeper today. I didn’t even understand half of it. Hearing Maïne talk about things I don’t know anything about, and keeping up with an adult... it’s strange.”

The ringing in my ears continues. I gulp nervously as I listen to him.

“Hey. You’re really Maïne, right?” he says, looking for confirmation.

I force down the prickling in my throat. I tilt my head way over to the side doubtfully, pretending like I have absolutely no idea what he’s talking about it.

“Well, um... Lutz, do I look like I’m not Maïne?”

“...My bad. That was a weird thing to say.... I was just a little surprised to see you talking like an adult.”

Lutz manages to put something like a smile on his face, then starts walking again.

I stand there, mutely, strange thoughts turning over in my head. When I notice Lutz’s figure slowly growing smaller in the distance, I start moving forward as well.

...I messed up, didn’t I.

That’s right. I haven’t interacted with very many people so far. Since I don’t have any strength or stamina, I haven’t been useful for much of anything. I’ve been working as Otto’s assistant, but for that, I’ve been at most a child that’s uncommonly good at calculations, and none of the kids I know ever come in contact with me while I’m there.

What I’ve done with Lutz has basically just been making clay tablets and carving wood. Even if my motives were strange, that’s still something a child could actually do, so my doing so wouldn’t be particularly suspicious.

However, today I showed off a speaking ability as good as Benno’s, and fought very hard to secure a position for me and Lutz. I fought *too* hard. I’m sure that Lutz didn’t see in me today a trace of the weak, frail Maïne that he has to protect from everything.

As we start making paper in earnest, the number of arguments with adults I’ll need to have is only going to increase. When we’re having tools made for us, I’m going to need

to be able to lay out proposals and give clear directions. I'm going to have to do more and more un-childlike things, but this is what I have to do in order to obtain paper for myself.

I'm going to drift farther and farther away from the Maïne that Lutz knows, I think. As Lutz and I work together, he's only going to grow more and more convinced that I'm not actually Maïne. This isn't that far off.

What would Lutz think if he knew this?

What should I, who am not Maïne, do now?

As we return home, Lutz's face is hidden in the shadows of twilight. I can't bring myself to walk at his side.

Chapter 31

Lutz's Most Important Duty

Even long after we've returned home, Lutz's words tumble around in my head. It looked like they were hard for him to say, but the fact that he was able to say them so clearly means that he holds some significant doubts in his heart.

What would he say if he knew I really wasn't Maine?

"Give Maine back," he would scream, "it's your fault she's gone!", mixing his confusion, his anger, his *fear* into a deluge of verbal abuse. And if he tells my family about it, then I'd suddenly have nowhere to belong.

I'd be driven from my home or even, in the worst case, subjected to this world's equivalent of a witch hunt. Their religion may tell them that I've been possessed by a demon, so they'll torture, maim, and kill me.

I shiver as all of the things I've read about witch hunts and the tortures they involve flicker through my head.

...I hate painful things. I hate scary things. If it looked like I was going to be tortured, I think I'd want to die instead.

Getting driven out or getting tortured would both be terrible, but before that happens, I could just let myself be swallowed up by my fever. The only pain there would be whatever would seep through the feverish delirium as I died. I have a simple way to throw away my life at a single thought without anyone being able to say otherwise.

I'd rather die than be tortured.

It's hasty, but being carried away by fever sounds way more comfortable than being tortured. When I think about it like that, I can breathe just a little bit easier.

On top of that, now that I'm thinking about it, what made me fight back against the fever and struggle to remain in this world was the fact that I'd made a promise to Lutz.

I told myself that I had a promise to keep, and drove my fever away.

I apologized to him, then introduced him to Otto, so I think I can tentatively say that I no longer have any regrets. After meeting with Benno and seeing that making paper is almost in my grasp, I realized that I wanted to make paper, and wanted to make books, but I don't actually have any particular attachment to anything else in this world.

It would be very simple for Lutz to avoid the me who is not Maïne if I disgust him, but if he does that, then the paper-making project won't succeed. If I can explain things clearly, then I think it's likely that Lutz will come along quietly until we finish making paper and finish getting hired as apprentice merchants.

If I can somehow manage to keep things together until we successfully make some paper, then I can die whenever I want.

Now that I've prepared myself for that, I feel much more at ease. It's not the most conclusive conclusion I've come up with, but it's the best compromise I've come up with.

I don't particularly care when it's time for me to die, but if I want to die without any regrets at all, I need to focus all of my efforts into making paper.



I may have *said* that I've prepared myself for the worst, but that doesn't mean that I have no reluctance at all to meet with Lutz again. The next morning, I meet him outside, just a little bit nervous.

"I'm going to the forest today," he says. "I've got to bring back a bunch of firewood."

My face lights up when I hear him say that. Today, I have to head to Benno's shop to write up the remaining material orders and instruct him in the manufacturing process for my simple shampoo. If Lutz isn't going to be there, this is the chance to get as many of the suspicious things that I need to do out of the way now, buying me some time.

"Got it," I reply. "I'm going to Benno's shop today. I need to place the order for the paper mat, and I'm going to need to talk with him about where our supplies are going to be delivered."

“...You’re going by yourself?”

“Yeah, I think so...?”

If Lutz can’t come with me, then I’ve got no choice to go alone today. Plus, since today’s primary order of business will be to dealing with adults, then it’s very convenient if nobody I’m particularly close to is there today.

“...You’re *able to go* by yourself?”

“Oh, I’m all right.”

Lutz clenches his fist tightly, looking like he wants to say something. However, he heads off to the forest without saying anything but “see you”.

I’ve been to Benno’s shop once. Twice, if you include when I went to Otto’s home. Going there by myself shouldn’t be any trouble at all. Carrying my slate, slate pencils, and set of material forms with me in my tote bag, I set off for Benno’s shop.

Alright, so! Let’s get as many things out of the way as I possibly can today!



“Good morning,” I say as I enter the shop. Merchant’s bustle about frantically, and customers constantly stream in and out of the shop. I make a beeline straight for Mark, the only person whose face I know. “Ah, Mister Mark! Would Mister Benno happen to be in? I’ve brought some more order forms with me.” “The master is busy right now, so I’d be happy to take them from you.”

I pull out the set of order forms from my bag and place them in his outstretched hand, along with the ink and measuring tape he lent me.

“I’ve filled out these orders, but as I mentioned yesterday, if possible I’d like to explain how I’d like them to be made. Would it be possible for us to decide on the best day to do so now?”

“The lumber dealer will be more free during the morning. How about we head there now?”

“Is that okay?” I ask. “The shop’s so busy, though.”

Mark looks around the room at the other employees as they deal with customer after customer streaming through the shop. His mouth turns up into a smile, much like

Otto's, emanating a hint of a black aura.

"The employees here are very well trained; I'm sure nobody would shed a tear if I were to step out for a moment."

There are a few of them that look like they're on the verge of tears already, though?

"Also," he continues, "as Master Benno told me, your requests are a special case. I do not have anything else I need to be doing at the moment, so he has determined that I am well-suited to assist you in this. Please, do not worry about me."

"Ummm, then, thank you for helping!"

Mark and I head out from the shop. It seems that the lumberyard we're heading to is near the west gate, where the town market is. Since the west gate is close to the river, most large goods are brought in through there. It's probably a very convenient place for a lumber dealer to set up his shop.

"I had some things that I was hoping to ask Mister Benno, but since it seems that he's busy, may I ask you instead, Mister Mark?"

"What is it?"

As we walk along the main road towards the central plaza, I start to ask about the things I wasn't able to while we were in the store.

"I was hoping that you could lend us a storehouse or workshop that we could use to store the materials we've ordered."

It's all well and good that we can place order after order for whatever we need, but we have no place to put any of it.

Mark blinks. "Where had you been planning to work before?" he asks, as if he hadn't even considered the possibility that we didn't already have a workshop.

"We were planning on splitting storing the tools between our two houses, and then we were going to bring everything either to the well or to the river in the forest to work..."

Originally, when we were planning on borrowing a pot from our families, we figured that we could essentially find substitutes for whatever we needed either in our houses or in the forest. We were thinking that we'd be able to beg our mothers for the ashes we'd need, and in the forest we'd be able to cut and then immediately use any wood

we'd need.

If we don't have to substitute things, we save a lot of time and effort, but the sheer amount of baggage we'll have immediately increases. We'll also have a lot more raw material to store, beyond just what we'd be using in a single day. However, neither Lutz's home nor mine has very much extra space in it, so I don't think that either of our families would let us store a bunch of stuff not actually necessary for daily life in there.

"There's a limit to what we can store between the two of us," I explain, "and it's difficult to work like that. It would be best if we could borrow a workshop, so I thought I should ask you about it, since there's nothing to lose. Wouldn't you say this is also part of your initial investment?"

As I talk, Mark rubs his temples, muttering about how unbelievable this is.

"You were planning to do something much more unreasonable than I'd originally thought," he says.

"We haven't had the support of any adults so far," I remind him.

There's only so much that children can do without the cooperation of adults. Now that I've traded my simple shampoo for Benno's support, I fully intend to use it to its maximum potential. If I let this opportunity slip, I don't think I'll have a second chance to try to make paper, so I can't let things like restraint or discretion hold me back.

"Hmm, I'll see what I can do to secure a storehouse for you."

"Thank you very much. With you on our side, Mister Mark, I have a feeling we'll definitely be able to get a storehouse for sure."

Based on what I saw last time, I think Mark might be something like Benno's second-in-command or right-hand man. (Because he looks so butler-y.) If Mark is the one doing the negotiating, there's no problem at all. He'll definitely be able to get us a storehouse.

"Do you have any special requirements for the storehouse?"

"Ummm, since there are a lot of things that we're going to need to go to the forest to do, it would be nice if it could be near the south gate. Besides that, as long as it has a roof and can hold the things we're ordering, anything is good."

"I understand.... Ah, there they are. That lumberyard over there."

He points at something ahead of him, but at my height, I can't see anything. I try hopping up and down, but I still can't see over the crowds. I grab his hand and quicken my pace.

"Right, let's hurry!"

Exuberantly, I turn towards where Mark is pointing, and break into a bit of a jog. In the next instant, my knees collapse, and my consciousness smash-cuts to black.



When I come to, I'm in a completely unfamiliar room.

Thanks to the thick covers of the bed I'm in, there's no prickling from the straw mattress beneath me. It's a very nice, comfortable bed. The ceiling is simple, but it's been carefully kept clean. I don't recognize it at all.

"...Where, am I?"

I sit up in bed and look around. Nearby, I see Corinna, working on some needlework. When she hears my voice, she stops working and immediately runs over to me.

"Maïne, you're awake? Benno came in carrying you, saying that you'd suddenly collapsed in the street. I was so surprised! I heard from Otto that you used to not even be able to walk to even walk to the gate in the morning without having to rest until noon, so since you didn't have a fever I thought you must just be tired and I let you sleep here for a while."

"Th... thank you very much for your care, ma'am! I am very sorry for the inconvenience!"

Eeek! On top of the bed, I breathlessly prostrate myself before her in apology.¹ It seems like I collapsed in a heap on the way to the lumberyard, so I was carried here to Corinna's house thanks to Benno. I've really imposed heavily on these people. If my mother or Tuuli hear about this, there will be no end to their scolding.

Aaaaaargh, I need to deeply apologize to Mark too! I'm sure he must have had a heart attack when I spontaneously collapsed in the middle of an ordinary conversation.

I think I now know why I collapsed. First, I didn't get very much sleep last night, since I stayed up far too late brooding over Lutz's words. Then, I got a little bit overenthusiastic when I decided to finish as much of the negotiations as possible today when Lutz wasn't around. On top of that, since it looks like my paper-making is starting to go really well, I've been so inspired that I haven't actually been paying attention to the condition of my own body. And, since I didn't have anybody near me to pay attention to my health for me, I didn't have anyone to stop me from overdoing it.

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is *extremely* weak. My body is a real piece of junk.

"Maïne, what are you doing? You don't need to apologize for that. I'll go contact my brother. I wanted to let your family know as well, but it seems that they weren't around..."

Today, I don't think anyone should be at home, so it's only natural that they'd be hard to get hold of. On top of that, my family thinks that Lutz is out there with me. I don't think they would have even imagined that I'd go out to Benno's shop by myself, then just spontaneously collapse. Just imagining my father, so worried that he flies into a rage, is terrifying to the point where I don't even want to imagine the magnitude of my mother's wrath when she finds out how much I've inconvenienced Corinna.

"Ummm, Miss Corinna. C... can you please keep this a secret from my family?"

"Maïne...?"

"My family thinks that I'm out with Lutz right now, so they'll get really angry at him..."

I try to use Lutz as a shield to negotiate an escape from my family's wrath, but Corinna only smiles, a smile so sweetly radiant that it's almost like that of a goddess.

"Now, now, they'll get mad at you anyway."

"Nooooooo....."

As I'm assaulted by expectations of how awful my scolding is going to be, loud footsteps approach before Benno bursts into the room. His reddish-brown eyes narrow sharply as he glares at me.

"Little girl," he says, in a low voice.

"Fwah!!"

With a snap, I sit up perfectly straight, kneeling on the bed.

“You took some years off my life, there.”

It feels like *my* lifespan is being eroded away by his threatening glare. All my conditioning takes over, and bow down, pressing my forehead into the mattress.

“I am extremely sorry and beg your forgiveness!”

“...What are you doing?”

“This is a *‘dogeza’*, how I show that my apology is of the utmost sincerity!”

“Ah, I see.”

He sits down next to me on the bed, ruffling his milk tea-colored hair as he scratches his head.

“I’d heard a bit from Otto about how frail you were, but I had no idea it was this bad.”

“Neither did I,” I reply.

“Hm?”

I got greedy, thinking that I could somehow manage to get by without Lutz there. When I decided that I’d be fine if I was only doing this much, I was unconsciously judging things based on my old body. Since I’m in Maïne’s body now, it’s only natural that I’d collapse.

“The problem was that I thought I could do anything, as long as I had the drive to do it.”

“Well, okay,” he mutters to himself, turning to look at me. “From now on, only come here with that kid. I won’t approve if you go out alone again.”

“...Yes, sir.”

I didn’t expect that I’d collapse just because I didn’t have Lutz nearby to serve as my pacemaker. I figured that since I am now able to make it all the way to the forest under my own power, then I’d be fine walking anywhere as long I was in town. I made too light of my situation.

“Go home for today. Mark’s worried about you, so take him with you.”

My eyes go wide. “Umm?! That’s too much for me to ask. I need to apologize to him and then I can go home by myself!”

I wave my hands frantically, trying to refuse. I couldn't possibly impose on Mark any more than I have already. However, Benno's face goes tight, and he glares at me with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Didn't I just say I don't approve of you going out alone? Did you hear me the first time?"

"...Yes, I did. I understand. I'll go home with Mark, even if it upsets him. Ummm, but, since I've finally managed to see you, I'd like to tell you about how to make my 'simple'—"

As I open my mouth to try and explain my main reason for coming here today, Benno grabs my head in one hand, a terrible look on his face.

"Now! Lis! Ten! Here!"

"Yes?!"

"I, told, you, to *go home!*"

"Eeek!"

As he yells at me, my head firmly in his grip, I tremble in fear. Tears well up in my eyes on reflex as I look up at him, but in the recesses of my mind, a dispassionate thought comes to life. Ah, I see. This is what truly being yelled at is like.

"From now on, you are prohibited from entering my shop without that boy with you! If your memory works at all, *remember this!*"

"I got it! I'll remember! Ow! Owowowowow!!"



After that, I had a bit of a discussion with Mark about whether I could walk home or whether he'd carry me, but he first said, kindly, "I don't want my heart to stop like that again, so please come along quietly," then, when I tried to insist on walking, he asked, "did your apology just now mean nothing?" and I decided there was no way I would win.

Giving up my futile resistance, I allowed Mark to pick me up, and was carried home. When we got to my home, my family saw me being carried by Mark and extracted a report of my actions for the day from him and, as I expected, they got angry. In the middle of their enormous lecture, my fever flared up with full force, and I was stuck in bed for two more days.



“So, basically, since I was such a hindrance and made everyone so mad, please come with me to the shop today.”

The day after my fever subsided, I explain my circumstances to Lutz, and ask if he'd accompany me to the shop. He stares at me, completely stunned, then lets out a huge, huge sigh.

“Haaahhh~... Didn't I tell you? I asked if you really could make it there, and you said it was okay. That wasn't okay at all, was it?”

“Is... is, uh, is that what you meant? I was thinking you were asking if I remembered how to get there... Lutz?!”

“Ahahaha! What kind of crazy world do you live in that you'd think that's what I meant? I'm always thinking about your health, aren't I?!”

I pout at Lutz, lips pursed, as he bends over in riotous laughter. He looks up at me, smiling so wide that it looks like his face might break.

“If you're collapsing like that, you really shouldn't go there without me,” he says.

“Yeah. Mister Benno actually banned me from entering his shop if I don't have you there too.”

“Ahahaha! You got banned?!”

I've been reminded of just how useless I am, so I'm feeling rather depressed right now, but for some reason Lutz is in an excellent mood. I'm glad he's not in a *bad* mood, but I kind of want an explanation.

I'd stayed up so late, worrying so much about what he'd said, and I thought that seeing him again was going to be so difficult, so why is he acting like he always does?!

“Hey, Maïne. Stop sulking, let's get out of here.”

Just like always, Lutz starts acting like my big brother, pulling me along as we start walking towards Benno's shop.

“Lutz, what did you get when you went to the forest the other day?”

“Firewood and some bamboo. Didn't you say that you wanted to whittle some bamboo down into something so that you could show it to some craftsmen?”

“Now that you say it, I did. I forgot!”

After Mark wasn't able to understand what I was talking about, no matter how I described it or how many diagrams I drew on my slate, we'd decided that Lutz and I should come up with a physical example. I'd completely forgotten.

“Hey, hey, keep it together!”

“Lutz, you're here to keep it together for me, so everything's just fine.”

In a world without notebooks, there's no way I can remember literally everything. I'm a notebook *fiend*. I used to always carry a notebook with me, and write down literally everything so that I wouldn't forget it. If I took good enough notes, it wouldn't matter if I couldn't remember something, so I guess I became so reliant on always having my notes on hand that my memory might actually have been pretty bad.

As I tell him that we're not going to forget anything if we've got each other, Lutz suddenly looks like he's almost about to cry.

“...Um, Maïne, when I saw that you're so good at writing, and that you can do all that math, and that you can talk with the adults about all those things I don't understand, I got really sad.”

“Huh?”

“I started thinking, what am I really good for? Like, maybe I'm not going to be any help in that shop at all.”

There's no way that anyone in that shop would expect a kid who hasn't even been baptized to be immediately useful. Lutz can already write his name, and he studied very hard, so I'm sure they think highly of him. It seems like he didn't notice that at all, and was only depressing himself by comparing himself to me.

As I console him, telling him that there's no need to compare himself to me so much, he looks up at me, smiling just a little bit.

“But hey, Maïne, you collapse a lot, and even though you're really smart you forget things, and you're not strong at all, and you're really tiny, and now that I think about it there's a lot of things that you actually can't do. Like, you're even banned from going to that shop without me there too...”

“That's so mean! There's some things I can do, you know!”

As I protest the way he's describing me, for whatever reason he clutches his stomach, nearly falling over as he's laughing so hard. He calms down after a while, then puts his hand on my head, ruffling my hair.

"The other day, when I said that you weren't really Maine, that was really mean of me. I'm sorry."

"...Oh. You were being... mean."

That's kind of deflating. I took Lutz's words so unbelievably seriously, but it seems like he was just being mean. The lingering threads of tension that coiled around me suddenly slacken.

"...I thought you really hated me, I'm so glad..."

"Nah, I don't hate you. Hey, let's keep moving!"

I take Lutz's outstretched hand, and we walk together down the street. My usual daily life feels like it's coming back around.

"Good morning," I say, as we enter the shop.

Mark looks up as we enter, then leads us to the back of the shop, where Benno is. He looks up at us, his eyes sharp as ever, rubbing his temples.

"Kid," he says, looking at Lutz, "taking care of this unreasonable girl is now your absolute maximum priority. This is your most important job, that nobody else can do. Got it? My heart can't take it, thinking about this kid could be walking around out there, then with no warning at all suddenly collapse in the middle of the street."

Lutz blinks as Benno, displeased, delivers his orders. He points at himself, doubtfully.

"...I'm the only one who can take care of her?"

"That's right. Besides you and her family, is there anyone that actually looks after this unreasonable girl? Know anyone?"

"Nope."

"How about anyone in this shop?"

"No, sir."

Lutz immediately shakes his head at each of Benno's questions. I think it might not be just my imagination that his face is practically shining and there's a hint of a proud

gleam in his pale green eyes.

Nngh, I want to grab those proud cheeks and stretch them out.

“Well then, kid, I’ve got a few questions for you. Today, can this girl walk out to the south gate?”

“If we’re watching our pace, then yeah. Since the south gate is near where we live, if she starts feeling bad we can also just go home.”

This is an everyday thing, but as both Lutz and my family well know, my physical condition is downright deplorable. I’ve been working to gradually train myself up, but no matter how I try I just can’t get my stamina to increase.

Even though, as a kid, I should be steadily growing up.

Benno looks down at me, the girl whose growth rate is terrible even though she’s been training hard, then picks up the bell on top of his desk and rings it once. The door opens with a click, and Mark enters.

“You called for me, Master Benno?”

“Looks like she can walk there if she watches her speed. Lead them there, please.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Huh?” I ask. “Where are we going? I thought the lumberyard was near the west gate?”

I didn’t think we had any business that required us to head towards the south gates. I blink, uncertainly, as Benno shrugs his shoulders.

“Mark told me about your request for a storehouse. I’ll lend you one that’s down by the south gates.”

“Really? Thank you very much!”

As I thank him excitedly, he lets out a little sigh.

“This isn’t for your sake, it’s for the boy’s. It’d be very difficult for him if he has to lug all of the tools everywhere while also looking after you.”

“Whaaat?! I can carry things too, you know! I’ve gotten a little bit stronger, lately.”

As I try to assert my own strength, all three of them simultaneously open their mouths in rebuttal.

“You shouldn’t do anything rash, kid, just go along with it.”

“I’m the one who does the lifting, so don’t do anything that’ll make you sick again.”

“Since you won’t have to carry anything, please look after your health.”

I, however, refuse. I’m not just going to go along with it. I promised Tuuli. I’m going to do the things that I can do, and I’m going to *increase* that number. I’m going to do my own things by my own strength, and I’m going to work hard until I can do the things that I can’t do right now.

With a meek expression, I nod in assent, but Lutz immediately reaches out to grab my cheeks, staring me down.

“Maïne, that face... you were just pretending to listen, weren’t you?”

How did that slip out?!

I look up at him, surprised, as he pinches my cheeks. Benno and Mark exchange glances, then nod.

From that day on, Lutz had a very important role in Benno’s shop: “Maïne Duty”.

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. *Dogeza* is a very Japanese way to express your deepest apologies or show the highest deference by kneeling on the floor and bowing so deeply that your head touches the ground.

Chapter 32

Material and Tool Orders

After we leave Benno's room, Lutz and I are led out of the shop by Mark and towards a warehouse near the south gates. It seems like the south gates are where a lot of craftsmen work, so there are a lot of warehouses in this part of the town. Also, there are a lot more water wells around here than in the residential districts, since craftsmen likely use a lot of water in their work.

The warehouse that Mark leads us to has a well right next to it. It's not a particularly large space; at a glance, it looks to be about three by three and a half meters wide.¹ It looks like it was originally used for workers to store raw materials in, with rough wooden shelves nailed onto the walls. The inside has been roughly swept out, so while it's still a little dusty it doesn't seem like we'll need to do any thorough cleaning. As I look around, I notice that both a pot and a bag full of something have already been left in a corner.

"When the items you order arrive at the shop, we'll send an employee to bring them here. Yesterday, they brought the pot and the ash you ordered; they are in the corner there. Today, the large tub and the stone weight will be arriving. Please be here when they arrive."

As I look at the black pot that Mark is pointing at, my heart fills with gratitude for Benno's assistance. A pot, something that Lutz and I could absolutely never have gotten on our own, is *here*.

"Whoa, a pot!!" I exclaim. "Lutz! Can you carry this?"

"Yeah, if it's this size. I could also strap it to my back, instead."

"Well, let's measure it! We need to figure out how big the steamer's going to be."

I have a set of ordering materials, that I borrowed from Benno's shop, in my tote bag. As I rush to take out the measuring tape, Lutz casually takes it from my hands.

"...Sure, let's measure it, but let's calm down a little first. If you get too excited, you'll get sick again."

“Urgh...”

Mark smiles wryly as he watches our exchange.

“If there’s no problems with this warehouse, then I’ll be returning to the shop today. Tomorrow morning, I plan to go to the lumberyard, so please make absolutely sure you’ve finished measuring and ordering everything you’ll need by then.... Hmm, I’ll leave the shop at the third bell, so I think I should arrive at the central plaza shortly after that.”

“Yes, understood!” I say. “Thank you very much for everything so far.”

Next, he takes out a set of chains and a key, a serious expression on his face.

“I’ll leave this key with you for now. This is the key to this warehouse. When you close up here, please make very sure you don’t forget this. Then, after you’ve locked up, you need to bring this key back to the shop. Lutz, it’s alright for you to do this by yourself. All right?”

“Yes,” I reply.

After handing the heavy key to Lutz, Mark turns smoothly on his heel, then exits the warehouse.

“Lutz, shall we get started?”

This warehouse doesn’t seem to have been used very recently, so it has neither chairs nor any boxes we might sit on. This isn’t the kind of place we can really take a break.

“How about we bring in the stuff we have already? The frame we made, the bamboo, the nails...”

“Yeah, that sounds good. The things we definitely have to do today are figuring out the size of the steamer, and then the size of the wood we’re going to use, right? I want to go over what I’ve got down on these orders so far to make sure I’m not forgetting any more lumber we need... after that, we could start on making bamboo strips?”

“If we’re cutting and shaving bamboo like that, we’ll need some tools for that too.”

I write down a list of the things we need to do today on my slate, then prop it up against the wall of the warehouse. This way, I think we won’t forget anything.

Lutz and I start heading home to get our things and bring them back to the warehouse.

I'm completely unfamiliar with the part of town we're in, so I'm very lost, but Lutz seems to know exactly where we are as he casually leads us through twisting, narrow alleyways. This warehouse is supposed to be close to the south gate and to my home, but where *are* we? As the question bounces around in my head, we turn a corner and arrive home. It's very close, much to my relief, since it'll be easy on my stamina.

"Okay," I say, "I'll go up and get everything in a basket and bring it back down here."
"Got it."

All I've got at my house is the nails. Since Lutz's family works in the construction and woodworking industries, it's very likely that if we'd left the bag of nails there, it's likely that someone in his family would have thought it was their own bag and taken them off. Similarly, if we left the frame or the bamboo we've collected at my place, they'd probably be mistaken for firewood again and burned up, so we left those at Lutz's.

I put the bag of nails and my knife into the basket. As an afterthought, I grab a dust rag and a broom, too. Since we don't have anything to use as a chair, at the very least, I want to sweep out part of the floor and lay down a cloth so that we have someplace to sit.

When I head back downstairs, Lutz is already waiting for me, with all sorts of wooden things sticking out of his basket.

"Lutz, what's that?"

"Oh, this is something Ralph messed up making the other day. I thought we could maybe use it as a chair for now."

"Heh heh, I also brought some things so we can sit down."

We head back to the warehouse, put the bag of nails on a shelf, and set the bamboo in a corner. I take out the tape measure, and the two of us measure the pot's dimensions and decide on the size of the steamer that we'll use, then write down on my slate the size of the wood that we'll be steaming.

"This look okay?"

"Yeah."

There's a lot of wood that we need to request from the lumberyard. We need the components for the steamer, the heavy stick we'll use to beat the extracted fibers, the large, flat board we'll need for the paper bed, another flat, but relatively thin board we

can stick the paper to as it dries, the bamboo that we'll need to make bamboo strips, and, of course, the wood we'll be making the actual paper out of.

While I double-check to make sure I have everything written down on the order form, I start wondering about what sort of characteristics we want in our wood. Do we want a hard or a soft wood, an old or a young wood?

"Alright," says Lutz, "let's do the bamboo strips."

"Sure. Can you make them small enough?"

"Hmm, last time they were still pretty big. I wonder how we can make thinner ones?"

Under Lutz's direction, we start work on making the bamboo strips. It's relatively straightforward to make the rough cuts with single, powerful strokes, but paring them down to something more slender looks like it's a much slower, painstaking process.

"Let me try, too. If it's fine work, I think I can do it."

I take out my own knife, select a slender piece of bamboo, and try to cut it down. Halfway through, though, it suddenly snaps in two. There's not enough length left on either side for us to be able to use it without it rattling around.

"This is *really* hard," I say.

"Yeah, it really is," says Lutz.

I look at the few, rattly strips we've complete, then at the frame we have to fill, judging how much we'll need to fill it.

I really want to leave this work to people who can actually do it. The two of us have neither enough time nor skill.

As we continue to work, a call come from outside. "I've brought your goods!"

An employee from Benno's shop has arrived, carrying a large tub and a stone weight that's light enough for Lutz to lift. I have him put them in the corner, next to the pot.

"Maïne," says Lutz, "our delivery came, so let's call it quits for today."

As Benno's employee leaves to head back to the shop, Lutz starts tidying up his tools. Since it's only just about noontime, though, I still think I have plenty of stamina to keep

working.

“I can keep going, you know?”

“...Tomorrow looks pretty difficult, so you should get some rest today. Hey, didn't you say you needed to do the cooking today?”

“Oh, that's right.”

My turn to cook came around while I was stuck in bed, so Tuuli covered for me. So, today, it's my turn.

“Also,” he continues, “since I'm going to the lumberyard tomorrow, I have to make sure I get all of my stuff done first.”

“Your stuff?”

“I need to make sure I get my share of tomorrow's chores done today. So, Maïne, go home. I'll go run the key back to the shop after that.”

“Got it.”

I nod in agreement, painfully aware of how much of a burden I am, then start putting everything back in order.



The next day, shortly after the third bell rings, we meet Mark in the central plaza, then head towards the lumberyard. It seems like Benno's shop is the busiest between when it opens just before the second bell and when the merchants start calming down at around the third bell.

Since Lutz is here with us today, I don't collapse on the way there, and we make it to the lumberyard safely. Logs are gathered in piles here or leaned against the walls, a scene not entirely unlike something I've seen in Japan. However, since everything that would usually be done via machine is instead done by hand, there's a huge number of very well-muscled buff dudes wandering around, yelling at each other as they haul wood around and cut it down to size. It's a very lively scene. Almost excessively lively, to the point where I'm a little bit scared.

“Ahh,” says Mark, “Foreman, it's been a while.”

“Oh! Mark, huh? That Benno kid's doing pretty well, isn't he?”

“Ah, yes. He's doing quite well. For today's business, though, these two are looking for some wood...”

The foreman sports a bristly mustache, peppered with gray, and a shiny bald head. He comes out to greet Mark, who tells him about our search.

“The little girl and the kid, huh? What the heck kinda wood do you need?”

His burly muscles don't match his age at all. As he stares down at me, my breath catches in my throat with a squeak.

“Umm, I'm looking for wood so that I can make a steamer...”

“Huuuh? What kind of wood's that?”

He repeats his question, a dubious expression on his face, leaving me at a total loss for words. I'm pretty sure that Lutz and Mark understand what I've been referring to when I talk about steamers, but I wonder if the foreman doesn't actually know about them? Or, maybe, do I have to actually tell him the specific kinds of wood that I need?

“Ummm, I need something that keeps its shape even when there's a lot of water vapor... ah, no, when there's a lot of steam; a hard, dried wood. Could you please tell me what kinds of wood like that you have?”

“Hoh? A hard, dried wood, hm. I think I have an idea of what you might need.”

The foreman nods to himself, then lists off the names of three different kinds of wood.

“We've got zwan, turaka, and pedithry. What'll it be?”

“What will it be, you ask... Lutz, do you know?”

Even though he's listed off some potential candidates, I have no idea at all what any of those are. I look over my shoulder at Lutz for help.

“Hmm? Zwan's the easiest to work with, right?”

“Well then,” says Mark, “let's go with zwan, then. You've decided on the sizes you'll need, correct?”

“Yes!” I say, pulling the order forms from my tote bag. Mark looks them over, double checking to make sure there's no errors.

“Hmm,” he says, “there are no problems here. So, foreman, please cut zwan to the dimensions listed here, then deliver it to the shop.”

“Alright!”

He glances over the order form, then hands it to a nearby young buff dude.

“Um,” I say, “next I need a thick board and a stand to put it on, also out of a wood that won’t warp when it’s wet.”

“I can sell you the wood, but if you want it put together into a stand you’re gonna need to do it yourself or find a furniture maker. You want these in zwan, too?”

“Yes, please,” I say with a big nod, handing him the order form for the thick board. He huffs as he looks it over, then I pull out another form to hand to him.

“This sure is a lot,” he says.

“I’ve still got more,” I reply. “This is for two boards, which need to be able to get wet, and also need to be thin.”

“How thin?” he says, with a frown. “If you cut wood too thin, it’ll start bending when you put any weight on it, y’know?”

I hum tonelessly, digging through my memories. When the image of the board that we’ll be sticking the paper onto pops into my mind, I clap my hands together in inspiration, then take out my slate from its bag. The slate pencil clacks against the surface as I draw a diagram.

“Ummm, it’s going to be set in a frame and reinforced from the back like this, so something thick enough that it won’t bend when that happens. I’m worried about the weight; I know I’m not going to be able to lift, it, but if Lutz can’t...”

“I’d be a failure of a man if I couldn’t lift something that big,” interjects Lutz.

There’s no way that Lutz could even begin to compare himself to that brawny foreman. A little anxious, I turn to face him, but before I can open my mouth he’s already wearing an unpleasant frown.

“I’m a man,” he says, “so it’s all right.”

If Lutz talks too big now, he’s going to wind up paying for it later, but if I say anything now, I’ll only be wounding his masculine pride, so I let it slide.

“Next,” I say, “we’ll need a squared timber out of a hard wood, like a club, or like the rod you use when you’re beating your laundry. This also needs to be a size and weight that Lutz can carry and swing around.”

“This sounds completely different than a laundry rod, though? What are you hitting?”

Those were the two things that came to mind when I was thinking of things that you

use to hit other things, but it seems that since a club is a weapon and a laundry rod is something mothers hit their washing with, the materials must be very different.

“Wood fibers,” I reply. “We’ll be boiling them until they’re limp, then beating them until they’re soft like cotton.”

“What’re you making, again?”

I cross my fingers in front of my mouth, making an X. “Sorry, but I can’t tell you.”

The foreman huffs again. “Getting the hardness and the weight balanced’ll be important, huh. If we’re gonna get this right, what kind of surface are you going to be doing this on? Stone? Wood? There’s more variables on top of that, too, yeah?”

All of my blood rushes to my head. I had completely forgotten that we’d need some sort of chopping block built that we could beat the fibers on top of.

“...I, I didn’t think about that. R, r, right, we need a block for that too! Can we order those as a set, please? I can write out the order right now!”

“Yeah, if you wanted to do it as a set you could add that to the order here, but... little girl, you’re going to write it?”

“Yes, I will...?”

My head pounds with the realization of my thoughtless mistake. Trying desperately to recover somehow, I immediately take out the measuring tape, the ink, and the pen from the order-writing set, then I add to the form the dimensions of the chopping block, underneath the description of the stick itself.

“Mister,” I say to the foreman, “will this do?”

“Yeah, that’ll do. Is that your entire order?”

“No, next is... um, is there a kind of wood that has really long, tough fibers? If possible, we’re looking for wood with sticky fibers, but if you can’t then it’s okay as long as they can stick together well enough and we can get a lot of them from the wood. I heard that year-old wood is the best for this; after the second year the fibers get too hard and brittle so they get really hard to work with. So, we’re looking for a young, soft wood.”

As I list out the characteristics of the wood that would be easiest to use in paper, the foreman’s reaction isn’t very good. He tugs on his mustache in thought, frowning.

“Hmmm. Wood that young isn’t very useful, so we don’t actually carry anything like that.”

It seems that this lumberyard doesn't deal in year-old woods unless they get a special order for it.

"Um, then, if you have any idea what kinds of wood might have those traits, could you please at least give us a list of them? We don't know exactly what kind of wood we'll be using, so we can gather the small quantities we need ourselves to test. When we find out what we do need, though, can we order it through you?"

"I can't say until I know how much you're ordering. If it's too little, it's hard for me to make any money."

"I understand.... Lutz, could you please find out about the names of these trees and where we can find them? I don't think I could tell them apart, myself."

It looks like we're going to have to gather our raw materials ourselves after all, at least to start. Once we get our prototype finished we'll have figured out what kind of wood we're going to want to use, so then when we start mass production we'll be able to place an order for it.

Lutz goes off with one of the young buff dudes to learn about the different kinds of wood and how to distinguish them. Meanwhile, I take out a bamboo strip to show the foreman and ask some questions.

"Ah, that's right," I say, "We need bamboo strips like this; do you have bamboo here?"

"Not that much, but yeah, we do," he says, pointing towards one of the many piles of lumber. There, I see the familiar shapes of bamboo poles stacked up.

"Could you make these bamboo strips here?"

"Fine work like that is a craftsman's job. Ask a craftsman."

"A craftsman, okay. Thank you very much. Um, that's everything in my order for today."

"Alright," he says, looking over the stack of order forms. "When it's all done, you want it sent to Benno's shop, right?"

All of the order forms I handed him are being placed in Benno's name. Since we have a contract saying that he'll provide the initial *material* investment in exchange for my simple shampoo, it seems that Benno's the one doing all of the actual ordering. It seems that the formality of having Benno purchase and receive the goods, then have them delivered to us is important to the way the contract magic works.

"Yes, please. Thank you very much for your assistance."

The foreman heads back off to his duties. As I wait for Lutz to come back, I stick my hand into my tote bag and feel around, making sure I didn't accidentally forget to turn a form in. All I have left are the order for the stand, which I need to find a furniture maker for, and the order for the bamboo strips, which I need to find a craftsman for.

Hmmm, what should we do about the stand for the paper bed? To be honest, a stand like that doesn't seem like the kind of thing I need to expressly go to a furniture maker in order to get.

"...Mister Mark," I say, "Do you have any wooden boxes at the shop that we could use for a table? I think it would be wasteful to ask a furniture maker to make a custom one."

"Ah, I understand. I'll make to find some for you. How many do you need?"

"We're going to need two that are the same size so that we can put a board on top of them. I'd be really happy if we could get two or three more, but the size of those doesn't really matter."

Mark readily agrees, since this will be far cheaper than ordering something custom from a furniture maker. When Lutz comes back, Mark says that it's time to split up for the day.

"Perhaps we should go to the craftsman's workshop another day. I'd be unable to get in contact with one today, so shall we part ways here?"

"Alright," I say. "Thank you very much."



The next day, we head to the forest to gather firewood. While we're at it, I try to figure out if there was any trees out here that might work for making paper, but since Lutz is ultimately far more knowledgeable about this than I am, I basically just foist the entire task off onto him. I mean, every single tree I see looks just like every other tree to me! Sure, there's differences in the color and texture of their bark, but there's so many different variations, I can't actually remember any at all.

Then, when we stop by the shop to borrow the warehouse key so that we can store what we've found, Mark informs us that he was able to get in contact with a craftsman who could help us.

Mister Mark, you're amazing at your job. Such a quick worker.

Thanks to Mark, five days after our visit to the lumberyard, we're able to meet with a craftsman. As usual, we meet in the central plaza around the third bell, then head towards our destination. It seems that since this craftsman's workshop gets a lot of traffic from other workers, it's located near the south gates.

Unlike the foreman at the lumberyard, this craftsman is, if I had to describe him, a rather slender man. He has the muscles he needs to do his job, but the rest of his physique is the embodiment of minimizing unnecessary things. His ashen hair reaches down to his back, loosely tied into a ponytail so that it doesn't get in the way of his work.

"What's the job?"

He scans me up and down with his sharp eyes, the picture of the neurotic artisan. I reflexively cling to Mark's pant leg.

"I'd like thin bamboo strips like this," I say, pulling one of the ones we've already made out of my tote bag and handing it to him. "I asked at the lumberyard if they could make it, but the foreman said I should go see a craftsman..."

He turns the imprecisely cut strip over in his hands, his mouth pursed.

"Do you need it to be wavy like this?"

"I tried to make it as straight as possible..."

"Hm, if I account for your lack of skill, it's clear what you're looking for. Got it. Those are the ingredients?"

The craftsman points at the bamboo that Lutz has in a basket on his back, which we retrieved from the warehouse on our way here. We take it out of the basket and stack it up for him.

"That all you need?"

"Um! I'm hoping that you could make a *'bamboo mat'*, do you think you can?"

I draw a diagram on my slate, then use the one bamboo strip I have as a prop as I try to explain what I'm looking for. Despite my crude explanation, it seems that the craftsman somehow manages to capture the image of what I'm looking for.

“That’s going to be a real pain to make, but I can’t say I can’t make it.”

“Really? Amazing!”

“*But*, I can’t make that work if I don’t have a strong enough thread. Go get me some of that before you place the order.”

He flicks his hands at us as he talks, shooing us away. However, there’s no way I can let myself be driven out like this. After all, I have literally zero idea as to what kind of thread is going to be tough enough to work.

“Umm, I’m sorry, but I don’t really know what thread is strong enough for you. Would you be able to help me look, please?”

“I’m free to head to the thread wholesaler right now, so I can, sure.”

“Let’s go!”

I lift my fist enthusiastically to the sky. I’m quite happy that this disagreeable-looking craftsman suddenly said something so cooperative.

“Oi, Maïne,” scolds Lutz from behind me, grabbing me by the top of the head. Pouting, I spin around to face him. He glares at me, his green eyes narrowed in irritation.

“Don’t be so rash. You’re the first one who’s gonna pay for that, you know.”

“It seems that today she would like to be carried in my arms today as well, doesn’t it?” says Mark.

“Eek?!” I say.

I don’t know if he clearly remembers how much I hated having been carried all the way home last time; his pleasant smile shows no indication either way as he approaches me. As I cautiously back up, the craftsman, sounding irritated, speaks up.

“Are we going or not? Pick one!”

“We’re going, of course,” says Mark. “Maïne said so after all. Right?”

Mark captures me, lifts me up in his arms, and hauls me off to the thread wholesaler. Since we don’t have to worry about watching my walking pace, there’s a big difference in our speed. I’m quietly surprised that, even though I’m being held in his arms, it’s a remarkably smooth ride. I let out a dissatisfied sigh, my face near his shoulder.

I’d planned to keep forging on, but I just wound up being a bother again...

Since the thread wholesaler is along the workers' streets, it's not actually very far away. Even still, as someone who's mentally an adult, being carried in someone's arms like this makes me want to flee far, far away. When we arrive at the wholesaler, he *finally* lets me down, letting me walk on my own two feet while in the store.

"Whoa, there's so much thread here!"

"Yep," mutters the craftsman, "because it's a wholesaler. For thread."

Despite his quip, I'm still amazed by the spectacle of the huge quantity of thread that's gathered here. In this city, the stalls in the town market don't carry anything more than what they can reasonably sell to individual customers, and the shops on the first floor of buildings along the main streets have limited amounts of merchandise on display, just enough for samples, to minimize the damage that a robber or a burglar might cause. It's very rare to see so much of a commodity crammed into a space like this.

"Which of these are the tough ones?" I ask.

In Japan, the thread we use to when making bamboo *keta* mats is spun from raw silk. Here, I don't know if silkworms, let alone silk, actually exist, so I don't know how to pick a strong enough string.

"Silk from a spinne would be the strongest, especially any harvested during their breeding season in the fall. However, it's expensive, yeah?"

I glance at Mark questioningly, and he returns my glance. I'm not the one actually in charge of the money. Mark is, as he's been entrusted with the final say over the contents of Benno's purse.

"Spinne silk would be fine, but it shouldn't be necessary to be particular about it being from the fall, is it?"

"...Yeah, you're right, but is spinne silk really okay?"

"Yes, it would be."

It seems like spinne silk is a very highly-priced item. The craftsman slowly, gingerly takes down a spool from a shelf full of the most expensive, highest quality goods. Startled, I exchange another glance with Mark.

"However," he says, "if there are complaints about the final product, I will not forgive your mistakes. I trust that you'll finish this task to perfection."

Mark briefly looks over the order form that I've retrieved from my tote bag, then hands it and my sample bamboo stick to the craftsman with a broad smile.

"I leave this in your capable hands."

"...Yeah."

Two postcard-sized mats to fit the paper frames. With that, all of the orders for our tools have been successfully placed, without any trouble at all. I breathe a sigh of relief.



After that, I wind up playing house-sitter at the warehouse for a while, watching as the goods we ordered start to arrive. As that happens, Lutz and I work to build our tools using the parts that have reached us already.

All the while, we routinely head into the forest to do our gathering, and although we make sure to help around the house enough that we won't get scolded by our families, we steadily gather our raw materials.

We don't yet know if we're going to use edil fruit or the bodily fluids from a slamo bug as a substitute for sunset hibiscus sap, so we start by trying edil fruits. It seems that in the autumn, when winter preparations begin, the sticky juice from an edil fruit is commonly spread along window frames, which are then stuffed with cloth to seal the windows off from drafts. As such, in just a little while, the number of fruits available at the town market is going to start decreasing, and the price is probably going to start going up, too. So, since it seems like we won't be able to use edil fruit, we're going to need to use slamo bug juice.

Also, when it came time to go shopping for edil fruit, I was once again laid out with a fever, so Lutz went to meet Mark by himself. I heard from Lutz that he was finally able to get some valuable experience from working with Mark, so I briefly wondered if I've been butting in a little too much.



By the time all of our raw ingredients have been collected, my health has recovered, and we are finally able to start working on making the paper itself, a month and a half has passed since our very first meeting with Benno.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. The original measurement is given as "6 tatami mats". Tatami mats are a kind of woven floor, built to standardized panel sizes, and rooms are generally sized by the number of panels you could fit into the room. A standard layout for a 6-tatami room is about 2.75 x 3.65 meters; I've rounded to the nearest half-meter to preserve the roughness of the measurement.

Chapter 33

Starting Paper Making

Today, we can *finally* start making paper. I'm raring to go, excited to the point where Lutz might tell me that I need to back it off a bit.

Today's tasks include finding and cutting down wood from trees that we think might work, based on what we were told at the lumberyard and what Lutz learned after asking various people he knew. Then, I'm thinking that we'll set up next to the river and steam the wood, then submerge it in the river and strip the rough outer bark from it. We can then leave that bark in the warehouse to let it dry out.

Since our prototype is only going to need to be postcard-sized, I don't think we need very much raw wood to use as materials. However, since we'll need to steam it for several hours, we'll need to gather a lot of wood to use as fuel. If we're working in the forest, gathering that much firewood shouldn't be particularly difficult, and if we start to run out we can always go and find more. Lutz, though, seems to be having a hard time lugging both the pot and the steamer.

In order to do this, he had to go out early in the morning to get the key to the warehouse, then go back to retrieve the pot and the steamer. Since we'll have more work to do in the warehouse afterwards, he also let Mark know that we'd be keeping the key for the day. All of this preliminary work went flawlessly, but right now, things are unexpectedly difficult.

"Lutz, are you okay?" I ask.

"...Yeah," he says.

Although he says, that, he does not look at all okay as he trudges forward, the pot and steamer tied securely to his back. It looks like he's about to give out any second now.

The cause is simple. When we looked at the pot, he judged that it was a weight he'd have no problem carrying, and he did the same when we finished the steamer. "Yeah, I can carry this much," he said. However, he didn't actually think about what it would be like to carry both of them simultaneously all the way to the forest.

“Can I carry the steamer, maybe?”

“No, it’s too much for you.”

“...Okay.”

If Lutz says it’s too much for me, then it’s probably too much for me. All I can do right now is cheer Lutz on while I make sure to get to the forest without overdoing it.

As always, a number of other children are walking with us as we all head to the forest together.

“Lutz, whatcha got there?”

“What’re you doing in the forest today?”

Since Lutz is carrying both a pot and a never-before-seen steamer, the other children are very curious.

“A pot and a steamer,” he says, tersely. “Making paper.”

The stuff he’s carrying must be very heavy for him to be so taciturn. The children, though, are so full of curiosity that they pay no attention to his mood and keep peppering him with questions.

“Huh? What are you making?”

“Is it something fun?”

“...No,” he replies. “I have to do this if I want to get my apprenticeship, they’re seeing if I can do it or not.”

“Oh, okay! Got it. Good luck, Lutz!”

I thought the questions were going to be endless, but as soon as they heard that it was something Lutz needed to do to secure his apprenticeship, they immediately started drifting away.

I have no idea why the kids left us alone so quickly, so I ask Lutz about it. He says that even though a lot of kids get their apprenticeships through their parents, a lot of the more popular professions can get a flood of applications. In those cases, some parents will change tack, but it looks like there’s also some apprenticeships that have selection tests.

It seems that other children are absolutely forbidden from interfering in these tests. There's probably cases where some kids mess with others out of revenge, but if word of that were to get out then it would make their own job search even harder.

Oh ho, I see. Trying to get into a popular job is the same, no matter where you go.

When we pass by the gate, Otto waves at us encouragingly. "Good luck!" he says. He probably noticed the pot and steamer on Lutz's back and figured out that we're getting started making paper.

"Yeah, we'll do our best! Oh, Daddy! We're heading out," I say, waving at him.

My father has been sulking a bit lately since I've been spending so much time with Lutz lately, but he still waves back at us, wearing a complicated expression that flickers somewhere between smiling and sullen. He's not happy that I'm on such good terms with both Otto and Lutz, but I know very well that, with his particular mentality, there's no way he wouldn't be happy when his daughter waves cheerfully at him.



"Whoof. I'm tired~. That was way heavier than I thought."

Lutz rolls his shoulders, having set the pot and steamer on the ground near the riverbank.

"Good work, Lutz. Want to take a break for a little?"

"Nah, steaming's going to take about a bell's time once we start, right? I'll rest then."

Even as he's saying that, he's already starting to pile up rocks in a circle, building a makeshift stove that we can set the pot on top of.

That's Lutz for you. Nothing's too impossible for him.

Compared to Lutz, who's so used to outdoor work, my previous life was all about indoor work, so I don't have very much experience with this at all. Not being very useful, though, is basically my natural state. All I can do right now is gather up wood from the nearby area and hand it over to Lutz. He fills the pot up with water from the river, sets it on top of the stove, then quickly piles up wood underneath it and gets a fire going.

“I’ll head off and start cutting down some wood, so how about you take a break and watch the fire for a while?”

“Aren’t you the one that needs a break?!”

“Well, if your health gets worse before we can make paper, I’ll really be in trouble. You’ll probably be fine gathering more wood around here, but don’t move around too much. Also, if anything happens, give a shout. Got it?”

“...Alright.”

Like Lutz asked, I quietly stay near the fire, keeping watch over it. Although, it looks like it’s going to be quite a long time before it actually starts boiling, so I’ve got some spare time. I gather up more fallen wood from around the area, bring it back to the firepit, and feed it into the fire.

When I’ve collected all the wood from the immediate area, I head a little bit further into the forest looking for more. As I reach down to pick up a stick, I see something half-buried in the dirt. It looks like a large red berry, kind of like a pomegranate.

“Huh? What’s that?” I wonder aloud. “Is it edible? Or maybe can I press oil out of it?”

I’m convinced that most of the things in the forest are used in day-to-day life around here. After all, I’ve been living in this world for nearly a year now, so it’s only natural that I’d start thinking like it. When I was in Japan, I wouldn’t have done anything like arbitrarily gathering up whatever I see on the ground.

“I’ll have to ask Lutz about this,” I muse.

I grab a sturdy stick and start digging around the red berry, until I have it free of the ground. I reach down to pick it up, only to find it rapidly heating up in my hands.

Oh no! This is probably some incomprehensibly weird fruit.

Somehow, it seems like this red berry is another one of those really strange ingredients that I sometimes wind up using in my cooking. To be honest, I have literally no idea what’s about to happen, much less how to deal with it. Frantically, I summon all of my power, and throw it as far away from me as I possibly can... which means it lands about five meters away.

Bang! Ba-ba-bang! The red berry bursts open violently, scattering everywhere.

Suddenly, countless plants start sprouting from the ground. As I stare, dumbfounded, they quickly grow until they're up to my ankles.

What?! What the hell?! What are these pop-up trees?!¹

I frantically run away from this clearly abnormal situation, yelling at the top of my lungs.

"Lutz! Lutz! Luuutz! Something weird's happeniiiiing!"

"What's wrong, Maïne?!"

Lutz comes crashing through the trees, probably from somewhere nearby. As soon as he sees what I'm pointing at, all the color drains from his face. He sticks his fingers in his mouth and lets out a piercing whistle.

"Tronbay!" he yells.

"What's tro—" I start to ask, but he cuts me off.

"I'll explain later!"

He immediately unsheathes his machete, chopping away at the rapidly-growing plants. By now, they're up to his knees (and up to my thighs). It's very clear that these fast-growing plants are actually extremely dangerous.

"Head to the river, Maïne! Got it?!"

"G... got it!"

There's no spare time to chat in the middle of an emergency. I flee back towards the riverbank. The other children come running in from the other direction, summoned by Lutz's whistle.

"What's u— whoa, tronbay?!"

"It's tronbay!"

"Cut it down, now!"

As always, I'm the only one who doesn't know what's going on. It looks like all the kids who came running already know what these pop-up trees are. Like Lutz, they all take out their knives and machetes as they head towards the plants.

As the children run around, cutting down the pop-up trees, I sit by the pot and watch

the reaping unfold. *The foe is a plant*, I think to myself, *so couldn't I just burn it down since I've got fire here?* However, I'm already winded from that little bit of running I did, so I can't really do anything but sit by the river like Lutz told me.

"Any more still growing?" I hear.

While I sat, worn-out, by the riverbank, the reaping of the pop-up trees seems to have drawn to a close. The children search about, making sure that there aren't any that they've missed.

"I think we're alright now."

"There may be more tronbay around, so be pay attention out there when you're working. If anything happens give a whistle."

The children disperse, going back to their gathering. Lutz comes over to stand next to me.

"I told you to go sit by the river... was that too much?"

"...Yeah, too much."

Lutz just finished chopping down a large number of plants, but I'm still the one who's shamelessly gasping for every breath. If someone were to stumble across us like this, they definitely wouldn't be able to guess who was on the front lines of that battle.

"Lutz, what was, that?"

"That was tronbay."

Tronbay, he says, are extremely fast-growing trees that, if you let them grow to adulthood, immediately suck up all the nutrients from the surrounding soil. Also, if you let them get too big, they become extremely difficult to cut down, to the point where you need to request the order of knights to send someone to deal with them.

Huh, so there's an order of knights here? As I'd expect of a fantasy world.

"It's weird, though."

"What is?"

Lutz sits down on a rock on the riverbank, catching his breath, his head tilted to one side in puzzlement.

“It’s kinda early for tronbay to show up. It’s usually much closer to autumn before you start seeing them.”

“Huh...”

“They also were growing *really* quickly. But the soil around them wasn’t really churned up...”

“Hmm!”

“What, you don’t think that’s weird?”

Lutz stares at me, unimpressed by my lack of reaction. Asking me directly like that, though, puts me in a tight spot. This is the first time I’ve seen something like this, so I can’t tell if it’s weird or not. Trees popping up out of the ground like that is weird enough to me already.

“Umm, I’ve never seen tronbay before, so I can’t tell if that was any different than usual.”

“Ah, that’s right. You’ve only been coming to the forest since the spring.”

He nods several times in understanding. As he does so, the pot starts audibly bubbling as the water comes to a boil.

“Lutz, where’s the wood?”

“It’s scattered somewhere around there, I think...”

He points over to where the tronbay was growing, hanging his head. It looks like he’d found enough wood well before the pot came to a boil, but he threw away all his hard work when the tronbay suddenly appeared.

“...Hey, Lutz. We’ve come all this way, so how about we try making paper out of tronbay? There’s a lot of it, and since it was cut down right after it started growing, its fibers are probably still very soft...”

“Hey, you’re right. Going back to get the other stuff right now would be a huge pain.”

We put the tronbay in the steamer, then Lutz sets it on top of the pot. All we need to do for a little while is just keep feeding the fire so it doesn’t go out. Lutz keeps an eye on the condition of the fire for a while, occasionally throwing in a few pieces of the firewood that I’d gathered earlier.

“Maïne, sorry, but could you watch the fire for a bit? I’m going to go gather up the wood

I dropped.”

“Okay,” I reply.

He heads back out to where he'd been startled by the tronbay to go pick up the wood, perhaps because he's had a bit of time to rest. I, in my new position as fire watchman, grab tightly to a stick, staring intently at the fire. By now, I'm actually able to regulate fires a little bit, but I've made too many inattentive mistakes getting to this point that I can't take my eyes off of it now.

Gas stoves really are convenient. At this point, induction grills and microwave ovens are practically magic. Seriously.

As the tronbay steams, Lutz heads off to work on his gathering duties. It seems like there's quite a lot of things to eat in the forest around the time summer turns to autumn. I gather some things as well, alternating between keeping an eye on the fire and picking up whatever catches my eye.

“I found a lot of stuff, Lutz! What do you think?”

“Lemme see, lemme see..... Maïne! Pay *attention!* Actually look to see if you can bring something home *before* you pick it up.”

As he looks over the pile of things I'd collected, the color drains from his face. He goes through the pile, pulling out everything that couldn't be eaten. Over thirty percent of what I'd found was poison.

“This one's bad. If you eat it, your arms and legs will go all numb, and you won't be able to move for three whole days. This is bad too. If you eat it, you'll foam at the mouth and die. This too! It'll make your stomach hurt terribly for two days.... Maïne, if you don't learn this stuff soon, you won't have to worry about dying from sickness, because you'll poison yourself to death! Got it?”

Yep. And it's not just me who'll die if I don't remember this, it'll be my family, too.

I need to immediately start memorizing not just the things that are useful in everyday life, but also how to distinguish which things out here are poisonous. I don't have anything like an illustrated field guide, either, so I have no way to do this other than have it shown to me in person.

“I'll try hard to remember, so please teach me about it,” I say.

“Yeah.”



Faintly, the sound of the city’s bell rings through the air, and we take the steamer off the pot. A burst of steam hits us in the face as we open it up, but just from taking a look at it I actually can’t tell if it’s had enough time to steam.

“Is this okay?” asks Lutz.

“I don’t really know, but let’s put it in the river and peel off the bark.”

We dunk the wood in the river, then try to strip off the bark while the wood is still warm. It comes off cleanly, without crumbling or snapping at all. This is far easier than I thought it was going to be. We might have found an excellent material after all.

“This tronbay might be really good for making paper,” I say.

“We don’t know when it’ll grow, though, and we have to cut it down when it’s really young, right?”

“...Whoa, this isn’t going to work, then.”

I sigh, thinking back on how things unfolded today. If we could cultivate this, it would be an amazing material, but, alas.

“Hey, Maïne. Is this all we need to do today?”

“Yeah. Next we need to let the bark dry out completely.”

“...Hmmm. Alright, I’ll go wash up the pot, so take care of these, okay?”

Lutz leaves me with tidying up the pile of bark as he goes to clean up the pot and the steamer. Sitting there and lining all of the strips in a row is remarkably fun, so I’m in good spirits as I pick away at the pile.

As we return home, I carry several strips of the bark we harvested in the basket on my back. Lutz carries the pot and steamer, putting his entire soul into lugging it along. Since he’s also carrying the things we gathered today, his burden is definitely way heavier than it was when we had first gone out.

Both Lutz and I are barely still on our feet as we make it back to town and split off from the rest of the group to head to the warehouse. When we get there, Lutz unlocks the door, steps inside, and drops everything to the ground.

“Aaargh, that was heavy!”

“You had a lot more stuff coming back than you did before, after all. You know, I could probably have carried a little more...”

What I’d carried back already took all of my effort. I didn’t really have any extra surplus of energy to help him out. Lutz sits down in the corner and takes out a fistful of bark strips from the pot.

“Hey, Maïne,” he says, waving them around, “how and where are we going to dry these things?”

“Eh? Ummm... how, huh?”

I’d been thinking that we’d dry it out kinda like you dry out hay, but we don’t have any poles to do that from. I look around the room, searching for something to use.

“Lutz,” I say, putting a hand on his shoulder, “I know your tired, but could you hammer a bunch of nails at even distances into these shelves, please? I’ll dry the bark on that.”

“...If I have to...”

Lutz hammers nails into the board, his hammer ringing, and I hang strips of bark from them. This is doable for now, since we don’t have very many of them, but when we move on to mass production, we’ll need a dedicated place for drying.

When we get to the point where we start mass production, I’ll ask Benno about it. We don’t need to worry about that right now, right?

“It would be pretty bad if these couldn’t dry completely here. If they’re damp for too long they’ll start getting moldy. Tomorrow, when we go to the forest, maybe we should take these along and dry them in the sun?”

“So, could we just bring the bark with us tomorrow and keep the work pretty light? I want to gather some normal things. There’s a lot of things I need to get for my family, so I’d really appreciate it.”

“Yeah, I want to gather a lot of mushrooms too so that I can try drying them out. I want to try making soup stock out of them.”

“...Maïne, get better at picking out the poison ones first.”

The next day, we bring the bark with us. I hang the strips off the rim of my basket, then collect quite a large number of mushrooms.

About twenty percent of them were poisonous.

That's weird, I didn't expect that...



Over the next few days, we let the bark dry out in the sun until it was completely dry. I don't actually know how to tell when it's "completely dry", so I let it dry until I started wondering if I was maybe overdoing it. With the hard, dry bark strips in hand, we head back out to the forest. Our next step now is to let them soak in the river for a full day, so the weather is actually important.

We pick a spot in the river that wouldn't really stand out to anyone looking for it, then arrange some rocks in a circle and place the bark inside.

"Will this work?" asks Lutz.

"...Probably. Let's check on it on our way back home."

I don't have much practical experience, so I'm not very confident, but I'm pretty sure this is probably going to work. While I think about it, I look down at my feet, immersed in the river water.

...It should be obvious, but I don't have any rubber boots or gloves.

Today, the weather is still fairly warm, so the water is merely cool, but as the seasons progress, the river might start getting life-threateningly cold.

"Lutz, before it gets too cold, we need to get all of the wood to this point, not just the tronbay. At some point we won't be able to go in the river anymore."

"...You're right. The river's pretty cold already, too."

Perhaps he'd been thinking about what was going to happen when the weather got cold too, because he frowns, nodding in agreement to my suggestion.

"Today let's cut down some wood, and hide it somewhere like we did with the clay. Tomorrow if we bring the pot and the steamer, shouldn't we have some wood ready to go?"

"Yeah, you're right."

We spend some time searching for suitable wood, collecting a variety of different kinds and stashing them underneath a bush. While we do our gathering, I occasionally stop by the river to check on the state of the bark. They've been drifting around within the enclosure of the rocks, but they don't look like they're in any danger of being washed away. They've also started to swell up a bit from being immersed in the water.

"I'll be kinda worried while we're away from the forest, but I think it'll be okay," says Lutz.

"...Yeah."

With great reluctance, I head home, but even then I can't help but worry about what's happening to the bark. What if it suddenly starts raining super hard upstream, causing the water to surge and wash everything away? What if bandits come, see that there's floating treasure, and steal it? Increasingly strange thoughts bounce unceasingly around my head as I stare blankly at the wall.

The next day, I'm fidgeting constantly as we walk back towards the forest, but when we arrive I see that neither has a flash flood washed everything away nor have bandits stolen it, so they're right there where we left them.

"Oh, phew, they didn't disappear."

"...So," says Lutz, "now what do we do?"

Lutz picks up a soggy, floppy strip of bark and looks at it dubiously.

"We'll use our knives to strip off this outer part, leaving only the white inner part of it. Although, let's start steaming the wood we got yesterday first. We can work on this while the wood's steaming."

"Got it."

The stone stove we made last time is still there, so after we do a little bit of maintenance we set the pot and the steamer back on it again. With that complete, we find a large, flat rock near the riverbank, close enough that we can keep an eye on the pot, and start working on peeling off the outer bark.

"Looks like we can leave the bark we want to dry here for now. Let's try to get all of the white bark finished while the weather's still warm out."

"Right!"

Skrnk, skrnk, skrnk..... Screeeeeeeeeeek.....

We place the bark on top of the stone, then start stripping the dark outer bark away so that we can keep only the lighter inner bark. It's kind of like slicing off the high-quality breast meat from a chicken. The bark isn't quite as tough as that, though, so we have to use short, halting strokes. There's probably better tools and better methods for doing this, but right now, I need to make the best of what I've got.

Skrnk, skrnk, skrnk..... Screeeeeeeeeeek.....

“Hey, Maïne. This, um... well, it's not like I *can't* do it, but...”

“Yeah, we need a table for this.”

The sound of our knives scraping against the stone shoots through my body, leaving me with unceasing goosebumps. I very, very much want some sort of cutting board to do this kind of work on.

Thinking back on the list of tools that I'd written down, I really did wind up missing a lot of necessary things. I thought I'd had a good grasp on it, but there's a lot of things I didn't know about at all. As we work, it looks like we're going to need to gradually supplement our supplies with more things that we need.

With tears in my eyes, I continue peeling away at the bark, my goosebumps serving as a keen reminder of how important experience actually is.

Translator's notes:

1. There's a pun here that doesn't have a particularly good translation. Urano describes the plants as “によきによつ木” (*nyoki-nyokki*). “によきによき” (*nyoki-nyoki*) is an onomatopoeic expression that describes tall, thin things popping up everywhere, one by one, and “木” (*ki*) means tree. She's swapping the last syllable of the first expression with the word for tree to describe trees that pop up everywhere.

Chapter 34

A Regretful Mistake

Today, we brought with us our pot and some ash. As the dark outer bark of the other wood we're experimenting with dries in the sun, we'll boil the light inner bark from the tronbay together with the ash for about a bell's worth of time. Lutz is much lighter on his feet today, perhaps because just the pot and the amount of ash we'll be needing today aren't all that heavy for him.

After we walk to the riverbank, I set down the basket I was carrying on my back, then hang strips of bark from its edges to dry. While I do so, Lutz starts preparing the pot. He fills it with water, sets it on top of our stone stove, then starts heading off to find firewood.

"Listen up, Maïne. Do not, under any circumstance, leave this pot."

"I *get it* already!"

The pot and the ashes are both very important and very difficult to acquire, so they're worth quite a lot of money. On top of that, we'll be in big trouble if the bark we've processed so far gets stolen as well. So, even someone as useless as me can come in handy once in a while, watching the stuff.

I've been putting more effort into gathering lately, wandering around more and more, so Lutz has been incessantly hammering in his point.

"You *say* that you get it, but every time you see something interesting, you immediately stagger off to look at it!"

"I'll stay right here until you get back, so just go already!"

When I first started coming to the forest, I used to set down my basket as soon as I arrived, because it was so heavy. Whenever I tried leaving it behind as I went deeper into the forest, though, Lutz and Tuuli would get amazingly angry at me. Unlike in Japan, it seems like in this world you'd never, ever wander off and leave any of your things unattended. For this reason, all the kids who go to the forest always have their baskets and boxes worn on their backs, and they don't ever gather more than they can

carry.

Lutz very quickly comes back with wood, which he uses to build a fire, then immediately takes off to get more for later. I periodically adjust the position of the basket as the daylight shifts, moving it out of the shadows in order to maximize the amount of drying time the outer bark gets, all while still keeping an eye on the pot.

“Is it boiling yet?”

“Yeah, just about, I think.”

To the bubbling pot, I add the strips of inner bark and the ash, then realize that I need something to stir the pot with. However, we don't have anything like that prepared.

Nooo... yet another thing I didn't think we'd need.

I slump down dejectedly, suddenly aware of just how lacking my imagination is, then start looking around for something we might be able to use.

“Lutz, could you please make me a couple of long straight sticks, about the same length, that I could use to stir the pot? I think wood would peel apart and get mixed in, so it would be great if you could use bamboo. There's probably some nearby, right?”

“Sticks made out of bamboo? Got it.”

Lutz skillfully cuts a length of bamboo and whittles it into two long cooking chopsticks for me. Using those, I start stirring the pot. As I marvel at how much better he's gotten at carving bamboo, maybe from when he made all those bamboo strips, Lutz murmurs something to himself.

“...You're really great at stirring things with those, huh.”

“Um?! Y-y-yes! They're super handy, aren't they?”



I force a smile onto my face, covering my sudden panic, as a cold sweat runs down my spine. This world doesn't have Asian cooking, so of course it doesn't have any chopsticks, so of *course* it wouldn't have any people in it who are able to use chopsticks. There probably doesn't exist a single normal little girl on this planet who would look at a pot that needs to be stirred, ask someone to make some chopsticks for her, wield them both in one hand correctly, then stir away like it's the most normal thing in the world.

Whoa, Lutz has a kind of doubtful expression on his face. It must be just my imagination. Just my imagination. Just my imagination, right?

I continue stirring the pot, internally second-guessing every single movement. It would be very suspicious of me to suddenly change my grip and grab them like normal sticks right after he pointed it out. I have to keep using them like this for now, but my heart is pounding in my ears.

Aaaaaahhh, I'm such an idiot! This totally isn't just me thinking I'm looking suspicious!

I try to keep my face as normal as I can as I continue stirring the boiling bark. After a while, I hear the faint chiming of the town bell, signaling that it's probably about time to move on.

We put the stewed bark in the river, simultaneously washing out the ash and exposing it to the sunlight. The more it's exposed to the sun, the lighter it should be bleached. I don't know exactly how the plants of this world behave, though, so I'm having to make assumptions based on what I remember from Earth.

"Now we leave it like this for another day," I say.

"Right. Got it," says Lutz.

To make sure our paper will be as white as we can get it, we'll leave the bark in the river for another full day. After Lutz finishes washing up the pot, we take turns going out to do our gathering work.

I manage to reduce the total percentage of poisonous mushrooms by a just a little bit. I'll need to keep at it like this.



The next day, our main paper-related task is just retrieving the bleached white bark from the river. Essentially, we're just going about our gathering business as usual, then when we're just about ready to head back we'll stop by the river and collect the bark. To do that, instead of bringing the pot with us today we've borrowed a bucket from home, but that's all we need for today.

"Work's going to be mostly at the warehouse starting tomorrow, after all," I say.
"Ah, okay. So, we have to make sure we get all of our gathering done today, then."

I wind up with a sizable amount of things, including edible mushrooms that Lutz helped me select, several nearly-ripe melia fruit that Lutz helped me pick, and some cran that I hope to boil down into jam. While we work, I sample a few things for myself. These fruit are far, far more sour than anything I used to eat in Japan, but since this world lacks sweet things so dearly, you could think of these as delicious.



The next day, instead of going to the forest, we sit outside the well in front of our warehouse to work. Today, I hope to get through picking all the junk out of the fibers and combing them out, enough to make several sheets of paper.

Picking the junk out of the fibers involves finding and removing any damaged or knotted sections of the wood, which will increase the quality and consistency of the finished paper. Since this is work that can be done sitting down, I'm in charge of that. While I pick through it, Lutz is peeling edil fruit, crushing it, and mixing the pulp with water to make a sticky binding agent.

"Hey, Maïne. This the kinda goop you were looking for?"

"...Hmmm, I think so? Since it's sticky, I think that's good, but honestly I don't know exactly what we need. Try thinking about what it's going to be like when we're mixing the fibers in with it."

After I'm done removing all of the junk from the fibers, we start pounding them out. Using a squared timber made of a hard, oak-like wood, we need smash away at the pile of bark until it's as soft as cotton. In order to make the stick comfortable to hold, we whittle the corners off of one side of it, then wrap some cloth that we borrowed from home around that side. Then, Lutz starts pounding away at it. This is Lutz's job. If I

were to try it, given how little strength I have, all I'd do is get in the way.

This time, since we're just working on a prototype, we don't really need very many fibers so this doesn't take a tremendous amount of time, but when we're looking to start increasing the quantity, it looks like this might be really tough.

We put the beaten, softened fibers in the tub, add the binder, then add water a little bit at a time so that we can regulate the stickiness of the mixture. Ordinarily, the next step would involve using a kind of large comb called a *mase* to churn this all together. For now, though, since we're working with such small quantities, I have Lutz make two more sets of cooking chopsticks, then I hold them together like I was about to use them to whip up a custard, and mix the fibers up that way.

...If I remember right, when I made recycled paper out of an old milk carton that one time, the mixture felt kind of like this...

Since I am nothing even remotely like a craftsman, I don't have any real sense for regulating the mixture, so I try my best to recreate how I remember the paper slurry I worked with back then felt. Finally, I take that slurry and spread it onto the bamboo mat in the paper frame.

"Aaah, finally, the part I actually know how to do!"

When we made homemade paper in my home economics class, the process was simple: we took recycled milk cartons, boiled them, peeled off the shiny polyethylene coating, put them into an electric mixer, added laundry starch, spread it out over a screen, and let it dry. We're at the stage now in making *washi* that my home economics experience actually applies to: spreading pulp out to dry.

My time has finally come! Roar out, my practical experience!

"You really know how to do this?" asks Lutz, looking at me with a very doubtful expression on his face as I quickly set up the paper frame.

Well, certainly, there have been a lot of parts in this process that have been really vague, and there have been a lot of tools that I didn't know we needed until we actually needed them, but all of those problems were because I lacked any actual practical experience.

Although I'm a little bitter about how little confidence Lutz has in me, I still stand up straight, suck in my baby gut, and look him dead on.

"Leave it to me!" I say, cheerfully. "I've done this part before."

"...When?" he says, frowning. "Where?"

The sudden sharpness in his voice makes my heart freeze.

"Guh?!... A, a, aaaaa, a maiden has her secrets!! Don't pry!!"

Aaaaaaaagh! I'm an idiot! I'm such an idiot! What am I *saying*?! He's staring now! He's staring at me! Aaaaaagh! Did I just wreck everything for myself?!

I try desperately to hide the screams of terror in my heart behind a pleasant smile as I transfer some of the pulp into the paper frame. My fingers tremble slightly as I work, but not so much that it can be seen. I scoop some pulp into the frame, then shake it around, letting it spread out over the surface of the mat.

"Why're you moving it like that?"

"Oh, this? By shaking it around, you can make sure it spreads out evenly so the paper will be the same thickness for the whole sheet. After this, depending on the kind of paper and how thick we want it, we might repeat this step a few more times."

"Hmmm, you've done this before, so you know a lot about it, huh?"

Lutz's frigid stare drills into me, scrutinizing every tiny detail of my facial expression. No matter what I say, I don't think I'll be able to weasel my way through an answer to that remark. Instead, all I can do is keep quietly working, then abruptly change the subject.

"Uh, um, Lutz. I was thinking that we should change up how many times we're doing this step for each sheet so that we can test out different thicknesses for the paper, what do you think?"

"...Yeah, sure."

Perhaps he thought something was up with my spontaneous topic switch, because his eyes grow even colder as he continuously glances between the work that I'm doing and the expression on my face. As he stares, I keep spreading pulp out over the frame.

Aaaaaargh, I think I just wrecked myself on my own wreckage again...

When enough pulp is evenly spread, I remove the bamboo mat from the paper frame, then transfer the sheet of filtered paper over to the paper bed.

“When you’re transferring paper over to the bed, you don’t want there to be any space between the new sheet and any sheets that you’ve already made, so you need to be careful like this about where you put everything down, starting from the first one.”

“Let me try.”

Lutz sets the mat back into the frame, then starts spreading pulp out himself. Since we’re only making small, postcard-sized sheets, it doesn’t take much movement to spread the pulp evenly across the surface of the mat. We take turns making sheets, working mostly in silence. Although I’d tried to prepare enough white bark to make only a few sheets of paper, by the time we’re finished, we have a full ten, showing just how off my calculations really were.

Well, making too much isn’t actually a bad thing.

“We haven’t made very many sheets today, but no matter if we’re making a a lot or a little, we’ll take this one day’s worth of paper and leave it here on the paper bed for a whole day so the water can naturally run off it.”

“Then what, after that?”

“Then we slowly start adding weight on top so that we squeeze the rest of the water out of it. We’ll put the stone weight on top of it and leave it alone for a day. If we do that, all of the leftover stickiness from the binding agent should go away.”

“Hmm...! You know your stuff. Have you maybe done this before?”

Whoa, Lutz’s eyes are penetratingly harsh. I’ve been completely exposed, haven’t I. I’ve managed to wreck everything for myself now, haven’t I. I am a complete and utter idiot.

However, since all he’s doing right now is staring at me with narrowed eyes, thinking deeply about something or other, there’s no way that I’m going to say anything else to finish myself off. I’ve done enough damage already, so since I don’t want to do any more I keep working, indifferently, as if I didn’t want to be wasting any time on idle chatter.

If I tried to lie my way through this, I’d probably immediately mess up, and suddenly being perfectly honest with him is far too risky. I’m positive that he’ll say *something* once we manage to finish making paper, but I don’t know how much of this he’s figured

out or what he's actually going to say.

I've already thought about how I'd deal with the situation, so there's not really any problem there. I hate painful things, and I hate scary things. If anything like that looks like it's going to happen, I'll unleash the fever that I keep bottled up inside my body, let myself be swallowed by it, and disappear.

Lately, I've been feeling like the fever is getting more powerful than it used to be, so I'm sure it won't take very long for it to devour me once I let it out.

Unfortunately, there's one big new regret that has come into my life since the last time I thought about this. All that's left on finishing this paper is letting it dry out. If we haven't made any mistakes, I'll finally have been able to make paper so, before I disappear, I want to make a book.

I wonder if I can stall long enough to make a book?

I want to buy myself some time. For now, until I can finish a book, I need to come up with some way to drag things out.

As I contemplate what I could do, I continue jerkily going through the motions of my work.



The next day, we don't talk very much either. We walk to the forest, put the next round of dark outer bark into the river to soak, then do our gathering work. When we return to the town, we drop by the warehouse to put the stone weight on top of the paper bed, but since there isn't a whole lot else to actually do, there really isn't anything to keep me from constantly looking over to see how Lutz is doing. I'm very much aware that he, too, keeps glancing over to look at me.

"Hey, uh..." he says.

"Hm? What's up?"

A tremor runs uncontrollably through my body as Lutz speaks up. I'd planned to be calm and composed, like nothing was wrong at all, but I can't make myself act like I thought I could. While I wait nervously for his next words, Lutz scratches furiously at his head, ruffling his blond hair. He opens his mouth as if to say something, then closes

it again.

“...Never mind.”

“O... okay.”

These are seeds that I have sown myself, so I'm well aware that there's nothing more that I can do now, but as long as things continue like this, there's no way I'll find any comfort.



The next day, we go to the forest to work on stripping off the outer bark from our next set of materials, making sure not to forget to bring a board to work on this time. This time, the work is far, far more difficult than it was with the tronbay. The fibers are left in tatters as I pass my knife through them. This isn't only due to my own incompetence, though, even Lutz seems to be having a hard time. Tronbay fibers worked so well, but the difficulty of working with this material makes me wonder if we even can make paper out of it.

“...This material's different, so it's way harder, huh.”

“Yeah, it really is.”

I can't help but let out a sigh as I compare the tattered fibers to our current relationship.

“We can let the inner bark dry like it is, so let's stop for now.”

“Mm. Hey, uh...”

“What's up?”

“...Nah, maybe later. I'll tell you when we've made some paper.”

Lutz closes his mouth and doesn't say anything more, and I give him a small nod. Inside, I've already prepared myself for the worst. Lutz has noticed that I am not, in fact, Maïne, and he's going to blame me for it. After all, ever since that enormous mistake, he's never called me “Maïne” even once.

When we finish making paper, I wonder just what kind of yelling I'm going to get? Or maybe is it going to be abuse? Thanks to my overactive imagination, the Lutz in my mind starts screaming worse and worse insults and abuse at me. In my imagination, my heart feels hollow, and I hang my head.

How could you say all that, Lutz! You're so mean! Even though you're a figment of my imagination, you're making me cry! I'm crying!



The next day, we work at the warehouse. First, we hang the inner bark we worked on along the edge of my basket so that it can dry in the sun, and set it outside. Next, we lift the stone weight from the paper bed, then carefully peel off each sheet of paper and stick them to another board.

“We really should use a paintbrush or something to get all the air out from underneath these sheets, but I guess I forgot to order that too. Ah well, ah well. These are postcard-sized, so if we're careful about it, it'll probably work out.”

“...Wow, you forget way too much stuff.”

Lutz shoots me a brief glare, but thanks to all of the hideous abuse my imaginary Lutz has been constantly showering me with, something at this level doesn't even faze me. I shrug my shoulders a bit, brushing off the insult.

“Well, make sure you don't forget anything either, next time we do this.... That aside, though, once we let these dry in the sun, they'll be all done. The longer we let them stay in the sun, they brighter white they'll get, too.”

Lutz carries the board outside and leans it against a wall so that the sun can hit it. After that, he washes off the paper bed in with water from the well, then sets it next to the board with the paper on it so that it can dry as well.

The bright gleam of the white paper lined up to dry under the perfectly clear, blue sky creates a beautiful contrast. I let out a sigh of satisfaction, wondering if this is the paper that I'll be able to make into a book.

“Haaah, it's paper! It's really turned into paper.... It's really paper.”

“Hey, so...”

“Let's let it dry until evening. When it's dry, we'll need to peel it off carefully so that it doesn't rip, then it'll be totally finished.”

With the paper so close to being complete, I want to put off having to face Lutz just a little while longer. Perhaps he senses this in my expression, because irritation

suddenly flashes across his face.

“Hey, it’s basically done, right?”

“...Well, yeah, but...”

“I told you, right? When we’ve made some paper, I’ve got something I need to say to you.”

The time of my reckoning is at hand. A sharp light glitters in Lutz’s green eyes, as if an anger deep inside him is clawing its way towards the surface.

I bite my lip, hard, telling myself that I’ll stay standing no matter what he might say to me. Steeling myself, I turn to face Lutz dead on.

Chapter 35

Lutz's Maine

"You want to talk here?" I say. "Not in the warehouse?"
"Here's fine."

Since this conversation might get complicated quickly, I thought it might be better to have it indoors, away from the public eye, but Lutz shakes his head.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

Anger may burn in Lutz's green eyes, but his behavior is comparatively calm. Without suddenly flying into a rage, he begins to speak in a low voice that hints at the anger he keeps contained, boiling in his gut.

"...Who are you, really?"

A difficult question right off the bat. I actually don't quite know what to call myself. Even now, I still think of myself as Urano Motosu, but no matter how anyone looks at me, all they could possibly see is Maïne. Also, I've been living in this body for nearly a year now, growing accustomed to life in this world, so I'm no longer really Urano Motosu, either.

Urano only read books, and didn't really do anything else of her own volition. When I went to college, I was commuting to and from home, so I never even moved out of my parents' place. Thanks to the fact that my mother was fundamentally a housewife, I didn't have to do much housework, although I was technically capable of doing it if I ever felt so inclined.

Going to the forest every day like this to gather things for my family, devoting myself to finding new flavors so that I can broaden my diet even just a little, making paper from scratch so that I can read books in the future... none of these things are actually necessary. If you compare the me of right now to the Urano of the past, whose desires were limited to reading whatever book happened to be nearby, we're absolutely different.

As I worry over how exactly I should answer, Lutz takes my silence as a sign that I'm not going to answer at all. He glances at me again, strength flaring in his eyes, and asks me again.

"You know how to make paper like this, and you said you've done this before, right?"

"...It was very different the last time I made it."

"And that's not Maïne."

"...Yeah."

Although I still want to hide the truth, Lutz is already convinced of it. Even if I were to lie, nothing would come from it. I answer honestly.

"Maïne *couldn't* know anything like that," says Lutz. "She barely ever left her house."

From Maïne's memories, I know very well that Maïne only rarely left her house. Thanks to that, I had almost no information about the world, and who knows how many problems that has caused me? Since Maïne's memories were of almost nothing but the inside of her house, I couldn't even catch a glimpse of what this world would consider to be common sense, and my own modern common sense constantly clashes with that of this world. Even still, I think that I'm making a lot of mistakes.

"That's right," I say. "Maïne really didn't know much of anything."

"So, who the hell are you?!" he shouts. "Where's the real Maïne?! Bring Maïne back!"

Lutz raises his voice, his anger unleashed. However, whether it's because the things I had imagined him saying were far more cruel than the words he hurls at me now, or whether it's because I'd already prepared myself for what was going to come when we'd finished making paper, I feel entirely calm right now. My reaction is vastly different from the panic I showed right after I wrecked myself earlier.

"Sure, I can bring her back, but... I think it would be better if I did that at home, you know?"

Lutz's eyes go wide with astonishment, and he furrows his eyebrows. It seems he didn't expect me to agree.

"Why?"

"Well, it would look really bad if you came home carrying a corpse over your shoulder,

right? If I go away, all that'll be left is a dead body, after all. It wouldn't be good if people thought you were a murderer, right?"

Lutz and I are the only two people who use this warehouse, and both our families and the people from Benno's shop know that the two of us came here today. If I were to lose consciousness and die here, it's extremely likely that all of the blame would be put on Lutz. Even if it wasn't, Lutz himself would know of his own sin, I think.

I, personally, was thinking of Lutz when I proposed that it would be better to do it at home, but Lutz acts as if this came entirely out of nowhere.

"Y-y-you, w-w-w-what are you saying?!"

Startled by my words, Lutz's face goes completely stiff as he grows incredibly flustered. It seems that it was far beyond his expectations that Maïne wouldn't come back if I were to disappear.

"S-so, Maïne isn't here anymore?! She's not coming back?!"

"Yeah, probably..."

I can't describe it as anything else but "probably". All I'm able to do is search through Maïne's memories. I've never been able to talk to her, and she's never spoken up to demand her body back.

"Answer this!"

Lutz fixes a powerful glare on me, the picture of an ally of justice facing down a hated evil. I can't help but smile a little when I realize that. This is so perfectly like him. His frail childhood friend, who he treated like his own sister, has been hijacked by me, a foul villain, and he is leaping to her defense, like the hero he is.

"What about that fever that Maïne was talking about with Mister Otto and Master Benno? Did you make her fever eat her up?!"

I'm a little impressed that Lutz put together that Maïne had been swallowed whole by the fever that still lurks deep within me. I'm pretty sure he's not wrong, at least not about that part.

"You're about half right and half wrong. I also think that Maïne was eaten away by the

fever. Her last memories are all "it's hot", "help me", "it hurts", "make it stop", that's why. But I'm not the fever. It's eating me alive too."

"What are you saying?! Isn't this your fault?! Didn't Maïne disappear because of you?! Say it!!"

Lutz grabs tightly onto my shoulders and starts shaking me. My thoughts thrown into disarray by agitation, the words "it's my fault," and "Maïne disappeared because of me" bounce around endlessly in my head. Then something snaps.

"Like *hell* I actually wanted to come here and be Maïne! I died, or at least I'm pretty sure I did, and then before I knew it I was this *child*. If I could have actually *chosen* where I was going to go, I'd pick a world with tons of books I could read, or maybe be an aristocrat in this world who could actually read, or even just a body that's healthier than this feeble, pathetically weak one! There is *no way* that I would *ever* have voluntarily picked a body that is plagued by an incurable disease that constantly threatens to strike me down with fever at any moment!"

The instant I so plainly say that I never wanted to become Maïne, Lutz's face goes slack and hollow, and his hands loosen from my shoulders.

"You... didn't want to become Maïne?"

"Would *you*, Lutz? In the beginning, just leaving the house left me out of breath, and I'd have to stay in bed the whole next day, you know? Even though I can finally make it out to the forest, I'm still growing so slowly, and even now if I make the slightest mistake my fever comes back..."

Lutz thinks about it for a little while, slowly shaking his head. The energy he had when he'd grabbed me has all vanished, and his troubled eyes drift off to the side.

"...You could be swallowed by the fever too?"

"Yeah, I think so. If I loosen the grip I have on it, it immediately rushes back out, and I start feeling like I'm being devoured. It's something like being swallowed, or maybe like being dissolved... it's difficult to explain."

Lutz frowns as he mulls over my words. It seems like it's also difficult to imagine, just from my explanation.

"That's why," I say, "if you're not happy with the fact that I'm using Maïne's body, and if you think you want me to disappear, just say it. I can disappear whenever you want."

Lutz, who just moments ago had been yelling at me to bring the real Maïne back, stares at me with astonishment. His terrified expression is asking me what the hell I'm saying, which leaves me a little bewildered.

"...It's better if I disappear, right?"

When I ask for confirmation, Lutz suddenly raises his eyebrows and starts shouting, as if he's the one who should be angry at me, the victim.

"Don't ask me! Why are you asking me?! It's *really weird* to say that you'll disappear if I tell you to!"

"It's probably weird, yeah, but... if you weren't here, I probably would have already disappeared a long time ago."

Lutz looks like he has no idea what I'm talking about. I start to explain what happened the last time I nearly disappeared, thinking back to how it all began.

"Don't you remember? When Mommy burned my *mokkan*, how I collapsed?"

"Yeah..."

With an "oh, that's right, that happened, didn't it" expression, Lutz nods. To him, that hadn't been a big deal, but to me it was an enormous turning point in my life.

"Back then, I was thinking I should just let my self be swallowed up. I really was planning to disappear. I didn't have any lingering attachments to this world without books, and no matter how hard I tried I wasn't ever able to finish anything, so I was thinking I might as well give up."

Lutz gulps nervously, so loudly I can hear it. He looks at me, silently urging me to continue, so I gently close my eyes and remember. As I was drowning in the heat, amidst the faces of my family dimly projected across my consciousness, Lutz's face unexpectedly had risen to the surface.

"When I was being swallowed by the fever, I could see my family's faces, but then suddenly I saw your face, and I wondered why you were there too. I focused on that, and gathered up my strength to drag my consciousness back from the fever. When I saw you really were there, I was a little surprised, you know?"

"That's... you can't seriously have come back because you were surprised that you saw

me, and not a family member?”

He frowns, sighing, and I gently shake my head at him.

“What brought me back was that I was surprised to see you, but then you said that you were going to go get me some bamboo, so that my mother wouldn’t burn it? That made me think that I should hold on for a little bit longer, that I should fight back against the fever.”

“Your mom burned the bamboo too, didn’t she?”

I nod. I can still clearly recall the anger and chagrin that pierced through me, leaving me with that deep despondency. Even just remembering it makes me feel like the fever within me is growing more powerful.

“If everything really is awful, and I don’t actually care about anything anymore, I was thinking, then the fever will just rush in and carry me away. I didn’t care enough to fight back anymore, so dying like that might have been a relief, but... then I remembered our promise.”

“Our promise?”

“I don’t remember a promise,” he mumbles to himself. He looks up and to the side, as if he really doesn’t remember and is having to dig through his memories. Of course. I smile a little to myself. To Lutz, all he had been trying to say was that I’d better get well soon. Even so, those words were the all-important lifeline to which I clung.

“I promised I’d introduce you to Mister Otto. Didn’t you say that the bamboo was advance payment for the favor, so I had to get better?”

Perhaps he remembered something that he didn’t want to, but when he hears me clearly identify him as the source of my last lingering attachment to this world, he groans in embarrassment, holding his head in his hands.

“Th... that was! I wasn’t trying to make you feel like you owed me... aaargh, no!”

“Then, what were you trying to say?”

“Don’t ask! Nothing! Forget about it!”

I want to play the straight man in to Lutz’s completely unforeseen reaction, but right now I’m supposed to be being blamed. As Lutz requests, I pretend that nothing’s happening.

“Ummm, well, I remembered the promise like that, and then I also thought that I really shouldn’t disappear without returning at least one favor, after everything you did for me, so I worked hard to push the fever back, and, um...”

“...”

“So we met Mister Otto and Mister Benno, and I kept my promise, and then we made paper, so even though I want to make a book if I can, I think it’s okay if I disappear now, if you want me to?”

Lutz looks at me with a face like he’s swallowed a bug. He looks me up and down, with eyes that wouldn’t miss even the slightest lie, then hangs his head limply.

“Since when...”

“Um, what?”

I can’t hear anything he’s saying as he mumbles with his head hung low, so I tilt my head curiously to one side and ask him to repeat himself. Lutz raises his head and stares at me dead on.

“Since when have you been Maine?”

“...When do you think? When do you think that I wasn’t the Maine you knew anymore?”

I may have answered his question with another question, but Lutz doesn’t get angry. Instead, he looks vacantly off into the sky, thinking deeply. He looks back down at me, mutters something too quietly for me to hear, then looks down at his feet, kicking at the dirt with his shoe.

“...That,” he says, pointing at my hairpin. “Was it about when you started wearing that?”

I didn’t expect him to guess quite so accurately, but it’s true, I’m the only one who wears my hair with a hairpin like this. If my hair weren’t so silky and straight, liable to come loose no matter how many times and how tightly I’d tie it, I’d probably be wearing it normally, tied back with a string.

“...Correct.”

“That’s basically a year ago!” he yells, with such force that spittle flies from his mouth. His eyes flare wide open with rage.

Come to think of it, I became Maïne at about the end of autumn. Right now it's about halfway through the autumn, so soon the seasons will have come all the way around once.

"Yeah, I guess that's right. Most of what I remember is being stuck in bed with a fever, but it's been about a year."

My memories of over half of the time I've been living in this world have been of being feverish and bedridden, but if you compare that to the Maïne of before who spent the vast majority of her time stuck in bed, I'm remarkably energetic.

"...Has your family noticed?"

"I have no clue. I know they notice I've been doing some strange things, but I wonder if they really haven't even considered that I'm not actually Maïne?"

I especially can't think that Tuuli and my mother, who had to spend so much time looking after Maïne while she was secluded in the house, haven't noticed anything at all. However, they haven't said anything about it, and I haven't either. Living like that is very practical, so I think it's more-or-less okay.

"Also, Daddy said that he's overjoyed just that his daughter is starting to get healthier."

"...I see."

Lutz lets out a long sigh, then turns his back on me as if to say the conversation is over. He runs a fingertip along one of the pages of paper clinging to the board, checking it to see how well it's drying. I had been fully prepared to disappear, but when this conversation ended without a satisfying conclusion, I can't help but be troubled about how my future is going to play out.

"Hey, Lutz..."

"...I think your family should decide, not me."

He interrupts me before I have a chance to finish. He's saying that my family should be the ones to decide whether or not I should disappear. However, if that's the case, then nothing will actually change for me right now.

"So, should we keep going like this for now?"

"Yeah, let's do that."

I don't know what Lutz is really thinking, since he's not looking over here. Does he not particularly mind that I, who am not Maïne, am going to continue living like this for the time being?

"And that's okay?"

"Like I said, that's not something I should be deciding..."

Lutz stubbornly refuses to look at me, so I reach out and grab his arm. I want to ask him how he feels about me, since I'm not Maïne. But, if I avoid such a troubling topic of conversation and just maintain the status quo, I wonder if he'd be alright with that?

"Lutz, is it really okay if I don't disappear? I'm not the real Maïne, you know?"

Lutz's arm twitches a little bit. I thought for a moment that his arm was trembling a little bit in my grip, but it was really my hand that was trembling.

"...It's fine."

"Why?"

As I ask him again, he finally turns around to look at me. With an expression somewhere between shock and amazement, he reaches up and flicks me on the forehead.

"If you disappear, Maïne's not coming back, right? Also, if you've been here for an entire year already, then you're basically the Maïne I know."

He roughly scratches at his head as he speaks, messing up his golden hair. Then, he looks me firmly in the eyes. What I see reflected in the pale green of his eyes is calmness, the anger and threatening attitude from the beginning evaporating away. These are the eyes of the Lutz I've always known.

Because before, I hadn't thought about exercising my body, so I was even weaker. Because if I counted the number of times I've actually come face-to-face with Lutz or Ralph, I wouldn't need more than my two hands.

"...That's why, it's okay if you're my Maïne."

When Lutz says that, something deep in my heart clicks into place. Something that had been fluttering about within me settles down with a thump. It really wasn't a big

change, so small that you couldn't see it if you looked, but for me, it was the biggest, most important change in the world.



Chapter 36

Paper's Completion

"Aaaaaargh, it's ripping apart..."

"This one, too."

The prototype paper we made out of tronbay worked out well, but batches we've been making to test other kinds of materials have not. I don't know if it's because the fibers aren't adhesive enough, or if they're too short, but they aren't tangling together very well, nor are they sticking together, so as the sheets dry out they start falling to pieces.

"I wonder if it would work better if we add more binding agent...? What do you think?"

"I think we've got no choice but to try whatever we can think of, one after the other."

In order to make the fibers stick together more easily, we try adding more binding agent, and in order to make the paper less likely to tear, we try making it a little bit thicker.

"How about this?" I ask.

"I have no clue about how it'll turn out when it's dry, but it's coming together pretty well, I guess."

The thicker, gluier paper dries rock hard, and when we try to peel it from the board it snaps in half. We stare, dumbfounded, at the fragments as they drop, one by one, to the ground.

"...That's a failure, huh."

"Yeah, this one didn't tear, it... broke? It wasn't actually paper, at least."

I don't know if the problem is with the ratio of fiber to binder to water, or if the raw materials themselves aren't right for the job. At one point, I'd read something about what kinds of vegetation could be made into paper, but in this world that sort of knowledge doesn't really apply. The failures have been accumulating, to the point where I want to scream, "how did this happen?!"

“This is just making me wish we could mass produce tronbay paper.”

“There’s no way!”

“Couldn’t we make something work as long as we had tronbay seeds?”

I think that, as long as we had some of those red fruit, harvesting enough tronbay would be easy enough, but Lutz shakes his head vigorously when I suggest it.

“Don’t search for them! Do you want to destroy the forest?!”

“If we found a seed, couldn’t we get everyone to quickly cut it all down as soon as it grew?”

I’m a not quite sure about this because I don’t know when tronbay actually grows, but when someone finds a seed they could gather a bunch of people to wait for it to sprout, then as soon as it does they could jump in and deal with it. However, Lutz rubs his forehead, insisting that it’s not a good idea.

“You have no idea when tronbay will grow! It’s too dangerous!”

“Ah, I see.”

It seems like I had stumbled across a tronbay seed that was coincidentally right on the verge of sprouting, but it turns out that tronbay don’t usually sprout immediately after you pick them up. Lutz is starting to get a little angry, so I decide to give up on using these mysterious pop-up trees.

“...Please learn how things work around here.”

“I’m trying, though!”

Since Urano’s memories from my previous life are crammed into my head far more firmly than those of Maïne, who rarely left her house, no matter what the situation the raw evaluation criteria I wind up using is still always Urano’s. However, because Lutz and I have been discussing some of Maïne’s memories, I’ve gradually started thinking of them a little more, and Lutz has been helping to correct my actions, too.

“Anyhow, using tronbay is dangerous. When tronbay starts sprouting, it drains all the strength from the soil, so for a while after it sprouts nothing else can grow there. We can’t mass-produce it.”

“Whaaat?! It’s that dangerous?! But nothing like that happened last time, right?”

“Didn’t I say that was weird? Did you not hear me or something?”

“I don’t know anything about normal tronbay, so I had no idea if anything about that

was weird or not.”

Tronbay has been the best material so far, but since it’s such a dangerous plant, and since it only grows in the autumn, mass producing it would be impossible. Rather than wishing for something that doesn’t exist, it’s much more useful to be thinking about if there’s something we can find that actually exists. So, we had no choice but to keep searching through trial and error.

While we were doing that, we had to consider whether any of the wood that we can easily find in the forest is actually something that’s mass-producible. Also, we needed to think about the ratios of materials, try crushing the fibers more or less, using sulamo bugs instead of edil fruit for the binding agent, and so on, in order to try to make gradual improvements in the final product.

“Out of these, forin seems to be the best for this.”

“Yeah. If we add just a little bit more sulamo glue to the forin, it looks like we get something good enough to sell.”

When we tested the three soft woods that the lumberyard recommended to us, we found that forin was able to make the thinnest paper. Forin fibers, compared to those of the other two varieties, are a little stronger. This makes them harder to beat into shape, but the more we beat it, the more stickiness is released from the fibers. Once we discovered that, we were able to make a comparatively good paper by beating the fibers thoroughly. Then, when formulating the pulp, we tested gradual changes to the ratios of the various ingredients that we used until we found the best proportions we could.

I write down the proper ratios on my slate, then clap my hands together to shake the dust from them.

“I think we’ve got it now, right?” I ask.

“Yeah, if we make it like this, it looks like we can mass-produce it.”

Lutz’s face is bright now that we’ve found the proper ratios. I happily run a fingertip along the surface of our completed paper.

“Mass production is going to have to start in the spring, though. Getting more wood right now is going to be a huge pain, and bark in the winter is going to start getting tougher and tougher.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

We’d make much better paper if we waited until spring arrived and the plants came to life again, then went to collect young trees and new branches. Besides, the weather is already such that bleaching the bark in the river is already a very painful process. I want to wait for it to get warm for Lutz’s sake, too.

“So, let’s get our finished paper over to Mister Benno as soon as possible. I’m going to have to start helping Mister Otto at the gate for the winter, after all.”

“Yeah. In a little bit we’re going to have to start preparing for the winter, so we should get this finished as fast as we can.”

“Right. Tomorrow I’ll go to the gate and ask Mister Otto about how to write a thank-you note. We were finally able to make paper! I want to show him my thanks.”

Lutz nods his agreement to my suggestion, as he starts gathering up the remains of today’s failed experiment.

“I’ll leave the thank you note to you, then. So, you’re going to be bringing today’s failed paper home with you?”

“Yeah. We’ll take the successful paper to Mister Benno, but I can use the botched paper, even if it has some holes or is peeling a little bit, to make a book.”

I’ve already confirmed with Mark that it’s okay for me to bring home the large quantity of failed experiments. With this, I can finally start working on making a book



The next day, I return to the gate; my first time in a while. As winter accounting season comes around, all the necessary documents for processing the calculations have been gradually piling up, so Otto’s face is positively radiant when he greets me.

“Hey there, Maïne! I’ve been waiting.”

He pats the accumulated pile of wooden cards sitting next to him, smiling *brilliantly* as he beckons to me. The cards are covered with totals of goods and quantities, and it looks like Otto is in the middle of writing everything out into the official documents.

As I help him out with that, I eventually try asking him about how to write a thank-you note.

“Mister Otto, if you could, I’d appreciate it if you could show me how to write a thank-you note.”

“A thank-you note? Like what the noblemen exchange?”

Well, no, it doesn’t have to be like what a noble does, I almost start to say, but I stop myself. Perhaps it really is a custom that only noblemen practice.

“Umm, I figured that since there are letters of introduction, then maybe there was a letter of thanks from the people who got introduced... was I wrong?”

“Well, I know that noblemen exchange those among each other, but it’s not something that merchants explicitly write. It’s a waste of paper to use it on something that’s not a contract.”

Of course, paper is such an expensive commodity that they wouldn’t use it so lightly.

“Then, how should they send thanks?”

“For a trader, you usually give the other party something from what you trade in that they might find useful. It doesn’t really matter if you have an attendant deliver it or if you deliver it yourself, but you don’t send a thank-you note, you send a gift.”

I thought that there was going to be a general format for a thank you note, like there’s one for a letter of introduction, and that I could write one on a sheet of our finished paper, but he’s telling me that it’s normal not to send a note, but instead to give a gift.

“...Whoa, I didn’t expect that. Hey, Mister Otto. What do you think I should give to Mister Benno? I can’t think of anything that Lutz or I could possibly send to him that he would want.”

I really can’t think of anything that I personally have that Benno might possibly be interested. Benno seems to be a man who has everything.

Otto shrugs his shoulders, then gives me some advice.

“Wouldn’t the paper the two of you’ve made be a good gift? That’s all you two trade in right? If it has value as a commodity, then showing Benno that his initial investment is paying off would be the best. Besides that... maybe information on some kind of new product... or something like that, I think.”

“I understand. Thank you very much, Mister Otto.”

Something to increase the value of the paper, or information about a new kind of good, huh... I might be able to come up with something like that.



The next day, I immediately rush to Lutz to propose to him my idea for the paper we should make to show Benno our thanks.

“It turns out that merchants don’t say thanks by sending thank you notes. They give each other something that they think they’d like. So, I think we should make some special paper out of tronbay for him. We still have some tronbay inner bark, right?”
“Yeah. We should give Master Benno the best paper we can, shouldn’t we?... Hey, Maïne, what’ve you got there? Leglas?”

He looks down at the red leaves I brought with me.

“Oh, is that what it’s called? I found it growing next to the well, so I picked some yesterday. I want to try doing something like pressing flowers, I think.”
“What are you going to do with those?”
“I’m going to use them to make paper, of course!”

Leglas is a plant that looks like a red clover. I thought that we might be able to put it in the pulp after we spread it out, substituting it for the maple leaves that would be used for that in *washi*. I make a message card with leaves arranged along the edges of the page, like a bookmark or a piece of nice stationery. I also cut up some of the leaves into smaller pieces, then scatter them on another page in a heart shape, making something kind of like *chiyogami*.¹

On the message card, I write “Because of you, Mister Benno, we were able to make this paper. Thank you very much.” Lutz and I sign our names at the bottom.

“This paper is really pretty,” says Lutz, looking at the other sheet.
“Since it’s got leglas in it, it’s kinda showy, like it’s got a picture drawn on it, you know?”
“What are you going to do with it?”
“I’m going to make *origami*,” I reply.
“Oh-ree-gah-mee?”

I take the *chiyogami*-like paper I made and use my knife to cut it into a square, then

fold it into a celebration crane.² In my old memories, *shuriken* patterns were the most popular with people from overseas, but I don't know if anyone here has ever seen a throwing star before. I don't have enough paper to make something large like an origami balloon, either.

A celebration crane is a simple, yet flashy design that I can make with a single sheet of paper. Since its tail spreads out wide, like a peacock, it's far more extravagant than an ordinary crane.

"What do you think? Is this showy enough?"

"...Wh, whoa," he says, timidly, lightly poking at the crane. "You can make paper do something like this? Man, I have no idea what you're capable of, Maïne."

I'm a little taken aback by his reaction.

How much would a crane like this be worth?

"...Now that I think about it, making decorations out of paper would be super extravagant, wouldn't it?"

"A~ah, w... , well, since it's for Master Benno, it's alright."

I'd been thinking that origami was lighthearted, cheap, and comparatively unusual, so it would make a nice gift, but now that I'm actually thinking about how expensive paper is here, I'm wondering if I've just done something monumentally wasteful.

...I wonder if I should make sure to tell Benno that he can unfold it and still use the paper, despite the creases?

"I was also told that information about some kind of new product would be good..."

"You've got better ideas for that than me, right?" asks Lutz offhandedly, shoving the entire burden onto me.

It's not that I have no ideas whatsoever, but I don't know if any of them are actually at all salable, so I want to ask Lutz for his opinions.

"...When we first met Benno, he looked pretty interested in my hairpin, so I was wondering if we should teach him about those, but this," I say, pointing at my head, "is basically just a wooden stick, isn't it?"

Lutz gives a big nod. "Yeah, you're right. It's just a stick."

“You think he could sell them?”

“...People can make them themselves, so it’s not the kind of thing you’d really just go out and buy, I think?”

I’d thought that, even though it was unusual, it wouldn’t really be salable, and Lutz seems to agree.

“If you want hairpins you can sell, how about that other kind?... You know, like the one Tuuli wore during her baptism, or like that.”

“Lutz, you’re a genius! That got an amazing reaction back then, too! And I think making those would be great to do for our winter work, too.”

With this, we’ve completed our preparations for what we’re bringing to Benno. Next, we need to figure out the circumstances, then make some time with him to meet.

“Hey, Lutz. When you go return the lock today, could you ask Mister Mark what Mister Benno’s schedule looks like?”

“Yeah, sure thing.”



On the day that we arranged with Mark, Lutz and I head to Benno’s shop, bringing with us the completed paper. Our finished product has both tronbay- and forin-based papers, each in three different thicknesses, for a total of six different varieties. With that, we also are bringing the message card and origami celebratory crane, into which leglas has been pressed for color. I also have Tuuli’s hairpin in my tote bag as well, so that we can consult with him about it.

“Good morning, Mister Benno. We’ve finished a prototype of our paper, and have brought it with us. We were able to finish it so quickly thanks to your generous initial investment.”

“I heard about it from Otto, but you’re done already?”

“Yes, sir. Here it is.”

I draw the sheets of paper from my tote bag, then arrange them on Benno’s desk in front of him. When he sees them, he looks at them with slight amazement, then reaches out for the first sheet.

“Well now, let’s take a look.”

He holds it up to the light and tests it for feel, then takes out a bottle of ink. He tears off the top part of one of the sheets, then draws a line across it with his pen.

“...This is good for writing on. The nib doesn’t get caught in this as easily as in parchment, so it’s easy to write... though the ink is spreading just a little bit. Not enough to make a difference though... hmm!”

“Did we do it?!” I ask. “Can Lutz be your apprentice?”

Benno strokes his chin, grinning broadly as he reaches for the next sheet.

“Yeah, I did promise that, after all. How many of these can you make?”

“Ummm, since this is just a prototype, if we start making it for real, I want to use larger tools. I think that these sheets are a little too small. What would be the best size of sheet for us to be making?”

The letters of introduction I saw at the gate were all different sizes, so I don’t know what the standard would actually be for making paper. If we were to be making paper the same size as actual *washi*, the paper frame we’d need would be far too large, and it would take a tremendous amount of strength to spread out the pulp evenly over it. If Lutz and I aren’t able to make consistent, quality paper at that scale, there’s no point in trying, so I want to focus on mass-producing paper of the most widely-used size.

“...Hm, let me see. For letters of introduction and contracts, we usually use sheets about this size. It’s not a precise standard, though.”

The sheet of parchment that Benno pulled out from the shelves behind him is sized somewhere between an A4 or a B4 sheet of paper.³ It’s a size big enough that we can still swing the paper frame by hand.

“Okay, I’d like to make another paper frame, of about that size. Although, it’s only going to be practical to make paper again in the springtime. For now, we really can’t keep getting raw materials.”

“Just get all your tools in order by springtime, then. Work with Mark on that. This’ll be a great product once you’ve done that.”

“Yes, sir!”

Benno’s given his approval of our paper. Thrilled that our hard work has finally paid off, I exchange a look with Lutz, smiling broadly.

“This is a much higher-quality paper, huh.”

The sheet he currently holds in his hands is one of the ones made from tronbay. At a single glance, the difference in quality is obvious. It is both much whiter and much smoother.

“This was made using tronbay.”

“Did you say tronbay?!”

Benno’s head snaps up, startled, and he looks back and forth between me and Lutz. It looks like tronbay really is famous for being such a dangerous plant. I take a step back, letting Lutz give the explanation as to what happened so that I don’t inadvertently say something foolish. Lutz, reading my intentions perfectly, takes a step forward, opening his mouth to speak.

“While we were gathering things in the forest, Maïne stumbled across tronbay that had just started growing, which is how we got this. It’s very dangerous to get, though, and finding it is unreliable, so I think it will be very rare for us to make.”

“Well, I guess that makes sense... Still, tronbay, huh...”

Benno seems to be frantically thinking if there’s anything he might be able to do to make mass-production of this happen. Despite the fact that he’s making that calculating merchant’s expression, it seems that this is the rare case where he can’t actually come up with a way to get what he wants.

“After several tests, we determined that tronbay was the material that made the best quality material, but we can’t make it into a commodity if we can’t actually acquire the raw ingredients. Also, this paper here is made from forin. Since forin is much easier to find, it’s much better suited towards mass-production, and thus commoditization.”

“Ah, I see,” says Benno, nodding vigorously. “Forin is definitely much better for production.”

Since it seems that the paper has met his satisfaction, next I take out the thank-you gifts.

“Now, this is... a thank-you note, to you, Mister Benno. I heard from Mister Otto that the best way to thank you would be to show you how we could add value to the paper we’ve made, so we tried making a special paper for you.”

“A thank-you note? I’ve given these to some high-ranking noblemen, but this is the first time I’ve gotten one myself. How do I say this... I feel like I’m moving up in the world.”

Benno smiles broadly as he takes the message card from me. When he opens it to look inside, his eyes go just a little bit wider.

“Um,” I say, “while we were making this page, we added leglas to the mixture... What do you think?”

“Ah? When you say ‘leglas’, you’re talking about that weed that sprouts here and there around this time of year?... When you see it like this, it’s rather beautiful. This would be quite popular with the noblewomen and their daughters, I think.”

Benno, as a merchant, is very reliable: as soon as he saw that, his thoughts immediately went to trade. He looked at it with his merchant’s eyes and judged it as something that he could sell to the nobility. I’m sure that we’ve successfully shown to him that we’ve managed to add some additional value to this paper.

“Ummm, and I don’t know whether to say that this is a thank-you, or a gift, but... this is a decoration that I made from paper. It’s called a *‘celebration crane’*.”

“Hoh! This is paper, too?”

I take the folded crane from my bag, spread its tail back out, and set it on the desk in front of him. He reaches over to pick it up, his eyes gleaming. He turns it over in his hands, looking at it from all angles, but no matter how hard he looks, he won’t find any use for it besides as a decoration.

“After I made it, I realized that I’d just done something very extravagant. It doesn’t have any use other than as a decoration. Um, though, since the paper is only folded, you can use it as regular paper again if you unfold it, although there will still be creases.”

“No, it’s just fine being a decoration, isn’t it? This seems like a good advertisement for the paper I’ll be selling in my shop.”

Benno places the crane on one of the shelves behind him, murmuring that once he starts selling paper he’ll need to move it to those shelves instead. It seems like the little crane will be living on a shelf for a while. Honestly, I had no idea that origami was going to be this well-received. In retrospect, I’m actually a little glad I made it.

“To be honest,” says Benno, “I didn’t think you could make paper out of wood. The

quality is also far beyond what I was expecting it to be, if you even could. This, however, is more than good enough to sell as a commodity. Well done! I'm looking forward to seeing you start mass-producing this in the spring."

When Benno delivers his high valuation of our efforts, Lutz and I grab each other's hands joyfully. Thinking back on all the time we spent gradually improving the quality of the product, I'm suddenly moved to tears.

"We did it, Maïne!"

"It's 'cause you worked so hard, Lutz."

Benno smiles wryly at the two of us, stacking the paper back up on top of his desk.

"I'll buy this paper from you today. I'll pay you on the way out, so call Mark for me?"

"Really?!"

Now that I think about it, we *had* talked about how, before our baptism, we would get to keep the money from selling the paper, minus material and handling fees.

Finally, my first real cash!

If we turn the rest of our processed white bark into paper now, then we can probably sell that too. As soon as I think that, I suddenly remember something else, and I take Tuuli's hairpin, which I wanted to talk about selling, from my bag.

"...Also, I had something I wanted to consult with you about; do you think that this is something that we could sell?"

I place the hairpin that Tuuli had used as a hair ornament on top of Benno's desk. It's a short wooden pin, decorated with a bouquet of small blue and yellow flowers.

For some reason, Benno's face twitches and goes very stiff as soon as he sees the hairpin.

"Young lady, what is this?"

"It's a hair ornament. After someone ties her hair back normally with a string, she can then use this to decorate it... Like this."

To demonstrate, I swap out Tuuli's hairpin for my own and show it to him.

“This particular one is something that I made for my older sister’s baptismal ceremony, so I can’t sell it, but if I make more decorations like this while I’m doing my winter handiwork, do you think I could be able to sell them?”

As I ask my question, Benno keeps his glittering eyes fixed on the hairpin. In a low voice, he growls out an answer.

“...You could.”

“Then, I think I will. Then, um. Mister Benno, I’ll let you sell them for me, so would it maybe be possible for you to provide the initial investment for these too, please?”

He lets a loud, long sigh, then looks me in the eyes. He suddenly seems very, very tired, but I wonder if I’m just imagining it?

“What on earth do you need?”

“Just thread. The quality doesn’t need to be particularly high, but I’d like as many different colors as possible, please.”

Making every single one of them using the same colors would be very boring. Besides, I’m sure that everyone is going to want to pick ones with colors that match them the best, so it’s a good idea to have as many colors and designs as possible.

“Just thread? Nothing else?”

“I’d be happy if we could get a little wood, but since we’re already going to be gathering a lot of firewood for the winter, we don’t particularly need it.”

“And you’re doing all this yourself, young lady?”

Benno glances at me, scowling. Now that I think about it, I’m pretty sure we’re in a “Maïne thinks, Lutz makes” kind of situation. Perhaps it would be best for Lutz to help out as well.

“...Lutz will handle the woodworking portion, and I plan on handling the rest. Of course, we’ll be making them together. Right, Lutz?”

“Right,” he says, gripping my hand tightly as he nods frantically. “I’ll handle the wood parts.”

Benno scrutinizes us carefully, looking like he has something he wants to say, but then sits back, covering it up with a forced, happy smile.

“Well, sounds good to me. So, you two, do you have some time and energy to move around a bit?”

“Yes, we do.”

“Alright. So, let’s head to the Merchant’s Guild, shall we?”

“The Merchant’s Guild?!”

Whoa, once again, some new vocabulary just showed up. I wonder, is this going to be like a medieval European guild, or a fantasy world guild...? What the heck kind of place is this going to be?

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

- 1. Chiyogami is brightly-colored, patterned paper used for a variety of decorative purposes. It’s typically made by applying a pattern to the paper using ink applied either through wood block printing or through silkscreening.*
- 2. Celebration cranes are very showy origami cranes with wide tails folded so that both sides of the paper, which are usually different colors, are outwardly visible.*
- 3. For American audiences, A4 paper is slightly skinnier and slightly taller than letter paper (8.3" x 11.7") and B4 paper is about as tall as legal paper but somewhat wider (9.8" x 13.9").*

Chapter 37

The Merchant's Guild

Currently, I am being held in Benno's arms as we make our way to the Merchant's Guild. Originally, I was making every effort to walk there myself, but Benno started to get fed up with my walking speed. "So slow! This is a waste of my time," he said, and picked me up. Then, he started ranting on and on about the importance of time, which I had no real way to argue against.

"By the way, Mister Benno," I say. "What *is* the Merchant's Guild?"

Finding out all of the little details that are different from what I think I know is my top priority.

"What, you don't know?"

"I've never been to it. Lutz, do you know about it?"

"It's a place where people who do business go, maybe?"

I asked Lutz just in case this was something that any child in this town should know about, but all I got out of him was what I was expecting. Benno sighs lightly, then starts to explain.

"...Well, that's about right. Its main job is to do things like grant permits to people who want to open new shops or punish people who are doing bad business. If you don't have the guild's approval, you can't run a shop and you can't open a stall in the town market. Also, every person involved in a business must be registered; if they aren't, the guild lays down very harsh penalties."

Based on what I'm hearing from Benno, I guess it might be something like a department of commerce? You can't open a shop without getting approval, and you have to register new apprentices there, so I don't think I'm too far off the mark.

"They sound like they're a very powerful organization," I say.

"That's right. They're very powerful, and very *greedy*. When you register an apprentice, there's a registration fee. When you start a new business, there's a very

large registration fee. No matter what you do, they take a commission from it.”

It looks like things are the same whenever money is involved, no matter what world you live in. This is a terrible world for a poor person to live in.

“Either way, once the baptismal ceremony is over, my new apprentices are registered here, since everyone working at my store is involved in trade. In your case, you’ll need a provisional registration until your actual baptism. If you don’t, then you won’t be able to sell your paper or your hair ornaments... or any kind of good.”

“So, in order to buy the paper from us today, you need us to be registered first?”

“Right.”

Ah, I see. His rush to get us registered is so that he can purchase our prototype paper. I chuckle to myself, pleased that I figured that out. Benno, however, gets a stern look on his face, his eyebrows knotting together.

“I’d really like to get you through registration quickly, but that old *bastard* is going to get involved. Every time, that man never fails to find some bone to pick.”

“Like what?”

Benno’s brought out some less-than-friendly language. I thought that he’d be fairly high up in the guild himself; was I wrong? Or, perhaps, is there some sort of inter-factional dispute happening here?

“Right now, I’ve got a lot of momentum going, expanding on a few different ventures so I can grow my shop. It’s only natural that the guild chief would want to tear me down a little, you know? So, you two, don’t say anything unnecessary, got it?”

“Yes, sir,” I say, in unison with Lutz. Two highly skilled merchants are about to engage in a battle of wits against each other. I have no plans to stick my nose in where it doesn’t belong.

“Ah, that’s right. Maïne, about that hairpin you brought...”

“This one?” I say, opening my bag slightly to show it to him.

He nods, then fixes his sharp, reddish-brown eyes on me. “How long does it take you to make one?”

“If I already have all the materials, and Lutz makes the wooden part, then after that, if my physical condition is good... ummm, this flower part, if I work really hard I can do it in a day, probably... I guess...”

It depends on the actual quantity of flowers, but at my speed it's a day's worth of work. My mother, though, who is good at sewing, could probably do it in about two bells' worth of time.

"How about you, Lutz?" asks Benno.

"It's just carving and polishing some wood, so it'll take me about one bell, I think?"

"Hmm! That's great," he says, good-naturedly.

Benno's tone of voice may be light and pleasant, but his eyes glitter with a sharp light.

"What's so great?" I ask.

"I'm looking forward to what's coming up after this," he replies, smiling the same vicious smile a predator makes when it's found its next target, his eyes locked on the Merchant's Guild building as it comes into view.



The Merchant's Guild is in a tall building on a street corner that overlooks the town's central plaza. Just that alone shows that it is a very wealthy organization, but on top of that, not a single room in the entire building has been rented out to anyone else. The entire building is the Merchant's Guild's alone.

"When I think about how much of my hard-earned money gets funneled into this building," muses Benno, "I can't help but get a little mad, you know?"

"That's true, but if you didn't, you'd be in big trouble, wouldn't you?"

"Yep. And that makes me even madder."

Before the door stand two guards, each carrying weapons. As we approach, they look us up and down, then ask us what our business is here.

"What are you here for?"

"Getting temporary registrations for these two," replies Benno.

"Head on in," says the guard, opening the door for us.

As soon as we step through the doorway, we're suddenly faced with a flight of stairs, and I'm momentarily bewildered. While the staircase itself is wide, there's no sign of the first floor at all.

"Mister Benno, what happened to the first floor?"

“Ahh, the first floor is for the traders to park their wagons and carts. It would be a huge nuisance if they all were lined up on the street outside. If you go around back, you should be able to see them.”

We ascend to the second floor, entering a large hall, packed full of people constantly rushing about. I can't help but be amazed by the overwhelming clamor. I hadn't thought this town had this kind of people in it, until now. I feel a strange sort of admiration.

“We don't have anything to do here,” says Benno. “We're heading to the stairs on the other side so we can get up to the third floor.”

Since I'm still being carried in Benno's arms, I'm relatively safe as we make our way through the crowd towards the stairway, but Lutz, following behind us, keeps almost getting crushed in the crowd.

“Lutz, are you alright?” I ask.

“I'm fine, yeah... This is kinda like a festival, huh.”

“That's because this is the place where both people who want to open stalls in the town market and traders who want to do business in this town have to come to get official permission,” says Benno. “The closer it gets to market, the busier it gets. After the market closes, it'll be quiet for a while.”

“Huh...”

The stairs we arrive at are sealed tightly behind a metal fence. In front of it stand yet more guards.

“May I see your registration card, please?”

Benno pulls out some sort of metallic-looking card and hands it to the guard. “The three of us are going up.”

“Understood, sir.”

For some reason, the guard holds the card up high. Suddenly, a brilliant white light runs along the bars of the fence, and it disappears into the ground as if it were melting away.

“Wha-?! What's that!!” I ask, my eyes wide.

“A magical tool. Lutz, don't let go of my hand. You'll be pushed back if you do.”

“G... got it.”

Benno carries me with one arm, taking Lutz's hand in the other, and starts to ascend the staircase.

"Didn't you say that magic was something that only the nobility could use?" I ask.

"The upper levels of this organization are pretty well-connected with the nobility. There's quite a lot of noblemen who'd give out magical tools like this if they thought it would give them some kind of advantage."

"It's my first time seeing anything like this..."

I'm struck by the same thought as I had back when I saw the contract magic. Somehow, I've found myself in a world that's even more fantastical than I thought.

When we reach the top of the stairs, Benno lets go of Lutz' hand and sets me down. White walls extend past the stairway for a ways, until they arrive at a place in the back that looks something like a counter. While the second story handled business relating to the town market, the third story deals with the merchants who own shops. Compared to the second story, it is much quieter, and there are far fewer people here.

The floor of the second story was made of wood and slightly dirty, with small piles of dust accumulating in the corners. The third story, however, is carpeted, and swept scrupulously clean. The furniture is also well-maintained here, further emphasizing that this place has plenty of money. This is, in a single glance, a stunning example of how stratified this society is.

"There are conference rooms on the other side of these walls," says Benno, pointing at the white walls. "You two won't have much need to use them."

As he explains things, we start walking towards the counter. Lutz and I hold each other's hands, feeling slightly nervous in the face of the kind of wealth that we don't ordinarily see in our daily lives.

Passing the conference rooms, I can see that the counters stretch wall-to-wall, behind which children, perhaps apprentices, seem to be processing the income and expenditures of the Merchant's Guild, reading from wooden notes and performing computations on their manual calculators.

"Lutz," I whisper, "this winter you really need to learn how to read and do math."

"...Yeah, I really do."

Partway down the corridor, on this side of the counter, there's something that looks like a sofa in what appears to be a waiting area, or perhaps a reception area where one could be invited to relax. I turn around, surveying my surroundings. I notice, against one wall, a set of shelves on which a variety of wooden cards and rolls of parchment have been arranged.

"Is that... is that a bookshelf?!"

My energy level suddenly skyrockets. Benno looks down at me with curiosity in his eyes, then nods.

"Yeah, those are bookshelves. They contain copies of the regulations that apply to shops, simple maps of the surrounding area, almanacs of the nobility, and so on.... Are you interested?"

"I am! I am!!"

I want to immediately charge towards the bookshelves, but Lutz's grip on my hand is like a vise, squeezing so tightly that I can't get away. Watching me struggle, a wry smile tugs at the corners of Benno's mouth.

"You can take a look after we've gotten your application filled out. It'll probably be a long wait, after all."

"Really?! Yaaay!"

"Maïne," says Lutz, "calm down. You're getting too excited."

I've finally found book-like things that are okay for me to read, do you think I can possibly contain myself? No, I absolutely cannot. Lutz's warning technically does register in my ears, but it's nowhere near enough to stop the wild dancing of my heart.

At least, that's what I thought, until Lutz says something that forces me to stop dead in my tracks.

"If you get too excited, you'll faint before you get a chance to read anything."

...That would be terrible!

Benno, who has been watching our exchange with some amusement, notices that this is a good breaking point. "Come," he says, continuing to walk towards the counter. As

we approach, an employee that seems to be familiar with Benno looks up, an ingratiating smile on her face.

“Oh, good afternoon, Master Benno. How may I be of service today?”

“I’m here for temporary registration for these two. Can you handle both of them for me?”

“Temporary registration?... These aren’t your children, are they?”

“They’re not. *But*, I need them registered. Quickly, please.”

It seems that a temporary registration is effectively a loophole in the regulations, where the children of merchants can be allowed to help out with the family business even though they’re unbaptized and, by all rights, should not be allowed to be working, let alone be registered. Since it’s impossible to hire a child that hasn’t yet been baptized, children who aren’t directly related to a merchant would thus have no actual reason to be involved in any transactions. As such, it’s impossible that a temporary registration would be granted to a child that isn’t a blood relative of a merchant.

Although she squints dubiously at us, she dutifully begins to ask me and Lutz a series of questions, writing something down on the other side of the counter. From what I’d heard so far, I had been thinking this would be a long, bureaucratic process, but this is just simple data entry: our names, our fathers’ names, where we live, our ages.

“The son of a carpenter and the daughter of a soldier, is it?”

When she finishes her questions, her expression grows all the more dubious as she looks back and forth between the two of us. It seems that she’s searching for some reason why we should be registered, even though we’re not the children of merchants. Her eyes are not exceptionally pleasant.

“That’s right,” says Benno. “If you’re done with the questions, let’s move this along. I don’t think either of us have much free time to spare on this.”

“Very well, I’ll be back shortly. Please, feel free to sit over there while you wait.”

She gestures towards the reception area. I’m nearly crushed by my desire to immediately run off to the bookshelves, but I instead look up at Benno.

“While we wait, may I look at the bookshelves?”

“Sure. If there’s anything you’d like to know, I can show you. Come and wait over here. Lutz, don’t let her out of your sight.”

“Got it.”

Lutz and I calmly walk to the bookshelves, his hand clamped firmly around mine. I go through the contents of the shelves, unrolling the parchment scrolls and glancing through the stacks of wooden cards, looking to see what kind of information they contain. It’s all eminently practical information: maps and illustrated references, almanacs of the nobility, rules of business, block-printed news sheets with information from nearby areas, and so on.

“Whoa, look at this map!”

It’s a particularly rough and sketchy map, but this is the first time I’ve gotten a look at what this world looks like. I have no idea where even we currently are on this, so I tuck the scroll under my arm and head to the sofa where Benno is currently sitting. I sit down on the sofa in the manner in which one usually sits down on a sofa, only to realize that this beautiful cloth surface is, in fact, merely a piece of cloth attached to the hard boards of the wooden bench underneath. It has none of the softness or flexibility I was expecting, so instead my butt slams hard into the unyielding surface.

“Owww...”

“How excited do you have to be to throw yourself into a chair like that. Are you an idiot?”

I whimper softly as Benno stares at me with frank amazement. I was deceived by something that looked like a luxurious sofa in this strange environment, you know! If I had been able to see the wood this is made of, I wouldn’t have thrown myself into it like that. I keep these excuses in my heart, though, as I spread the map wide on the cloth-covered surface of the bench we are sitting on.

“Mister Benno, where’s this town on here?”

“Right here. Ehrenfest. That’s the family name of the lord of the land, so that’s the name of the town.”

This is the first time I’ve heard the name of this town. Come to think of it, this is the first time I’ve heard the name of the lord, too. Since there’s not been any reason for me to go outside the town, there’s never been any need for me to learn its name, and whenever people refer to the lord they just refer to him by his title.

Looking at the map, it seems that there is an agricultural village and a forest to the

south of Ehrenfest, and if you go beyond that, there's another small town. To the west, there's a large river, with another town belonging to the neighboring province relatively close by. Since the lords of those provinces share a good relationship, it seems that it's popular to come and go between those two cities. To the north is the aristocratic town where the feudal lord resides, so there's a large blank area. To the east, a major highway stretches, where it appears the largest number of traders operate.

"Well, when you two wind up going outside the town to do any purchasing, you're probably not going to need to go off this map, anyway."

After Benno teaches us the names of a few of the other towns on the map, I return the map to the shelves, and once again start going through every last document on the shelves. On the very bottommost shelf, there are books that seem to be intended for apprentices to learn how to read words and numbers. Lutz and I flip through it to study its contents. In addition to the words I already know, I see quite a few more vocabulary words relating to commerce. I want some time to memorize all of these.

"Mister Benno, could we maybe get a slate and a calculator so that Lutz can study...?"
"Sure, I'll take the cost out of your pay today and get those for you. Study hard, kid."
"By the way, could you tell me something, please? When a merchant's kid becomes an apprentice, how well can they read, write, and do math already?"

After we're baptized, the two of us will be working as apprentices with the children of merchants. Until then, we need to do as much as we can to make sure that we can do all of the things that they can do.

"They can read and write simple things and do basic calculations. For reading, they mostly know the names and related words of the goods their family trades in. For math, they know how to do the conversions between copper and silver coins, too."

This is bad. I don't really know anything about the local currency. I already know that large and small copper coins exist, as well as small silver coins, but I don't know what the exchange rate between them is, nor their actual market value.

After all, at my house, all we really use is copper.

I don't think I've ever really seen many coins that weren't made of copper. Also, when I'm doing my work at the gate, I'm only working with raw numbers. Otto handles all

of the actual money, and I haven't really seen him do it.

"I think where the two of you are most lacking is knowing how to treat customers. The other children have watched their parents at work every single day, so it's basically instinct for them by now."

"That's..."

That's impossible for the two of us. In Japan, I was only ever on the receiving side of customer service, and never actually stood behind the register myself. Lutz, as well, probably knows nothing that a merchant might actually know.

What should we do?

Before I can fall too deeply into a labyrinth of thought, the employee behind the counter calls out to us.

"Master Benno, the guild leader would like to meet with you."

"...As expected of that old bastard," he mutters, in a voice so low that only we can hear it.

He stands up from his seat, eyes glittering coldly, his hands tightly balled into fists, the very picture of a man preparing to head into battle.

"Let's go, you two."

"Yes, sir."

Benno starts heading towards the counter. With a clink, the closest panel to us on the counter falls to one side, opening a path for us to go through. On the other side is another staircase, at the top of which is a door that opens automatically for us. Through it lies a room that, although it's not particularly large, seems very comfortable.

A fire is already burning brightly in the fireplace, spreading warm light across the carpet. On top of that carpet stands an official-looking desk, with a gentle-looking old man who, despite seeming to be in his fifties, still possesses a somewhat decent physique. Since "guild leader" sounds very much like a purely managerial position, I had been imagining a much more grandfatherly type, but I can see that this man has not yet aged past the prime of his life.

“Hey there, welcome,” he says, standing up from behind his desk with a warm, genial smile. “I’m glad I could get a chance to chat with you.

“Now then, Benno, let me get straight to the point. Why on earth are you asking for a temporary registration for these two kids, who aren’t even your blood relatives? This isn’t at all like when someone managing a street stall comes to ask for permission for their kid to watch the shop for them from time to time, am I right?”

A crafty smile crosses the guild leader’s face, silently telling us that Benno’s insistence that the two of us be immediately registered without first waiting for our baptismal ceremony is basically exactly the same thing as him saying that the two of us possess some sort of goods that it is worth getting us registered for.

“...If I don’t know what you’re trying to do,” he says, “I can’t give permission to get these kids registered, you know. There’s no precedent at all here in Ehrenfest for registering kids that aren’t blood relatives.”

The guild leader looks the both of us over, with a contemplative smile that is completely impossible for me to read. His smile and his general demeanor seemed quite friendly at first glance, but this man is truly not friendly at all. After all, he just threatened us with rejection if Benno doesn’t immediately answer his question.

Seeing the guild leader waiting expectantly for an answer is making me grow increasingly nervous, so I look up at Benno to see how he’s taking it. However, Benno wears the darkly triumphant look of a man who feels absolutely assured of his victory.

“You want to know what these two kids have that I want, yeah?” he says, smiling broadly.

“Yeah, I guess I do. Since it’s a thing, after all, *any* store could probably trade them, after all. Your shop is starting to reach a little too wide, I’m thinking.”

If it’s something that could make some real money, he wants a chance to seize it, he’s saying. Mister, shouldn’t you be at least *trying* to hide your real intentions?

“These kids have said they want to sell things through my shop, so they’re going to sell them through my shop. Right, Maïne? Am I right, Lutz?”

We’re still scared of accidentally saying something unnecessarily, like Benno warned us not to do, so the two of us gulp, then nod emphatically. Benno smiles even more

brightly, then looks down at me.

“Maïne, please show the guild leader the hairpins that you’d like to start selling at my shop.”

“...Understood, sir.”

It seems that Benno still intends to keep our new paper trade secret for now. I don’t know what thought process he took to arrive at this conclusion, but since I don’t want to say anything I shouldn’t, I keep my mouth firmly shut as I reach into my tote bag. I pull out Tuuli’s hairpin, and hold it out for the guild leader to see.

A moment later, the guild leader’s expression completely changes.

Chapter 38

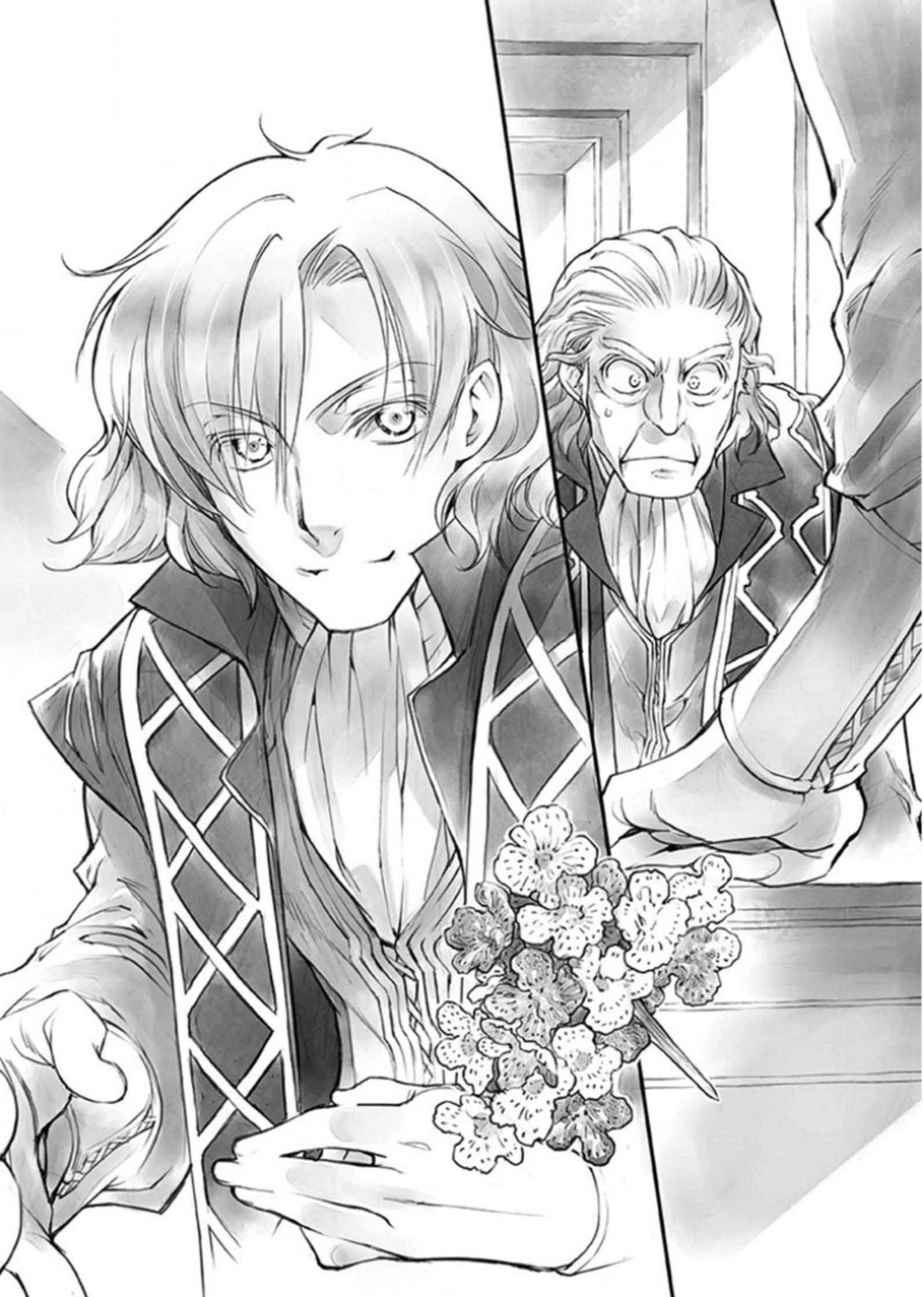
The Guild Leader and the Hairpin

“This...” murmurs the guild leader, transfixed.

The only time Tuuli used this hairpin was during her baptismal ceremony. What happened on that day, I wonder? I’m a little shocked about how suddenly the guild leader’s aloof smile completely disappeared, so I look back at Benno, seeking some kind of assistance.

The guild leader’s captivated by this, is he okay?

While I may be worried, Benno is clearly not. A terrifying expression flickers across his face, like a carnivore licking his chops, before it settles back into his usual darkly pleasant smile.



“Is this not the hairpin you’ve been searching for, Guild Leader?”

“You’re selling this?!” asks the guild leader, his eyes wide, looking back and forth between me and Benno. There isn’t a trace of a smile on his face anymore as he looks at us hungrily. Terrified, I can’t stop my breath from catching in my throat.

...Lutz, no fair! You’re hiding behind Benno!

I turn slightly to try to creep behind Benno as well, but he firmly clasps my shoulder, dragging me back to the forefront.

“Umm,” I stammer, “I was planning on making these during my winter work.”

“Your winter work... then, could you sell me that one right now?”

He reaches out as if to take Tuuli’s hairpin from me. His blazing eyes tell me that if he gets his hands on it I’ll never get it back, so I frantically shove it back into my bag.

“I can’t do that,” I say. “This is something I made for Tuuli. It’s not for sale.”

“I’ll buy it for this much,” he says, his hand coming up in a flash, three fingers standing straight up. That’s probably some sort of sign to indicate a value, but I don’t know what exactly it means.

Flustered, I look up at Benno for advice.

“Hmm, I see...” he says, grinning broadly. “If we could ask for a little more, we might be able to make one in advance especially for you, sir. What do you think, Maïne?”

“It’s... it’s just like Mister Benno says, sir.”

As if I could possibly refuse. I force a smile onto my face and comply with his implicit order.

“If she starts now,” he says, “She should have plenty of time to complete it before your granddaughter’s baptismal ceremony this winter. Isn’t that right, Maïne?”

“Yes, more than enough time.”

...Ah, now I see. During the summer’s baptismal ceremony, the guild leader’s granddaughter must have seen Tuuli’s hairpin and said that she wanted something just like it.

With that one statement, everything finally snaps into place. As the leader of the

Merchant's Guild, this man would be the most informed person in the entire city about the flow of merchandise through the markets, but even so, he couldn't find a trace of this hairpin. Since it's something I made entirely in-house, solely for Tuuli, it was never on the market, and nothing else like it is sold anywhere, he must be growing more and more nervous as the day of the winter's baptismal ceremonies draws ever closer.

"There's barely a month left, are you sure you can finish it?"

Come to think of it, making the flowers requires a surprisingly large amount of both time and thread, so in this extremely hectic season, unlike during the winter season where we're shut inside by the snow and have nothing else to do, we don't have time for making random things, or so my mother said. However, if this is a job that I'd be making money on, there might not be any problem with me devoting all of my time to it. Since I'll need to procure the thread and talk to the granddaughter about her specific request, it'll take somewhat more time than otherwise, but if I have until the winter baptismal ceremony, I should have more than enough time.

"Yes, sir. This hairpin isn't for sale, but there won't be any trouble making a new one."

"Yeah," says Lutz, nodding emphatically, "we can do it."

Next to me, Benno has been grinning broadly as he listens to our conversation.

"However," he interjects, "since I can't register these two, when they finally finish making the hairpin, they most unfortunately won't be able to sell it..."

"Tsk... Fine then, after we get their temporary registrations complete, let's work out the details of the order..."

With that, Benno's victory over the guild leader seems to have been clinched. The guild leader was unable to find serious fault with him, he didn't reveal any information about the paper, and he was able to secure our temporary registrations. In high spirits, he turns to head out of the guild leader's office.

"Well then, shall we go back downstairs?"

"Hold up," says the guild leader. "I can take care of their guild cards in here, so why don't you let the children wait here? I'd like to work out the details of the order, too."

Benno clucks his tongue quietly, then looks back, smilingly, over his shoulder at the guild leader.

“If I left the kids here alone, I don’t even know what kind of troubles they could blunder their way into, so why don’t I stay here and make sure to keep an eye on them for you?”

“No, no, these kids seem to be very well-raised! I’m sure they won’t cause any trouble if they’re out of your sight for a minute. Right?”

Though the guild leader may be smiling kindly, I’m scared of whatever he could be scheming underneath that. Cautious of the fact that I could be suddenly stolen away, I unthinkingly grab for Benno’s hand.

“Th... this is the first time I’ve come here,” I say timidly, “so I want to stay with Benno.”
“You see?”

Smiling triumphantly, Benno sits down on the hard bench that the guild leader has in his office, picking me up and setting me on his knee. “Good work,” he murmurs in my ear, gently ruffling my hair. He seems to be in a very good mood.

Shortly thereafter, I’m relocated to a spot on the bench next to Benno, with Lutz sitting on my other side. The guild leader sits down across from us, and we begin discussing the details of the hairpin.

“Well then,” he says, “I want one hairpin, delivered before the baptismal ceremony.”
“Umm... what color should I make the flowers? Do you know what colors she likes, or what might fit her hair, or...”
“I don’t really know much about that. Just make it like that one,” he says, pointing at the pin inside my totebag.

However, that kind of blunt declaration is actually somewhat problematic for me. I am very sure that Benno is massively overcharging the guild leader for this, so I want to make sure that I’ll be producing a product that his granddaughter is going to be absolutely delighted with. I have no doubt that this grandpa, who went to great lengths to find a hairpin for his granddaughter, thinks that her smile is the most priceless thing in the world.

“Umm, could I maybe speak to your daughter directly and ask her about what she would like? I believe she’ll be much happier if I could do so.”
“I want to surprise her, so I’m trying to keep this under wraps.”

There it is! That ever-troublesome surprise gift!

In order for someone to be truly delighted by a surprise gift, the giver needs to be very certain of the recipient's tastes and desires, and present it to them at just the right time, when they're thinking that they want something like that. Grandpa, though, is saying that he doesn't even know what his granddaughter's favorite color is, which makes a surprise gift much more challenging.

"...Umm, well, it's important that the hairpin matches the dress she'll be wearing, and it should fit with her hair color as well. And if she's already found something else that she's going to wear in her hair, then wouldn't she be troubled by getting a new hairpin?"

"Ah, really?"

Since it's the winter ceremony, preparations are probably already underway for the dress she'll be wearing. If that's the case, it's possible that her mother is also working on something for her to wear in her hair.

"Since I'll be making it from scratch, I feel that it's most important that she receive something that she truly wants, even more than something that merely matches her tastes. Wouldn't you agree that her look of joy would be more wonderful than a look of surprise?"

"Hmm, I see..."

The guild leader strokes his mustache, looking up at the ceiling as if in thought.

"Maïne, was it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you like to come to my shop?"

"She refuses!"

Before I even have a chance to react, Benno rejects the proposal.

"My shop is much bigger than Benno's," continues the guild leader, "and we trade in some very good things. It's a great offer, isn't it? You still haven't actually had your baptismal ceremony and officially become apprentices yet, so it's still possible for you to come apprentice at my shop. How about it?"

How about it, he says, but after all of the support I've received from Benno so far, I have no intentions at all to do him the injustice of spontaneously switching to another

shop.

“I owe a lot to Benno that I can’t pay back,” I say.

“Hmm, I’ll pay him back for you.”

“What? Ummm...”

I have every intention of refusing, but the words won’t leave my mouth. As Benno watches me waver under the guild leader’s relentless pressure, his mood grows worse and worse. His eyebrows crease together as he taps his temple repeatedly, looking at me with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

“Maïne, *kindly* give your response to the guild leader. Your rejection, if you would.”

“I... I mu, mu... I must refuse!”

“Mm, well, that’s a shame, but I guess I’ll give this up for now. You’ve got someone scary standing over you, after all, so you can’t say what you really want.”

He’s giving up *for now*?! But I’m already telling him what I really want!

“If you’re going to be meeting with Freida, my granddaughter, how does tomorrow sound? It’s better to get these decisions squared away sooner rather than later, isn’t it?”

“Umm, couldn’t Mister Benno come with me?!”

Earlier today, Benno had thoroughly engraved the words “don’t meet with the guild leader alone” into my consciousness. Meeting with him without someone present who can actually handle him would be very dangerous. However, the guild leader shakes his head in reply.

“Unfortunately, both Benno and I have a meeting tomorrow. If you’re just meeting with another girl your age, you don’t need a stern old man like him watching over you, do you?”

“...Alright, if it’s just us kids.”

Caught in the middle of Benno’s battle with the guild leader and focused on the plan to ask Freida about her wishes, I’ve started to wear down a little, so without thinking about it too much, I consented to a meeting with only another girl my age. Benno, hearing me agree with the guild leader’s opinion, clucks his tongue disapprovingly.

What?! Did I do something wrong?!

I glance between Benno, whose eyebrows grow even more creased, and the guild leader, whose smile grows even wider, and suddenly realize the stupidity of my reply. By agreeing for it to only be “us kids”, I’ve made it so that Mark won’t be able to come with me. Frantically, I kick my brain into full power, looking at both sides, trying to figure out what to do.

“S... since Lutz is going to be working on making this too, it’s alright if he comes too, right? Si... since it’s just us kids!!”

Going entirely by myself is too scary to consider. When I suggest dragging Lutz into it too, though, Benno seems to relax just a little bit.

“Well, that’s fine too,” says the guild leader. “Now then, how does meeting in the central plaza at the third bell sound? Freida can come out to meet you there.”

“Sounds good, sir.”

As if she had been waiting for the conversation to conclude, the staff member from earlier enters the room, carrying temporary membership cards. It appears that our temporary registration has been successful.

“These are your temporary membership cards. These are magic tools as well. They’re absolutely necessary when you’re conducting any sort of business discussion. Benno can explain the fine details about that later. Since this card shows that you two are essentially a shop’s apprentices, you’ll be able to use it to access the upper floors of the building.”

This mysterious card is made of a strange, pale metal that glimmers with rainbow colors as the light strikes it. Compared to the things I normally interact with, this is almost unnecessarily different. The more of the explanation I listen to, the more I admire this obviously fantastical card. Faced with the wonder of a magic tool, I can only blink in response.

“Now then, the last step is for the two of you to push some of your own blood into the card so that it can recognize you. If you do that, other people won’t be able to use it arbitrarily.”

“Wha?! B... blood?!”

Does all magic require blood? The memory of having to slice open my finger and make

a blood seal for the contract magic is still very fresh in my mind.

“Give it up, Maïne,” says Lutz.

“Lu~uutz...”

“It’s *fine*, just give me your hand.... It’s not like you’ll do it yourself, right?”

“Oooohh...”

Tearfully, I extend my hand. Lutz pricks my fingertip with a needle. A drop of blood immediately wells up from the wound, to which he presses the card, which seems to absorb it.

In the next instant, it brightly flashes.

“Whoa?!”

It flashed with light for just a moment, but afterwards, it looked exactly like it had before. Not a trace of a bloodstain or a fingerprint has been left behind, leaving it as perfectly clean as it was before.

Magic tools are really convenient. But scary.

Although I had been frightened of drawing blood and startled by the card’s bright flash, Lutz finishes his own task almost disinterestedly.

“With that,” says the guild leader, “your registration is complete.”

“Thank you very much,” I reply.

I run after Benno, who has already started leaving the room now that there’s no longer any reason for him to be there, then leave the Merchant’s Guild building entirely.

All we did was get registered, but now I’m very worn out.



“Welcome back, sir. It seems you were able to successfully get these two registered?”

When we return to Benno’s shop, Mark is there waiting for us. Although from time to time I’ve seen a merchant’s dark smile cross his face, Mark is, fundamentally, a supporter, and his pleasant smile always heals me.

“Yes!” replies Benno. “Thanks to Maïne, we won a flawless victory today.”

“Oh ho! How rare.”

“She caught that old bastard’s eye, though.”

“...That would seem to be rather dangerous indeed.”

Even Mark seems to regard the guild leader as dangerous. I must agree, from the bottom of my heart.

“Please, right this way,” he says, opening the door to Benno’s office and showing us in. “I’ve made arrangements so that we can settle the accounts regarding the prototype paper.”

“Well then,” says Benno, “let’s wrap this up then, shall we?”

As soon as I heard “settle the accounts”, though, my hand rocketed into the air.

“Excuse me! I have a question. Could you please teach me about money?”

“Huh?”

Benno frowns, not understanding what I meant, Mark, similarly, has his head tilted to the side in puzzlement.

“Ummm, well, until now, I’ve never actually held any money... I can read numbers very well, but I don’t know how the numbers and the money actually match up.... Let’s take 5,640 leon, for instance; I don’t have any idea at all how to use coins to pay that amount, or anything like that.”

“What?!”

The wild shout of disbelief was not just Benno’s. Mark and Lutz both joined in as well.

“You...” says Benno, slowly, “haven’t touched money... Well, you’re not a merchant, and you’re such a young kid, so maybe that’s not strange? Wait, no, that still is strange, right?”

“...Oh!” says Lutz. “She never gets sent out on errands, since she faints so easily.”

“Ahh...” they all say, breathing a collective sigh of understanding.

“I do calculations at the gate, but I’ve never actually watched anyone exchanging money with the merchants. When I went with Mark to go place orders, too, all we really did was hand over order forms, and we really didn’t exchange any money. I’ve

been to the town market a few times with my mother, and I've seen her use some small coins to buy things, but I don't know what those are or how much they're worth."

As I explain, Mark retrieves a small cloth bag, then steps forward in front of Benno. With a jingle, he spreads the contents of the bag over the desk.

"Then, perhaps I should first show you the different kinds of coins."

There are coins minted out of a light brown metal, perhaps copper, in three different sizes, and there are both small and large coins made out of silver and gold. Lutz, fixated on the gold coins on the table, gulps audibly.

"This small copper coin is worth ten leon. The mid-sized one here with the hole in the middle is one hundred leon, and the largest is one thousand. The small silver one is ten thousand, and the pattern continues through this large silver coin, and these small and large gold coins."

Since it's very easy to remember that ten of a small coin is exchanged for one of a large coin, I'm much more at ease, nodding my head in comprehension as Mark explains. To my right, however, Lutz moans quietly to himself. It seems that he is completely and utterly confused by higher orders of magnitude.

We're going to study *very* hard this winter.

Once he starts having money of his own, I think he'll probably learn how to calculate with it, so it'll probably be all right.

Benno takes out the six sheets of prototype paper, then lines them up on the desk.

"A full sheet of parchment is worth one small gold coin. A sheet the size we use for contracts is worth one large silver coin. A sheet about this size, then, would be about two small silver coins, I think.

A postcard-sized sheet is worth two small silver coins, he says...

I knew in theory that paper was expensive, but now that the money is being set out right next to it, I suddenly gain a new appreciation of that fact. Come to think of it, I did hear that a contract-size sheet would have been an entire month's salary for my father, didn't I?

"So, this time, let's use parchment as the basis for figuring out the price of this paper. I'll pay two small silver for the forin paper, and four small silver for the higher-quality tronbay paper. I'll take a thirty percent commission from that. Next, you said you'll be needing a new paper frame, larger than the one you used for this prototype. I'll go ahead and take the price of that out of the total now. That'll be another fifty percent."

"Alright," I reply, nodding. Since we've managed to complete our prototype, from now on the cost of any tools and materials will be entirely our responsibility.

Benno smiles broadly. "How does a twenty percent share sound, this time? In the future, you'll be ordering raw materials through the lumberyard, and the market price might go down once more paper starts to circulate, so we might have to revisit this in the future, but..." "This is fine with me," I say.

I nod in agreement, then turn to look at Lutz. He nods as well, with an expression I have no idea how to read.

Benno sets a wooden calculator on the desk with a thunk and pushes it towards Lutz.

"Lutz," he says, "that's three sheets of forin paper and three sheets of tronbay. Alright?"

Lutz pushes a few things around on the calculator, inputting the price for three sheets of forin, but after that he pauses, bent finger trembling in the air, and hangs his head in defeat. He can do calculation in one digit, but when the quantities or the varieties increase, he loses all hope.

"How about you, Maïne?"

"Umm, *'two times three is six and three times four is twelve'*, so it'll be eighteen small silver coins total. Twenty percent of that will be three small silver and six large copper for both Lutz and my share together, so each of us will get one small silver and eight large copper."

I blink a little as Benno stares at me. Behind him, Mark smiles wryly.

"That's correct. That really is amazing, to be able to compute that on the spot without a calculator."

I, however, can't even use a calculator at all, so this winter I'll need to be practicing right alongside Lutz. I need to be as familiar with my surroundings as possible.

“Next... Lutz, I’ll take the cost of the slate and slate pencils out of your individual portion. That’ll be two large copper coins.”

Two coins are pulled from Lutz’s share, and in exchange he receives a slate and a few slate pencils.

“Now, you can carry this money with you, but if you’re going to have trouble finding a place to store it, you could instead deposit it at the Merchant’s Guild for safekeeping. Which would you prefer?”

It seems that the Merchant’s Guild also functions as some sort of bank. Having a lot of physical cash on hand is somewhat terrifying, and since one day I’d like to be able to buy a book, I’d like to have some sort of savings account.

“Please give me the large copper coins. I’ll be giving them to my mother. I’ll leave the silver coin with you, if you could please deposit it for me.”

It had been one of my dreams as Urano to show gratitude to my parents by giving them my first real paycheck. It’s okay if I manage to fulfill that dream here instead, right?

“Alright. Lutz, what about you?”

“I’ll do the same as Maïne.”

“Alright then.”

I receive eight large copper coins, then Benno and I touch our guild cards together. They make a sharp pinging noise, like the plucking of a string, then we take them back. Nothing on the card seems to have changed at all.

“Now, you’ll be able to take out your money on the third floor of the merchant’s guild. Eventually, you’re going to need to go there and practice doing that.”

“That makes sense,” I reply.

Benno smiles wryly at me as I stare at the card in my hands, spinning it around in my fingers. Mark seems to share similar thoughts. Lutz touches his card to Benno’s as well, then collects six coins. The feel of the cold metal in our hands sets our hearts racing.

“This... is the first time I’ve ever held money,” I whisper.

“We’ve *earned* this ourselves, you know?”

I think back on all of the many failures we faced before we successfully made paper. Seeing this money after all of that is moving me deeply.

“When spring comes, let’s make a lot of paper, and let’s sell it all,” I say.

“Yeah!” replies Lutz.

My mind still fixated on my first ever earnings and feeling completely satisfied with the afternoon’s events, I look up at Benno.

“This is everything we needed to do today, right?” I ask.

However, my words only cause Benno to grimace, and he flicks me on the forehead.

“Hey, don’t be stupid, kid. *Your* battle is tomorrow. You’re going to be facing off against that old bastard’s granddaughter, *alone*, with no adults there, you know? With that *thoughtless* look on your face?!”

“What?! But, um, she’s just a child, and we’re both girls, right?”

I can’t imagine this being anything you’d call a battle. All I’m going to do is meet Freida so that I can ask her what she wants, and the guild leader isn’t going to be there, so is “facing off” really the right phrase to use?

“According to the rumors, it sounds like the granddaughter that old bastard really dotes on is the one kid amongst all his grandkids who’s the most like him.”

“Sh... she takes after the guild leader?”

I try to imagine what the guild leader’s face would look like on a young girl, but my imagination fails me.

“Well, you’re bringing Lutz with you, so that’s a little better. You won’t get overwhelmed. Lutz, you shouldn’t say anything you don’t need to, but if that girl tries to steal Maïne like the guild leader did earlier today, you need to immediately refuse. Personally, I have no idea where that old bastard’s hidden his traps. Got that?”

“Got it.”

Lutz nods vigorously, an earnestly serious expression on his face. Is it really necessary to make this big of a deal out of this meeting, though? We’re talking about an unbaptized little girl, right?

As I lean my head to one side doubtfully, the coins audibly rub together in my hand.

“...Come to think of it,” I say, “how much did you agree on for Freida’s hairpin? The guild leader made some sort of sign with his fingers, but I didn’t know how to read it...”

“The sign that old man put up meant three small silver coins. When I said we needed to ask for a little more, that made it four coins.”

This is extremely startling to hear. Even factoring in the price of the thread, this is massively overcharging for just a single hairpin.

“Th... what? What?! That’s a ripoff!”

“Make sure you’re done on time. This winter’s baptismal ceremony is going to be a great advertisement, so that’ll affect how well we can sell them afterward.”

“Um, so, adjusting the price is...”

With a sharp glare, Benno banishes my last glimmer of hope.

“You think I’m pulling one over on that geezer?”

“No, not at all.”

I hang my head dejectedly as I reply. I’m going to have to make a pin that’s worth four small silver coins, so there’s more than just a little bit of pressure on me.

“Even after my introduction fee, my commission, and the materials cost, you’re still going to make, what, fifty, sixty percent of that? Put your heart into this, kids. It’ll be fine! Look, that old bastard finally managed to find the hairpin he was looking so hard for, but you wouldn’t sell the one you were holding right in front of him. That makes it seem even harder to get, right? Then, he’s asking that you do something that you’d ordinarily be doing as your winter handiwork *right now*, in the middle of this amazingly busy time of year when everyone’s trying to prepare for winter, *and* sell it to him by this winter’s baptismal ceremony, before it’s even gone to market, so his granddaughter can wear something nobody else is? That’s what that price means. Don’t worry about it, kid.”

So, if you can come up with a few excuses, it’s okay to blatantly rip someone off, he’s saying? Seriously, give me a break.

Chapter 39

The Guild Leader's Granddaughter

The next day, before the third bell has chimed, Lutz and I wait in the central plaza for Freida to arrive. Now that I think about it, though, I actually haven't heard at all about Freida's hair color, mannerisms, eye color, or anything else of that nature.

"What do we do, Lutz?"

"She's going to wave to us when she gets here, probably?"

"...I wonder if she'll recognize us?"

"She will. Your hairpin is super unique, and plus her grandfather is right in there so if she goes to ask him, she'll be able to pick us out right away, right?"

Lutz, shrugging, points to the Merchant's Guild building that overlooks the central plaza. As he says, Freida could probably identify us immediately.

"Hey, Lutz. How did it go at your place yesterday? My folks were..."

Yesterday, Lutz and I sold our paper to Benno, then returned home with our first earnings. At my house, my entire family's eyes all went wide upon seeing the money, and when I told them the story about how Lutz and I had worked to make paper, they praised me, saying things like "amazing!" and "you must have worked hard!". Then, after I added my first-ever pay to our living budget, we bought a fair amount of a precious luxury item during the winter preparation days: honey.

"How about you, Lutz? Are they happier with you becoming a trader now?"

Lutz, working with me, successfully finished our-making project, and was accepted by Benno to be an apprentice as his shop. What, though, would his family think, I wonder? Would they approve of his enthusiasm?

Lutz shrugs, smiling bitterly. "It went... questionably. They were overjoyed about the money, but they're still not sold on the idea of me being a merchant. My dad was all, 'you said you made paper with Maïne and sold it, so why not be a craftsman and make paper?' He'd said he'd happier if I was just a craftsman."

“Your dad *really* wants you to be a craftsman, huh.”

I understand how someone can take great pride in making things for a living, but Lutz’s dreams are very different. It’s hard to find a middle ground.

“But I don’t *want* to be a craftsman. I want to be a merchant like Benno, able to leave the city. Maïne, you didn’t just want to make paper, right?”

“Right. My next step is to figure out how to mass-produce it. Then, I want hand off the actual production duties to someone else and work towards making books. If there aren’t more books in the world, I can’t own a bookstore, and my dream of being a librarian is always going to be a dream.”

If I want books to proliferate, then just mass-producing paper isn’t going to be enough. A printing technique is also absolutely necessary. I can’t let myself be satisfied with books made out of loose stacks of memo paper.

...The road ahead is still very long.

“If I could run a bookstore with you, Maïne, that would be great! Yesterday, when I saw those bookshelves at the Merchant’s Guild, I started thinking, who’s going to want books? People who can read, so rich people, right?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

The commoners in this town can’t really read, so of course there’s no way they’re going to want to buy books. ‘Books? What’re those? They tasty?’ they’d say.

“So, if we’re selling books, then we’re going to want to go and sell them to the nobility of a lot of different towns, right? Like maybe the lord of the next town over, like we saw on the map.”

When I consider the types of customers that might be buying books, he’s making a fair amount of sense.

As I idly admire Lutz for how he solidified his own goals while silently staring at that map, I hear the patter of small footsteps coming up to me and stopping.

“Pardon me, but are you Maïne?”

“Um?! Uh, yes!! I’m Maïne. You must be Freida?”

“That’s right!” she says, beaming. “Pleased to meet you.”

Her cherry-blossom hair is done up in pigtails, and her light brown eyes show a hint of a gentle smile; a sweet and adorable little girl. I don't know if it's because of good breeding or very rigorous home discipline, but her actions and manner of speech are more grown-up than I was expecting, in contrast to how small she is for her age. I can't say much about the person herself, but she gives off an unbalanced first impression.

However, no matter how hard I look, I can't see a trace of the guild leader in her. Maybe it was just a rumor that she resembles her grandfather the guild master? I'm glad Benno was worried for nothing.

She looks over at Lutz. "Are you Maïne's friend? I was looking forward to it just being us girls..." Her cheeks puff out in just a hint of a pout.

Certainly, talking with another girl my age does have some appeal, but that's usually restricted to only when the other girl is a close friend. Today, our destination is the guild leader's house. I have no desire at all to go there by myself.

In response, I immediately grab on to Lutz's hand, smiling at him.

"I'm not really strong, and I faint a lot, so if I don't have Lutz here with me I can't really go outside. Even if I go to Mister Benno's shop, if Lutz doesn't come with me, they won't let me in. So, if Lutz can't come today..."

Before I can get the words 'I'll have to go home' out of my mouth, Frieda suddenly bursts into a question.

"It's dangerous if nobody's watching you, and you faint a lot... Maïne, do you perhaps have... the devouring?"

"Huh?... Devouring?"

Unconsciously, I tip my head to the side, hearing this unfamiliar term. Frieda has her head tilted in the opposite direction, her hands held lightly to her cheeks.

"Do you not know the word?... How do I say this, is there something hot deep inside you that moves around against your will?"

"There is!! That sickness, do you know about it?!"

Information about this disease, which nobody so far has known anything about, has

suddenly appeared from a completely unexpected source. Both Lutz and I lean forward eagerly, waiting for her reply, but she gives a slightly troubled smile.

“...I had it as well. That’s why my body is still so small, you see?”

It seems like both my small stature and the fact that I collapse if I lose focus even slightly are caused by this “devouring” illness. When I compare myself to Freida, who also looks like she could be two or three years younger than she really is, I’m suddenly taken aback.

“Is... is there a cure?!”

She just used the past tense. In other words. She’s cured. After I briefly exchanged a glance with Lutz, the question leapt hungrily out of my mouth. Freida lowers her eyebrows apologetically and answers in a low, sighing voice.

“...It’s expensive. Really expensive.”

“Whoa, it’s hopeless, then...”

For the granddaughter of a successful merchant who serves as the leader of a guild to say something is “really expensive”, then there isn’t the slightest hope that my family will be able to purchase it. I hang my head low, dejectedly, and Freida pats me gently on the shoulder.

“But you seem so healthy, Maïne! As long as you keep your eye set on a goal and work towards it with all your might, you’ll be fine. Be careful, though, because if your will falters or you lose sight of your goal, then you’ll face the backlash.”

I see. It’s because I had my mind set first on going to the forest, and then now on making paper, that I’ve been so healthy lately? When I gave up on my last objective I *did* come close to death, huh.

Huh? Isn’t this like those migratory fish that literally die if they stop swimming?

I groan quietly to myself as I carefully file this new information away inside my head. My sickness is called the devouring. Today, I finally learned its name. Also, I learned a method to manage it. In order to stay healthy, I need to be constantly moving towards a goal.

“If you have no more questions, shall we head to my house?”

“Sure,” I reply.

The house that Freida leads us to has a shop on its ground floor, much like others in the area. It’s considerably large, and far closer to the castle walls than Benno’s is. In fact, it might not even be accurate to describe the building as “close” to the walls. It is right next to them, and has the best view of the temple that one could possibly get.

“I really love watching the parade to the baptismal ceremonies, you know, and I watch them every single time. During this summer’s parade, I saw that hairpin. It stood out so much for me.”

If her house is here, then she’d be able to have an excellent view of the entire procession as it enters the temple without even having to leave her front door.

“Since it was the first time I’d seen anything like it, I asked my grandfather if he had any information about it, but he wasn’t able to find anything out about it. Then, in the fall ceremony, when I saw that they hadn’t spread around, I thought it was very mysterious...”

“These do require some time to make,” I say, “so unfortunately I really can’t make them unless it’s the middle of the winter, when I have a lot of time on my hands.”

Or so my mother insists, I add, in my head.

“Is that what happened...”

“If I can sell them, then you should be able to see many girls wearing ornaments like these come next spring’s ceremonies.”

“Well! So, that means that I’ll be the only girl wearing one this winter, right? I’m looking forward to this!”

When I see her face light up, I remember how Benno had said “sell it as a special service by the winter’s baptismal ceremony, before it’s even gone to market, so his granddaughter can wear something nobody else is.” I see now that this would be like a special premium product.

It may be premium, but still, is it okay to rip them off like this? I’d really prefer not...

The building that Freida’s home and her grandfather’s shop is in seems to have been rented out entirely to the store’s employees. Not a single person who doesn’t have any

connection to the store lives in this building, it seems.

When we reach her home, on the second floor of the building, I suddenly stop dead in my tracks, stunned.

There's so much *cloth* in this room. I thought the same thing when I had visited Otto's house before, but that was only when I was in his parlor. However, no matter where I look in Freida's house, I see tapestries and cushions in a brilliant display of overflowing color. Also, on the shelves, there are stone figures of animals and metal sculptures. It is very obvious that this is the home of an exceptionally rich family, one with the political clout to live so close to the nobility.

"Refreshments, young lady?"

After being brought to the drawing room, the woman working as a servant here brings something to drink. This red liquid is served not in the wooden cups I'm used to seeing, but in metal ones.

"Ah, thank you," Freida replies. "This," she says to me, "is a beverage made by adding water to a syrup made by adding water to colde juice. It is very sweet!"

Colde berries are very much like raspberries, so I perhaps this is something like raspberry juice. As I ponder, I raise the cup to my lips, and find that it's much sweeter than I expected. It's so rare for me to taste sweet things, and I belatedly realize that my careful expression has disintegrated into a genuine smile.

"So sweet! Lutz, this is delicious!"

"It really is! Sweet *and* tasty!"

"I'm so glad you enjoy it!... Now then, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

Freida tilts her head very slightly to the side as she asks her question, and I wonder just what the guild leader actually told her. Since I have no way to actually tell, perhaps giving her a full explanation myself would be the best idea?

"To be frank, yesterday, your grandfather commissioned me to make you a hair ornament that you could wear to your baptismal ceremony."

I take Tuuli's hairpin, which I'd brought as an example, from my tote bag. Freida glances at it, then nods slightly.

“That much I had heard. However, I’d have expected my grandfather to just arbitrarily decide on something like that without any input, though.”

As expected of a grandchild. She is absolutely correct. Her grandfather had been running wild and ordered this hairpin entirely on his own, intending for it to be a total surprise.

“Ummm... he did say something to that extent, but I personally thought that you’d be far happier with a hairpin that was not only your favorite color but also matched your clothing as well, so I asked him if I could meet with you to discuss what you would truly want.”

Freida’s hair is the color of cherry blossoms. In other words, it’s a light pink. A hair ornament that was made to match Tuuli’s blue-green hair would absolutely not fit her hair color. An image starts to form in my mind; perhaps reddish flowers, or maybe even white ones, set in contrast to green leaves to pull everything together.

“Ah, I *thought* that was a little too unusually thoughtful for my grandfather, but it seems you were the one who reined him in?”

“Anyhow, if it’s alright with you, could you please show me the clothing that you’re going to wear to the ceremony? I’d like to look at the colors that were used in the embroidery.”

I had intended to dodge that particular topic and turn the conversation away from the subject of the guild leader, but Freida, perceiving this, chuckles softly to herself.

...Are all the children who have had such high-class training so mature?

Both her actions and her manner of speaking are maybe even more adult than mine. At the very least, she’s a very different person from the other kids that I go to the forest with.

“Wait just a minute,” she says. “I’ll go get my dress for you.”

As Freida leaves her seat, Lutz lets out an unnecessarily over-exaggerated sigh. He rolls his shoulders and shakes his head from side to side, limbering up his body as if staring silently had been a tremendously difficult task.

“Are you doing okay, Lutz?”

“I couldn’t really join in the conversation. I dunno anything about how clothes and colors match up, and I can’t really make myself talk that fancy, you know.”

When Freida and I were talking, I’d unintentionally started talking in a much more polite manner. Since I had also been very concerned about accidentally saying something out of place, I nod emphatically in agreement.

“Yeah. When you start working, you’re going to need to know how to talk fancy like that, but you can let me do that talking today when we’re asking her what she wants. Staying totally silent like that is probably really hard, but I’d be very worried if I didn’t have you here, so please stay with me!”

“Yeah!”

Just having a friend nearby is reassuring. Just as I breathe out sigh of relief, Freida returns.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting. This is the dress I’ll be wearing.”

“Whoa, amazing!”

Freida has brought out the dress that she’s planning on wearing to her baptismal ceremony. Like Tuuli’s, white serves as the foundation for the garment, but unlike Tuuli’s, the material is far thicker. To be specific, Freida’s dress has parts of it that are fluffy, like fur, and it looks very warm.

Suddenly reminded of the countless, countless layers I have to wear during the winter, puffing me up like a ball, I groan quietly to myself. During the summer ceremonies, everyone wears thin fabrics, so what’s important isn’t just the money you have to spend, but also the skill with which the garment is put together. For the winter ceremonies, though, one’s purchasing power makes a much bigger difference, it seems.

“Freida, do you like this color?”

“I do. That’s why I had my dress embroidered in it, you know?”

Having discovered embroidery done in a reddish thread amongst the white of her dress, I compare it to the color of her hair. If I use this color, I should be able to match both her dress and her hair.

“Do you by any chance have any of this embroidery thread left over?” I ask.

“I do, I think; what do you need it for?”

“I think that, for consistency’s sake, I should make the flowers the same color. May I ask you for a little bit of it? I can try to find a thread that’s the same color.”

“Sure, that’s fine with me.”

I’ll get a small piece of thread from her, then ask Benno to find me more thread that matches that color. Since Benno has already negotiated a ludicrously high price, I think I can afford to be picky about the thread being used.

“Will this be enough, I wonder?”

Freida returns with a ball of thread so large that she could probably have her dress fully embroidered a second time.

“That’s... certainly enough, but...”

“Then, I’ll leave it in your capable hands.”

She places the bundle of deep red thread in my arms, leaving me at a loss for words.

If she’s giving me all of the raw materials, then we’re *really* overcharging her! What should I do now?!

Although, I can’t really say anything like “since the price Benno quoted included sourcing the raw materials, I’ll give you a discount.” The relationship between Benno and the guild leader he’s overcharging is complicated enough, which is troubling. Plus, in my head, I can hear him admonishing me, saying “whenever and wherever you can take money, just *take* it, it’s something to be taken.”

Groaning softly to myself, I take another look at Freida’s hairstyle.

“How were you planning on styling your hair on the day of the ceremony?” I ask.

“Just like it is now, I think...?”

Since Freida has her hair in pigtails, she’ll need two hairpins. I’m glad I thought to ask. Better yet, I’m glad I stopped the guild leader from being too rash. If I’d done as he’d asked, not only would the hairpin not suit her, but she’d only have a pin for one side of her hair, which would have been problematic indeed.

“...If you’ll be wearing it like you are today, you’ll need two hairpins, won’t you?”

“...Ah. You’re right.”

Freida seems just as taken aback as I am. I’m slightly relieved though; if I have to make two hairpins, then this will be somewhat less of a huge rip-off. Freida thoughtfully taps on her chin, a slightly serious expression on her face.

“I’m going to have to pay double for this, I think.”

“No, no, since you’ve given me the thread I’ll need for the materials, the existing payment is very much fine with me.”

Since the production cost has been driven down to basically nothing, there is literally no way I could possibly accept *double* the excessive amount that we’re already charging. The thought of it hurts my stomach.

“No, but you can’t possibly say that,” she replies. “You agreed to make one hairpin for that amount of money. If you make two, then I’ll pay you for two.”

“I couldn’t! You’re providing the raw materials, so for two...”

As Freida and I start to endlessly dither back and forth, with her insisting she’ll pay and me insisting she doesn’t have to, Lutz, who has been quiet this whole time, suddenly reaches up to noisily scratch his head.

“So,” he proposes, “how about charging half-price for the second one?”

“Huh?”

“Maïne, since you got the materials, you want to give a discount. Freida, since you don’t want to cause any trouble between Benno and the guild leader, you want to pay full price for two. How about you meet in the middle, and pay half?”

“Lutz, you’re a genius!” I exclaim. “Freida, how does that sound?”

I jump on Lutz’s proposed compromise, to which I can’t find any objections. I eagerly turn to look at Freida, but her incomprehensible expression doesn’t seem to tell me that she’s satisfied with that.

“I’m... fine with that, I guess, but... whenever and wherever you can earn money, you should take it, right? It’s something that’s there to be taken.”

This girl has just spouted words that do not at all match her sweet and adorable appearance. Freida is, without a doubt, a merchant’s daughter, and the grandchild of

the guild leader.

"...Is that a merchant's wisdom?" I ask. "Benno said the same thing..."

"Hm?" she says, looking slightly doubtful. "Isn't that just how commerce works?"

Although she talks as if she's saying the most obvious thing in the world, I can't help but shake my head.

"There are limits to that, like, there are fair prices for things, and... ah, well, I'm just happy we found a compromise."

"The two are pretty unusual!" she says, smiling slightly. This, however, is no hidden sneer, but a friendly, genuine smile.

We certainly haven't formed a bond through resolving this disagreement, but I think we've worked a little bit to clear the space between us. It feels like there's a little bit of solidarity, here.

This wasn't exactly a negotiation to be proud of, but all of the details of the hairpins have been worked out. I'd thought that we'd immediately head home after that, but by now refills for our colde juice have arrived, and Lutz's eyes, which had been full of silent desire to immediately leave, are now firmly glued to his cup. I myself also want to stay a little while long and savor this sweet flavor, so we spend a bit of time chatting idly.

"Ah, so you go to the forest to pick fruits and gather firewood. That sounds like you're going on a picnic every day!"

Gathering firewood is pretty essential to maintaining our lifestyles, so it's actually not as leisurely of an activity as she's making it out to be. Rather, I'm actually more interested in how Freida lives, since she has no need to go out to the forest in order to forage for firewood.

"Freida, what do you usually do during the day? Kids in this part of the town don't go to the forest, do they?"

"Oh, what I like to do is... heh heh..."

In a single beat, Freida starts smiling broadly.

"Counting money, I'd say?"

Huh? Did I mishear? Was that my imagination? Did my ears go funny for a second? I can't imagine that a thought like that would have come out of this sweet, adorable little girl's mouth.

"Ah, that's not quite right. My apologies."

I'm taken aback by that unexpectedly strange answer, but Freida gently shakes her head and moves to revise her earlier statement. She just misspoke, it seems, I think to myself, putting a relieved hand on my chest. But only for a moment.

"It's not just counting it, I like *saving* it. Feeling the heavy weight of a sack full of gold is so delightful, and hearing coins clink against each other is the most wonderful thing! Don't you agree?"

"...Ah... yes... that might be right. I also like it when my savings box starts to get heavy."

After squeezing those words out, I quietly close my eyes.

...That wasn't a hallucination. *Now* who's making stuff up about her hobbies? Me! I am! I'm an enormous idiot! She's the kind of girl who looks like she should be into making candy or embroidering things, so for her hobby to be *money*... I hadn't even the slightest clue.

"Ah! You know what I mean?!"

Perhaps because someone agreed with her opinion, or perhaps because she just loves money that much, she starts getting fired up.

"So, when I was very young, the thing I loved the most was the glittering of gold coins, so when my grandfather did his monthly accounting, I sat with him, and I really enjoyed helping him count his gold."

Did she just skip entirely over copper and silver, and go straight to gold? This damn rich girl!

Even as I grow increasingly envious, Freida keeps passionately rambling on. She gets entranced by gold, she says excitedly, to the point that her eyes grow foggy and her cheeks grow hot, etc., etc., and she things that financial calculations and growing a business looks very fun.

“And, lately, I’ve been thinking about what I can do to start making *more* money, so when I find new products that I might be able to sell my heart starts jumping with joy!”

...What do I do? This girl is *strange*. She’s cute, but *far* too unfortunate.

“Hey, Maïne.”

“Y-yes, what is it?”

By this point, about half of my consciousness has wandered entirely elsewhere, so when she addresses I suddenly sit straight back up, snapping back to attention. Freida’s eyes are glittering brightly, and at the same time she grabs my hands tightly.

“I’m really pleased with you, you know.”

“Thank you very much?”

My voice unconsciously pitches unnaturally up at the end of my statement. I have no clue whatsoever about why she could possibly be pleased with me. As I tilt my head doubtfully to the side, Freida draws unabashedly close, a blush crossing her adorably sweet face as she continues to speak.

“Maïne, do you want to work with me?”

“She can’t!” replies Lutz immediately, before I can even react.

“Oh my! Well, my family’s shop is much larger than Benno’s, and we’ve been selling things for a lot longer than he has, so this is a good deal for her, isn’t it? So, since there’s no way you’re officially employed as apprentices since you still haven’t been baptized yet, so she can still come do her apprenticeship at my family’s shop! Also, I’m asking *Maïne*. That question wasn’t directed at you at *all*.”

Huh? Didn’t something like this happen... yesterday...?

“I’m thankful for the offer,” I say, “but I owe a lot to Mister Benno...”

Before I can finish my sentence with “so I must refuse”, Freida suddenly smiles even more widely, interrupting me.

“Aha! If that’s the case, then I’ll pay him back for you.”

“Um?! W, well...”

I’m trying to refuse, but she’s not letting me. Those *weren’t* just rumors. Benno wasn’t just overexaggerating his fears.

She is *exactly like* the guild leader! Her manner of speaking might be a little different, but she is saying the exact same things!

Her smile not fading in the slightest, she starts rambling off all of the benefits of working at her family’s shop. Lutz is suddenly looking very unhappy.

“Maïne, answer her clearly, like you did yesterday.”

“I, I, I must refuse!!”

Ordinarily, I’d think that being rejected so clearly would cause a child to start crying, but Freida’s eyes merely go wide for a brief moment. Then, her fighting spirit reignites, and her eyes gleam brightly again.

“Well then, that’s a shame.... But! There’s still some time before your baptismal ceremony, Maïne, and since you’re temporarily registered with the Merchant’s Guild already, I’m sure there will be plenty of opportunities for me to run into you until then. Heh heh heh, I’m looking forward to this!”

What now? I feel like I’m a rat cornered by a snake, with no place to escape, and a cold sweat breaks out over my forehead.

Benno! I don’t care how much you overcharge anymore, just please, save meee!

Chapter 40

Freida's Hairpins

Lutz and I leave Freida's house, commencing our journey home. She just saw us off with a smile, but why do I feel like I'm fleeing for my life? All we did was eat sweets and chat a little, but why am I more exhausted than when I go to the forest?

"Ah, have you finished your negotiations?"

"Mister Mark?"

As we pass Benno's shop on our way home, Mark calls out to us. We'd previously been told that we should come by the shop tomorrow afternoon to deliver our report, so we were planning on heading home for the day, but Mark waves to us, smilingly beckoning us inside.

"I know that we had planned to discuss this tomorrow," he says, "but since Master Benno is rather nervous at the moment, would you perhaps be willing to discuss the outcome of today's negotiations right now?"

"...Yes, I would."

My stomach churns a little as I think about how much I might get scolded for arbitrarily charging half price for a second pin, but I do really want to finish this as quickly as possible.

"Master Benno," says Mark, opening the door. "May Maïne and Lutz enter?"

"Yeah, show them in."

Benno sits behind his desk, tapping his finger impatiently on its surface as if to tell us to get in there immediately.

"...Maïne, what'd you think? Of that old man's granddaughter?"

"Ummm, she seemed like very cute young lady, like the rumors said."

"Alright, so she's well-groomed. What did you *think*?"

I tried hard to be politely indirect about my description, but Benno waves his hand

dismissively, telling me to get to the heart of the matter.

“To be honest,” I reply, “her appearance and her personality are so different that I was a little shocked. She’s not just a girl who loves money, though; she’s been close to the guild leader, observing him, since well before her baptism. She’s thinking about how to grow her capital, how to expand her business ventures, and so on. I think she has amazing talent for being a merchant.”

“You think she’s amazing, hmm...”

Benno roughly scratches his head, then breathes a heavy sigh.

“Umm,” I say, “how should I put this... she’s cute, but very... strange. Right, Lutz?”

When I cram all those thoughts about my impression of her into that one sentence, Lutz raises his eyebrows, then looks down at me with a face that screams “like you’re one to talk.” Benno, looking very interested, quirks up the edges of his mouth, then asks Lutz the same question.

“Lutz, what did you think?”

“She tried to recruit Maïne just like the guild leader did yesterday, so I think that she’s not someone you can let your guard down around. Also, I think that... she’s kinda like Maïne.”

“Whaaat?! How?!”

That’s way too unthinkable!

As I practically lunge forward, demanding an explanation for his shocking words, Lutz merely shrugs his shoulders.

“When that girl talked about money,” he says, “she looked like you do when you’re talking about books. Both of you act like you don’t have eyes for anything other than the thing you like, so it’s just like you said earlier: cute face, but weird inside.”

Ah, I see. Right now, apparently, I look pretty cute.

There are no mirrors in my house, so I had tried to look at my reflection in a bucket of water, but all I could see was a warped, blurry shadow. The only people who have called me cute to my face were either people I’ve only just met or my excessively doting father, so I thought it was just polite flattery.

For as long as I can remember, I've been used to people calling me not just your average bookworm, but a *weirdo*. It doesn't really matter much to me, but I wasn't particularly cute at all. If you had looked at me, you'd have seen just the kind of nerdy girl who holed herself up in the library all the time. Nobody had ever said that I looked any different than they thought I should.

I imagine a girl who resembles her siblings, so one who looks like a younger version of Tuuli, who also chases after nonexistent books, so an eccentric, strangely-behaving one. As I think about that dramatic clash of images, I hang my head in defeat.

"...I'm sorry. I have something to think about now."

"Think long and hard about it."

"Ngh..." I say, depressed.

Benno, who has been watching our exchange with a smirk, starts tapping his finger on his desk again.

"Then what? Did you finish your negotiations?"

"Umm, Miss Freida wears her hair in two braids, so it turns out that I'll be making two hairpins."

"Hmm! So we'll make double the profit."

My heart skips a beat when he says that. There's no way I can't tell him about this, but if I tell him, he'll absolutely get mad at me.

"Well, umm, you see..."

"What?"

Benno stares pointedly at me with his reddish-brown eyes. My breath catches in my throat with a squeak, and I stammer, stalling for time, as I try to come up with some kind of explanations. Benno turns his sharp gaze from me to Lutz. The instant Benno opens his mouth, Lutz starts talking.

"Miss Freida provided Maïne with the thread that she'll be using for the raw materials, so Maïne said that she'd make the second one for no extra charge..."

"Lutz?!" I cry, panicked.

"What did you say?!" roars Benno, at the exact same instant.

"Miss Freida," continued Lutz, "insisted that the price had already been established, so

she'd pay full price for the second one..."

"...Oh?"

"It didn't seem like they'd ever agree on anything, so I spoke up, and we came to an agreement that Miss Freida would pay half price for the second hairpin."

After Lutz delivers his precise, succinct report, Benno raises his eyebrows, then turns to look at me.

"Maïne... are you an *idiot*? Have you heard a *word* I've said? Or did you just *forget* everything?"

"I... I remembered! So even when I got the materials, I didn't try to lower the price at all for the first one. But then, after we agreed on half-price for the second, Freida said 'whenever and wherever you can take money you should take it, because it's something that's there to be taken', like you do."

"The *person you were negotiating with* told you that?"

Benno rubs his forehead, an amazed look on his face, then shakes his head. Even I had thought it was kind of pitiful that my opponent would remind me of that, but the thought of overcharging her *that* much made my stomach churn.

"But I was thinking that maybe there's a limit to how much I should be profiting, or maybe I was way past asking for a fair price, so my stomach started hurting... please forgive me."

"What kind of merchant gets a stomachache when earning money? Seriously... Well, that's just money out of your pocket. I'm charging the same handling fee for both of them, so I don't care either way. If strange rumors start to spread about how you can get a second hairpin for free if you buy one, then you're definitely going to get pushy customers coming in to demand it. Make sure you pay attention to what customers you can afford to lose."

I hadn't realized that customers like that could possibly exist. I hang my head even lower, the awareness of my lack of basic knowledge being hammered like nails into my skull.

"Ngh, I hadn't thought that far ahead. I'm sorry. Then, here is the thread that Freida lent me to use as materials. I'm going to want some white thread that matches this one. I'm going to need, ummm..."

I pull the measuring tape out of my tote bag, then stretch it from fingertip to fingertip.

“About this long... I’ll need a piece that’s about 100 feli long, please.”

“Got it. Tomorrow, come back here so that you can go to the thread warehouse with Mark. While you’re at it, you should pick up the thread you’ll need for your winter work.”

“Yes, sir,” I reply.

After we’re told that it’s okay to leave, Lutz and I head out from Benno’s shop to return home. I suddenly sympathize dearly with all of the worn-out salarymen back home. I want to go home and be comforted.



“I’m home,” I say, as I walk through the door.

“Welcome back, Maïne,” says Tuuli. “How was the girl you met today? Did you make friends?”

She, on cooking duty for today, looks up from the pot she’s stirring and smiles at me. She has a cute face, she’s very helpful, she’s kind, she’s been getting better at cooking so she’s a (future) excellent cook, and since she’s working as a seamstress she’s a (future) sewing beauty. When I see her, emotion suddenly wells up in my heart.

“Tuuliy~!” I cry, running up and clinging to her tightly.

She looks down at me, frowning a little. “What’s wrong, Maïne, did something happen?”

“Tuuli, you’re an angel! You heal me. You’re the best older sister in the world, but I’m not even just sick and useless all the time. Lutz told me today that I’m way weirder than I look, so I only just noticed. I’m so sorry, Tuuli!”

“Hah...” she sighs, stroking my head. “You just noticed?”

After a little while, she points over to the bedroom. “Maïne, I can’t cook like this. Go put your stuff away, okay?”

“Okay!”

I put my tote bag away, then come back to help Tuuli in the kitchen. Even though people keep saying over and over that I’m so small, I *have* grown a little bit, so now I can actually stir a pot safely, if I’m standing on a chair.

While I carefully stir the pot so that nothing burns, I tell Tuuli all about my day.

“Okay, so, the girl I met is called Freida, and she’s really cute, but her hobby is *money*. She said her favorite thing to do is count gold coins.”

“*Gold coins?! I haven’t even seen those! She must be super rich to have enough of those to count.*”

Tuuli seems to have jumped straight to the quantity of gold coins, missing Freida’s weird interests entirely. Around here, I think it might not be uncommon for someone to spend their entire life without seeing a single gold coin, so I know just how big of an impact that might have.

“Her house is amazing too. There’s decorations and cloth everywhere, and it’s very pretty. Oh! And then Freida told me that the sickness I have is called the devouring.”

“...Huh, I’ve never heard of that.”

Tuuli tilts her head to the side doubtfully when she hears about that previously-unknown disease. It can’t be helped; it seems like there’s very few people who actually know about it, after all.

“It’s a really rare disease. Mister Otto and Mister Benno even said that they didn’t know about it. She knew about it because she used to have it too! But she also said that it took a *lot* of money to cure her. And if a girl that rich says that it took a lot of money...”

“...then there’s no way we can afford it.”

Tuuli immediately comes to the same conclusion that I had. She didn’t even need to think about it. With our economic status, where we can’t even call a doctor when someone collapses with a fever, there’s no way we can make that happen, no matter what we do.

“...Yeah. But she told me about what I can do to make sure it doesn’t get any worse!”

“Oh?”

“If I have a goal or a target in mind, and I’m always working really hard on making it there, then I’ll be fine, she says.”

“Ah! That makes sense. You’ve been kinda doing whatever you like lately, so you’ve been much healthier. Before, you always used to cry about how only I could do things that I liked...”

“Ooh...”

Now that she mentions it, Maïne's memories are full of times when she was feverish, crying a lot, and bothering Tuuli. Now that she's made that comparison to the past out loud, though, I think she *had* to have noticed something strange had happened, right?

As I start to brood, Tuuli hurriedly comes over to stroke my hair comfortingly.

"Don't feel bad. I think it's great that you're feeling so much better. So! How about the hairpin?"

"I asked her about what her favorite color was, and she gave me some of the thread that her dress is embroidered with. I'm going make the pins out of it. And since she has her hair in two braids, she needs two pins."

"Hmm, I see!"

Our mother returns home while we're still in the middle of our preparations, and after a little while our father, who has recently been stuck only on night shifts and thus I haven't seen very much, returns from his first day shift in a while. While we eat the first dinner in a while that we've had the whole family together for, we talk a lot about the guild leader's home. It's not at all common for someone like us to be able to visit the home of someone so rich, so everyone at the table was extremely interested in hearing all about it.

My mother seemed most interested in hearing about all of the decorative tapestries and cushions they had, and my father was more interested in the brands of liquor they had lined up on the shelves. Tuuli was curious about the things that Freida wore and the kinds of things she owned, so her questions were all about Freida's belongings.

After a much more exciting dinner than I thought we'd have, I pull my mother aside and ask her if she could give back my embroidery needles.

"What are you going to do?" she asks.

"I'm going to make some hairpins. I told you yesterday, right? They're what Freida wants me to make. Today I went to find out exactly what she wanted to order. I also told her that I wanted to make it out of the same thread that her dress was embroidered with, so she lent me some."

"Could you show me that thread, please?"

My mother, the skilled seamstress who works as a dyer, could not, of course, hide her great interest in the thread I'd brought home from Freida. She tells me that she'll get

her sewing kit and take out the embroidery needles, so I should immediately go and fetch the thread.

I pull the thread out of my tote bag. The instant I set it on the table, my mother picks it up, staring at it very closely. Tuuli, who is apprenticing as a seamstress, is also interested in the kind of thread that the daughter of a rich family has embroidered on her dresses, so she excitedly comes in to sneak a peek.

“Dying a thread this deeply red takes a lot of work, you know.”

“It really is a high quality thread!”

While the two of them are entranced by the bundle of thread they hold, I sit down at the table in front of them and get my embroidering needles ready.

“Since hairpins like this are super rare, we’re going to sell it at a really high price. So, I’m going to try my hardest on this!”

“Is it going to be like mine?” asks Tuuli.

When I was making Tuuli’s pin, my first priority had been making economical use of the thread we had, so I was only really able to make it out of tiny flowers made out of the colors of thread we had left over. This time, though, I have quite a lot of the red thread that Freida lent me. Also, since we’re charging as much as we are, I’m going to try to make it somewhat more elaborate than Tuuli’s. For me, I need to put in a good faith effort.

“The flowers are going to be bigger,” I say. “since I’ve got so much more thread.”

My mental image is a bouquet, with a ring of miniature red roses set against green grasses. If I’m talking about a rich girl, the only thing my terrible imagination can come up with is, regrettably, roses. Roses, however, are very gorgeous flowers, and it’ll be a very showy piece.

I knit together a jagged strip of lace, designed so that it’ll form into petals once it’s rolled up. When I decided it was long enough, I roll it up, stitch it shut along the bottom, then spread the petals out a little bit, turning it into a small rose.

“Whoa, cute!”

Happy because Tuuli praised me, I immediately get started on the second flower. My

dad, drinking some liquor, looks over to see what's happening, then turns to my mother, who's been watching me this whole time and acting like she's itching to jump in.

"Say, Eva. If you're so interested in doing that, would you like me to make you another set of needles?"

"Dad," says Tuuli, "I want some too, so make two sets please!"

Emboldened by my mother's grateful embrace and Tuuli's begging, my father, in high spirits, gets some wood and starts whittling. Since he's already made a set of these for me, it takes him a relatively short amount of time to craft each slender needle.

Tuuli grabs the first completed set, then starts knitting along with me. Since she's been going to apprentice as a seamstress, it seems like her skills have been leveling up; after thinking about it for a few moments, she starts knitting fluidly. To be honest, she's faster than I am.

My mother has been hungrily watching me work, so when she receives her freshly-made needles she smiles brilliantly at my father, then tears into the work with a fierceness I never thought was possible.

"Maïne," says my father, "do you want your Daddy to make the pin part for you?" says my father eagerly.

His hands are idle, now that he's finished carving the needles. I feel bad for him, because he just wants to help his daughter with her work, but that part is Lutz's job. If it were to be taken away from him, then since we'd no longer be making it together, there'd no longer be any justification for him having come along with me to Freida's place and intruding on our meeting. Also, Lutz isn't the kind of person who would accept money for doing nothing, so if he doesn't actually help make the pins, despite the fact that he's always been there with me as I go around, he'll be the only one who doesn't make any money from this.

"You can be emotional support! Carving is Lutz's job, please don't take it from him."

"It's always Lutz, Lutz, Lutz. Maïne, why are being so cold to your Daddy lately?"

My father, ever easy to read, sulks. He has way too much love for his family, so he gets strangely jealous about Otto and Lutz, to the point where sometimes it just gets *annoying*. I breathe a sigh, then shake my head.

“If you want to make a hairpin, why don’t you not make pins for the other kids, but make one for my baptism? I’m planning on wearing a hairpin, so I kind of want something like before, with a hole in it...”

“Oho, what’s this, Maïne? You don’t want me to make them for the other kids, because you’d get jealous?”

Wrong. I have no idea where you could have possibly gotten that impression.

My father smiles broadly, due to whatever bizarre thoughts are bouncing around in his head, and starts working on making my hairpin. Since his mood is instantly good again, I shift my focus back to my needles. While I was busy talking to him, Tuuli and my mother have raced way ahead of me.

“I think we should be good on the red flowers now. Let’s finish up the ones that we’re doing now.”

I needed to make several roses like the first, but with three people working on it, it’s done in a flash. My mother is particularly fast. I, the one who is actually being paid to do this, am the by far the slowest.

“Whaaat? Done already?”

Tuuli pouts in dissatisfaction, perhaps because she found the knitting far more enjoyable than expected, but I merely shrug my shoulders as I finish forming the last of the roses into shape. Originally, my plan had been to have the left and right hairpins each have three miniature roses, but by the time I noticed how quickly they were getting made we had enough for four on each side. Given the size of each of them, we really don’t need any more than this.

“It wouldn’t be right for us to waste any of the thread that someone else lent to us, right?”

“Ah, that’s right. We shouldn’t use such a pretty thread on something useless.”

Downhearted, Tuuli quietly agrees, then starts putting away her needles.

“The next step is to make a lot of little flowers out of the white thread that I’ve asked Mister Benno for. I think white thread would match this red very well, so I think it would be a good thread to use. When I bring it back with me tomorrow, Tuuli, if it’s

okay with you, you can help me with the white flowers too.”

“Sounds like fun!”

Tuuli smiles happily as she picks up her sewing box.

...Hmmm, if Tuuli's like this, I wonder if it would be okay for her to skip making baskets for her winter work and help me make hair ornaments instead?



The next day, Mark, Lutz, and I head out to the thread warehouse so that we can stock up on supplies. It's the same shop that the craftsman we hired to make the paper mat took us to previously. The shopkeeper immediately stands up when he sees us, perhaps because we'd made such a big impression last time after buying the highest-quality spinne silk from him.

“Ah, if it isn't the folks who bought spinne silk a while ago! Are you here to buy some more?”

“Yes,” replies Mark, “we'll be coming back another day with our craftsman to make another purchase. Today, though, we're here to inquire about a different kind of thread.”

Mark's words remind me of what Benno said earlier, that he'd have the craftsman make another paper mat for us by springtime. My head has lately been full of thoughts about Freida's hairpins and my winter handiwork, but I can't let myself forget about any of the preparations that need to be done in order for us to make paper come spring.

...I want a notebook. I don't want this slate, which gets erased whenever anything gets rubbed against it. I really want a notebook.

“What can I help you with today?”

“Umm,” I say, “I'm looking for a white thread that would match this one.”

I pull Freida's thread from my tote bag and hand it to the shopkeeper. He stares at it closely, then hums thoughtfully.

“This is a very high-quality thread. What I've got that wouldn't strange next to it would be... these ones.”

He pulls out two kinds of thread and sets them down in front of me, then places the red thread next to them. After I spend some time looking back and forth between them to compare, I pick up the one that makes the red pop out a little more, then hand it to the shopkeeper.

“Could I please get 100 feli of this thread, and 100 feli of that green you have there. Also, I’d like many different colors of the cheapest thread you have. I’d like 200 feli of each of those, please.”

I need to separate the thread for Freida’s hairpins and the thread for my winter handiwork into two separate orders. I take out the order form set (the blank wooden order forms, the tape measure, the ink, and a wooden pen) that I always keep in my totebag. When I’ve finished describing the orders to the shopkeeper, I write them out immediately, my wooden pen clacking against the wood of the order forms.

A lot of the cheaper threads don’t have particularly good coloring, but for only two large copper coins I can’t really make a huge fuss about it. These hairpins aren’t things that’ll be worn in everyday life, just for formal events. If the price is high enough that people would regret purchasing it for just a single occasion, the few people will buy it. I can’t let myself set my expectations by the six small silver coins the guild leader will pay for his granddaughter’s two pins.

“These threads for your winter work will take some time for me to prepare, so how about I deliver these to your shop once I’m done with them?”

“Yes, please do.”

I put the high-quality white thread that I’ll be immediately using in my tote bag, then head out of the shop. Since the thread warehouse is close to Lutz and my houses, we split off from Mark in front of the thread warehouse and head back home. As we head home, I tell Lutz about how we were already able to finish the red part of the pins last night, and his eyes go wide.

“Huh? Then, you’re already ready to finish off the pins? Didn’t you say that we had some time left, so you’d take your time on it?”

“Yeah, I think it’ll be ready tomorrow or the day after. Mommy and Tuuli really want to help, and they’re way better and faster than me, so they did it in no time at all. If it were just me, it would have taken a lot longer.”

My initial estimate of seven to ten days was based on me having to go to either the forest or the shop during the day, and working on the hairpins between dinner and bedtime. I hadn't even considered the possibility that I might somehow finish everything off in just a single day.

"Got it. I'll get started on my pin part immediately."

"Yes, please! My dad really wants to join in and help make it, so..."

"Man, seriously..."

Lutz, seeing his work being almost stolen from him, hangs his head, sighing.

"Although... I've been thinking about what we'd do if my family takes all the work from us, but that's not quite right, is it? Merchants are people who let other people do the work making things so that they can buy and sell them. Mister Benno doesn't make anything himself, but he's still earning a commission off of the things we're making, right?"

"Huh. You're right."

Lutz looks up at me, taken aback. It is *not* the case that we can't earn any money if we don't actually make anything. Merchants are people who can bring forth money by just moving goods from one place to another. We're still thinking too much like craftsmen.

"This time, we already told the guild leader and Mister Benno that we were going to be making these pins together, so even though it's going to be difficult to change how we think so quickly, the two of us need to study really hard together how to work like a merchant."

"Yeah!"

When I bring the thread home, the work that I had originally planned on doing was, just as I thought, snatched away from me by Tuuli and my mother.

In the time it took me to make a single small flower, Tuuli made two, and my mother made four. In the blink of an eye, we were finished. Next, I was got ready to start making little leaf decorations out of the green thread, but the two of them wound up making the vast majority of them. Once again, I find myself pretty damn useless.

...Conclusion: It is impossible for me to become a sewing beauty. Opening my path towards being a merchant's apprentice was definitely the correct one.

Chapter 41

Hairpin Delivery

Once I finish attaching the pin parts of the hairpins that Lutz made to the parts that I had made, I can't help but breathe a little sigh of self-satisfaction at our accomplishment. The hairpins we made for Freida came out absolutely gorgeous, far more than I was expecting. Each one has four miniature red roses arranged on it, surrounded by a spray of tiny flowers, styled in the image of baby's-breath, with the shape of green leaves poking out here and there from behind.

"...Hey, Maïne," says Lutz, his face twitching as he sees the pin. "Isn't this *way* different from Tuuli's hairpin? This is *super* pretty."

The reasons are simple. First, we used a thread of much higher quality. Since the flower are made from a thinner, smoother thread, they are much finer and glossier. Secondly, the level of skill that went into them is very different. Unlike Tuuli's hairpin, where the vast majority of the flowers were made by my pin, about eighty percent of the flowers on Freida's hairpins were made by my mother and Tuuli, so they're much more detailed and elaborate.

"When you think about what her dress is made of and her general atmosphere, don't you think that this suits her a lot better than Tuuli's would?"

"I have *zero* idea what you mean when you keep asking if something suits or doesn't suit someone," he says, shaking his head.

I cross my arms, deep in thought. "Hmmm," I say, "that's something you're going to need to learn too, since it looks like Mister Benno is starting to carry a lot more things that are marketed to the nobility."

Lutz lets his eyes wander off to the distance, perhaps because he doesn't really want to look at something he's bad at.

"Heyyy, Maïne. Now that we're done, what do we do?"

"I think that we should show it to Mister Benno first, and then deliver it to the guild leader. How about we try heading to Mister Benno's shop now?"

“Sounds good.”

The finished hairpins have been placed in a small box, the top of which is covered by the nicest handkerchief in my house so that nobody can see what’s inside.

“Maïne, you hold the box. I’ll carry that bag for you.”

With my slate, slate pencils, and ordering set in my tote bag, it’s gotten reasonably heavy, by my standards. Grateful, I quietly hand it over to Lutz, and receive the small box in exchange.

“Ah,” says Mark when he sees us arrive, “what brings the two of you here today?”

“We’ve completed the hairpins. I thought that it would be a good idea if, before we delivered it to the guild leader, we showed it to Mister Benno first, maybe...”

“Oh? Show me,” says Benno, unexpectedly, from right behind me. Startled, I jump slightly in place.

When I turn around, I see that he’s standing behind me, dressed impeccably in magnificent clothes, perhaps having just come back from visiting the nobility.

“Welcome back, Master Benno,” says Mark.

“Hey,” he replies, nodding. He looks down at me and Lutz. “...Come along, you two.”

We follow him as he heads into his room, deeper in the shop.

“So, then,” he says as he sits down at the table, “where are these completed hairpins?”

I hold out the small box for Benno to see, removing the handkerchief that covers it.

“What do you think about pins like this?”

“...Maïne, you... did *not* need to charge half price for the second one of these.”

“Um? I still think that we’re massively overcharging even after that... since the only real materials cost is the thread, we’re making about three small silver coins worth of profit, right?”

“You’re going to have to learn how much things are *worth*. Every single thing you’ve brought to me has been a luxury good. If you don’t know how to correctly price high-quality luxury items like these, you’ll throw the market into absolute chaos.”

“...I’m sorry.”

I’m well aware of how my own intuition does not mesh at all with how goods are priced in this world, so I can very much appreciate how Benno has had to become a breakwater against the tide of chaos I might bring to the town’s market. I already knew that clothing and decoration were high-priced goods, but since I don’t have the strength to walk around the town from store to store to do any research, I don’t have a sense for what kinds and qualities of things are being sold for what prices. On top of that, given my age and my bearing, I’d likely be refused entry to any shops that dealt in those kinds of high-priced goods.

...Even still, luxury goods, huh? Simple shampoo, paper, and hairpins all used to be obvious stuff I’d find all around me, after all.

I know, in my head, that the Middle Ages I read about in my books didn’t have any of these things, but in my heart I still don’t accept it. If something doesn’t exist, I keep searching for ways that I could find some sort of substitute or make it for myself.

“Mister Benno,” I say, “I’d like to deliver this to the guild leader; what would be the best way to do so? I think I’d like to make an appointment to meet with him.”

“Good idea. Now’s a good time, how about I show you how to do that?”

He takes out an ordering set, writes out a request to meet with the guild leader, then fills in our names and the purpose for the meeting.

“Now you can deliver this to the third floor of the guild. When they decide on a time for the appointment, a staff member will fill in the details here, then deliver it back to the shop.”

“So, should we deliver it on our way home?”

“...Ahhh, wait. If it’s just the two of you, you’ll be easy prey in that place. I’ll come along too.”

He might be exaggerating the danger of just delivering a meeting request, I think.

We go to the merchant’s guild and ascend to the third floor, Lutz and I using our own cards this time. After delivering the request card to the service counter, Lutz and I turn to head home, happy about a job well done, when the receptionist calls out to us.

“Please wait one moment.”

“Um?!”

“I’ve been instructed that, if two people named Maïne and Lutz were to arrive, that I show them in immediately.”

Sure enough, we’re being let through. As I stumble about in flustered confusion, Benno glances down at me and murmurs, “do you see now?”

Whoa, Mister Benno, you were absolutely correct! I’m so glad he came along with us.

The guild leader shows us in when we arrive at his office, although his expression is a little less than agreeable when Benno comes in along with us.

“What can I do for you today?”

“We’ve finished the hairpins, and have brought them here for you.”

“Well then, let’s take a look, shall we?”

I take out the small box I brought with me, remove the handkerchief, and hold it out, as far as I can, towards the guild leader. Since Benno has already given his OK, I *think* everything will be fine, but I still can’t stop my heart from pounding.

The guild leader peers into the box, then picks out one of the hairpins. He frowns as he inspects it closely, then looks over at me, eyebrows raised.

“...This is very different than the one you showed me last time, is it not?”

“I took extra care to ensure that the product was worth the price you were paying for it. Was the item you saw previously perhaps more to your liking? I had thought to make hairpins that would fit Miss Freida’s hairstyle and clothing better, after speaking with her, but...”

As my face goes pale, wondering if he’s unhappy with it, the guild leader hurriedly shakes his head.

“No, no, I’m merely surprised; I hadn’t expected such an excellent product. I think they really will suit Freida quite well.”

“Ah, really? That’s good to hear.”

As I reassure myself that there’s no way he could possibly reject it, the guild leader’s eyes suddenly gleam.

“Maïne, wouldn’t you like to work at m...”

“Maïne, it looks like we’re done here. We’re leaving.”

Before the guild leader could even finish his sentence, Benno seizes Lutz’s and my arms and stands up. I contemplate if it’s best for us to leave now, since our business here is done, and quietly follow along behind him. Frantically, the guild leader blocks our path.

“No, wait. Now that this is finally ready, I’d like you to deliver it to Freida yourself. I’m so happy that she’s made friends with another girl. When I hear that she made a friend the same age as her, I was overjoyed!”

Oh ho, Freida’s made a friend? What a joyous occasion!

As I so carefreely contemplate somebody else’s problems, Benno, having heard how moved the guild leader sounds, leans down next to me and whispers quietly in my ear.

“You’ve... become her *friend*?”

“Um! Me?!... Ummm, I, I wonder?”

I knew that she had been quite pleased with me, although it was rather one-sided, but I wouldn’t really call this a friendship. However, it would be very difficult for me to deny it out loud in front of the guild leader, who is so obviously overjoyed that his granddaughter has made a friend.

“I hear that she’ll be having sweets ready so that you can come over to play any time you’d like.”

“...Sweets?”

Benno flicks my forehead for letting that reaction slip. I know that I shouldn’t be showing any weakness, but I couldn’t stop my self as soon as the topic of sweet things came up.

“Good! How about I take you to her right now?”

The guild leader picks me up effortlessly, perhaps like he may have picked up Freida before, and brings me out of the room. Benno and Lutz stare, wide-eyed, as I’m abducted literally right from in front of them, then frantically chase after us.

“Hey, wait,” says Benno. “I’m coming with you.”

“Where Maine goes, I go!” says Lutz.

It seems that it’s already been decided that we’re going, but the guild leader’s house is close to the castle walls, even further from my house than Benno’s shop is. To be perfectly honest, if I go, I don’t think I would have enough energy for me to return home.

“...Sir,” I say, “I’m not very strong at all, and I don’t think I can walk any farther today.”

“There’s no real need to walk. We’ll be taking my carriage.”

“Carriage?!”

I hadn’t really thought of those as something I could ride on. I’ve seen traders and farmers using wagons and carts, of both the horse- and hand-drawn varieties, along the main streets, but in my sphere of existence, each family is likely to have just one hand-drawn cart, and only adults are able to use them.

This goes without saying, but things like rubber tires do not exist here, so when a cart is loaded with baggage, even an adult has to put quite a lot of effort into pulling it. It’s not at all the kind of thing that a child could use. On top of that, a child would most certainly not be allowed to use such an important item of which the family only has one. We must use our own two feet to get around. That’s that.

Even more, horses are expensive. Donkeys are comparatively omnivorous, but since the hay that horses eat is expensive, even the maintenance costs are unattainably exorbitant.

Tch. Rich people.

As I stew in my envy of the guild leader’s wealthy status, he brings me down to the first floor of the Merchant’s Guild building, and puts me up into his carriage. Lutz and Benno, having come to their senses, catch up to us, getting onto the carriage as well, and all four of us get ready to depart, heading towards Freida’s place to make the delivery.

This is my first time in a horse-drawn carriage.

I’ve been on a hand-drawn cart before, during last year’s winter preparations, but this is my first time riding something that’s pulled by an animal. Lutz and I look around

constantly, and the guild leader smiles wryly at us.

“Heh. Maïne, is this your first time riding a carriage?”

“I’ve seen them going through the gates and driving on the roads, but neither Lutz nor I have anyone in our families that own one.”

This is a vehicle that was intended to pull two adults, so it’s rather crowded. The two adults fit exactly on the seats, so Lutz and I are stuck, with apologies, on our butts on the shelf in the back, where luggage is supposed to go. Since we’re children, we’re somehow able to fit, but it’s rather dangerous.

“...It’s cramped in here. Benno, get out.”

“If I do, Maïne comes with me.”

Benno and the guild leader glare at each other for a little while, but eventually, the carriage starts slowly moving forward.

“Whoaaooaaaa!!”

The cart jostles violently as it moves, making it impossible for me to stay still on my seat. Lutz has found safety by clinging desperately to the railing that’s intended to help people get on and off, but I have nothing to grab onto. With every bump of the road, it seems like I’m about to fly entirely out of my seat.

“Maïne, come here.”

Benno sits me on his lap, one arm around my stomach, pinning me tightly so that I won’t fly away. Even still, each shake of the cart sends me almost floating off my butt, and if I’m not careful, the top of my head might slam into Benno’s jaw. I knew that a cart without any suspension would be a bumpy ride, but I had no idea it was going to be this awful.

Horse-drawn carriages are not at *all* elegant vehicles.



“Freida,” calls the guild leader, “Maïne’s brought your hair ornaments!”

“Well, Maïne! Welcome.”

Her cherry-blossom hair swaying airily behind her, Freida greets us with a gentle smile on her face.

“Sorry for the intrusion,” I reply.

“Madam Freida, it is nice to meet you. My name is Benno. I’ve heard much about you from Maïne.”

“Well, I wonder what kind of things she might have said?”

They’re so politely greeting each other, yet this sends shivers down my spine.

Lutz grabs my hand tightly, trembling as we listen to the two of them introduce themselves. I quickly glance over at him, and see that he’s gone pale. Neither of us are at all ready to join in the invisible battle between fellow merchants that’s happening right now. I wonder if the two of us will actually be able to someday send sparks flying with a smile like that?

“Freida,” says the guild leader. Please handle receiving the hairpins from those two and pay them what they’re owed.“

“Yes, grandfather.”

As the guild leader leads Benno to his own room, Freida leads Lutz and I to a similar sitting room as last time. Meanwhile, sweet drinks and sweet snacks have been brought out, and an entrancingly sweet smell drifts from the table.

“Girls love sweet things, so I have some prepared so that you can come by to play any time! Maïne, whenever you’re free, please come to play.”

“Yes!” I answer, with a transcendent smile.

Lutz pinches my hand under the table.

Argh, that’s right. I cannot let myself succumb to sweet temptation. I mustn’t succumb, I mustn’t s... *sniff, sniff*, ah, bliss~!

Honey-soaked nuts have been layered on top of a thin pizza dough, baked, sliced, and set out for me.

“Come! Maïne, Lutz, please enjoy!”

“Thank you!”

Nom, nom. The ample honey makes it deliciously sweet. What a luxurious confection. Is this heaven?

For a while, I just let myself eat my fill, recalling memories of nut tarts I had in Japan. Sweet things really do bring happiness.

“Thank you very much. It was quite delicious.”

“I’m very happy you thought so. I’ll be sure to convey that to the chef.”

Wow, madam, you have a chef. So, she said she had prepared sweets for us, but her *chef* prepared them for us, and all she did was bring them out. What a stratified society.

“Now then,” she says, “would you perhaps like to show me the hairpins, now?”

“Certainly. Ah, before that, let me return the remaining thread.”

“...Oh my, you don’t really need to.”

No, no, I can’t actually keep an expensive thread like this. When talking to the guild leader or to Freida, I know deep in my heart that there’s nothing more terrifying than getting something for free. I can’t accept things from them so freely. I can’t give into temptation.

“Miss Freida, here are—”

“Maïne, the two of us are friends! Please, just call me Freida.”

When such a lovely, cute little girl says something like that with such a dazzling smile, there’s no way I can just say “we aren’t friends, though?”. Flustered, I fumble about for a way out.

“Um? But, you’re a customer...”

“Oh my... Well, with this, I’m not anymore!”

Smiling broadly, Freida takes the box containing her hairpins from me, and in exchange, places a stack of six small silver coins in front of Lutz and I.

“I have received my order and paid the bill. Now there’s nothing in the way of our friendship!”

“...Very well.”

With all avenues of escape closed, and in a situation where I can’t just say no, I

defeatedly nod my head in acceptance. Depending on how you think about it, she's a friend whose appearance does not match her personality at all, so it won't be a problem if I'm a little weird myself. Let's take this as a good thing.

If she's fine with me just calling her "Freida", I wonder if I can speak a little more casually?

"Umm, then, Freida. Would you like to take a look at the hairpins?"

"Of course! Don't mind if I do."

Freida gently pinches the handkerchief between two fingers, then pulls it away. When she takes one of the hairpins out of the box, her eyes grow wide.

"Well! How magnificent! Since my baptism is in the winter, snow will have started falling by the time the ceremony comes around, so there won't be any flowers or berries to use as hair ornaments, you know? I've been *terribly* envious of the children whose ceremonies were in the spring and summer. In a season where all the plants are withered, being able to clad myself in brilliant flowers and green leaves makes me so happy!"

"I'm glad to hear that."

Now that I think of it, Tuuli had initially said that her hair decorations were going to be flowers that she could pick nearby. In that case, these hairpins should sell very well during the winter.

"Try putting them on," I say. "I want to see how they look in your hair."

"I don't quite know how to do that. Maïne, might I trouble you to?"

"Sure! If you could give me those..."

I take the hairpins from her, then insert each of them into the base of her pigtails, where they're tied off with string. The small, deep red roses stand out beautifully against her light, cherry-blossom pink hair, further enhancing her general air of maturity.

Roses were definitely the right choice.

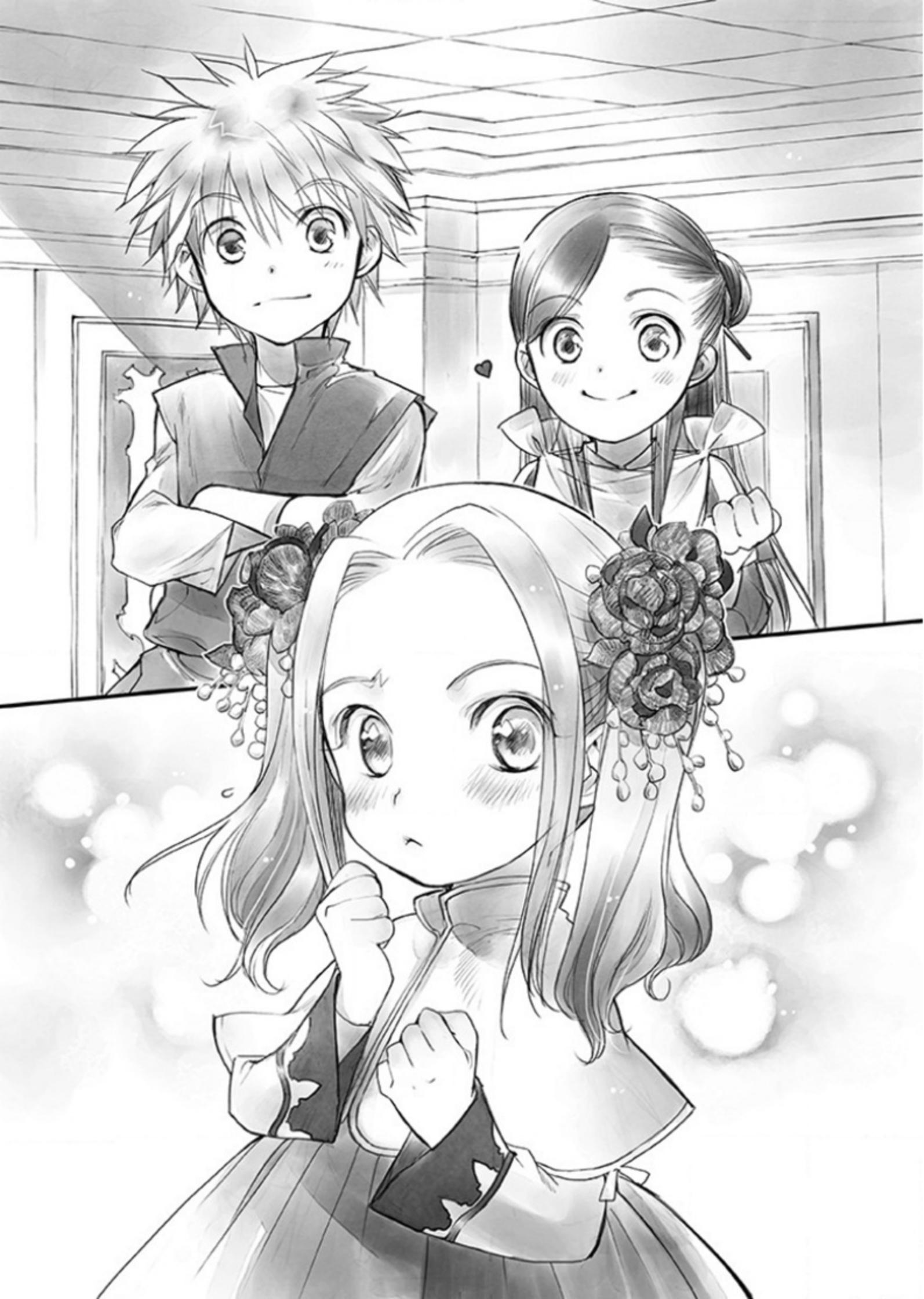
"You're very cute, Freida! Like a fairy of the flowers."

"You flatter me too much!" she says, daintily covering her mouth as she bashfully giggles. "You're just like my grandfather."

This isn't flattery. If I didn't know anything about her personality, she'd be the kind of little girl I'd want to kidnap and run away with.

"It's not flattery! It's a really cute look, and it suits you. Lutz, you think so too, right?"
"Yeah. When I was just looking at the pins, I didn't think that they were going to fit you so well. Maïne made these to just to match you. You're *super* cute."

"....."



Freida, whose face is growing red and whose cheeks are growing puffy, is clearly not used to being praised like this. I can instantly see from her reaction that she really doesn't have any siblings or friends.

In this world, it's common for friends and family to be constantly praising each other. I've been extolling Tuuli's virtues, and she's been praising me in return. Lutz praises me whenever I do something, and I've started to grow accustomed to praising others as well. It was startling to me at first, to the point where I'd shy away from it, but lately I've been able to go along with this kind of constant lip service.

"Even so," she says, "to be able to build such solid shapes out of thread..."

Freida has extracted the hairpins from her head and has started studying them in careful detail, like Benno and the guild leader had done before. Her eyes have completely become like those of a merchant.

"It's not all that difficult," I say. "Even I can do it!"

"...The discovery of this construction method is a *very* big deal, Maïne."

"Huh?"

Freida sighs lightly, then looks at me with a far more serious expression than I was expecting.

"The wives and daughters of the upper nobility are fond of wearing brightly-colored veils of unblemished embroidery. They also wear decorations made of real flowers that have been frozen in time via magic. However, nobody has any ornaments with shape like this."

The nobility who use ornaments like this use magic to do so, so perhaps decorations like this were never actually developed? As I hum thoughtfully to myself, Freida continues to explain the magnificence of these decorations.

"There is so much fabric in this house with so much embroidery, but not a single piece of it has this kind of shape. To be able to make a solid object with nothing but thread is completely groundbreaking!"

When she says it like that, I finally get it. This is why Benno said there was no need to sell the second pin at half price. This is, essentially, a new technology. I suddenly feel extremely conspicuous.

Have I, perhaps, done something really, really terrible?

I can feel my face going pale. Freida reaches out grabs my hands tightly.

“Maïne, you know a lot of unexpected, unknown things, right? If so, I have a lot of things I can teach you too. So, next time, I want you to just come and chat, not to work! I’ll have plenty of sweets prepared for you, so let’s have a nice long chat, with just us girls!”

“Ah, that sounds—”

Great, I was about to say, but I feel a sharp tug on my hair. I reflexively turn my head, and see Lutz looking at me with a grim face, shaking his head.

Argh, that was close. I almost carelessly agreed to have a nice, long, girls-only chat.

If I’d let that slip, then I’d run the risk of having both Lutz and Benno completely excluded. I’m at a loss for words, with no idea how to actually answer the question, so Lutz steps up in my place.

“We’re going to be very busy from now on, so unfortunately we don’t have much time to come over and play.”

“Oh my,” she says, smiling peacefully, “but I didn’t ask *you*, did I?”

She may say that, but my ability to go out is fundamentally dependent on Lutz.

“Maïne’s family doesn’t let her go out if I’m not going to be there with her. So, if I’m not here too, Maïne won’t be able to come.”

“...Ah, that’s right. There’s no helping it, then. Lutz, you are welcome to come as well.”

Is it because she had this devouring disease as well? Freida immediately understood my situation, then nodded in agreement. Lutz, however, isn’t nodding. He stands unwavering in his denial.

“Like I said earlier, we’re busy.”

“Busy with what?”

“We’re starting to get serious about winter preparations. The entire family needs to work together to prepare ourselves for the winter, so there really isn’t any free time for us to come and chat. Also, once snow starts falling, we won’t be able to go outside,

right?”

That’s right, unlike Freida, whose family can just buy all the firewood they need, preparing the huge quantity of firewood and making all of the candles we need is extremely difficult. It seems like even Freida knows how difficult winter preparations are, so she just slumps her shoulders, not pressuring us any more.

“...So we can’t see each other until the spring?”

“Aren’t you going to be doing your apprenticeship in the springtime? Is that going to be alright?”

“That’ll be just fine. It’s not like my apprenticeship will have me working every day of the week. I’ll have plenty of sweets prepared come springtime, so please do come by to play!”

When spring comes around, Lutz and I will likely be very busy making paper, but since Benno is still keeping that business hidden from the guild leader, I keep my mouth shut.

I give Freida a big nod, then look over at Lutz.

“Now that I think about it, Lutz, you didn’t react much to the sweets, did you? You usually leap right onto whatever food’s in front of you, so why?”

“Master Benno told me to keep a good eye on you, and also the parucakes and the other things you make are way tastier. I like food I can always eat more than occasional sweets. I’d be in trouble if you got taken away.”

It seems that Lutz, who is always hungry, considers maintaining the richness of his current eating habits far more important than eating the occasional sweet. If that’s the case, then I should head to his place with some more new recipes, I think.

“Oh my, I haven’t heard of parucakes before. I would be very interested in trying food you’ve made as well, Maïne.”

“Um? That’s, well...”

I couldn’t possibly feed confections made from squeezed-out paru fruit, which would usually be considered bird food, to the pampered daughter of a family like this. Her grandfather would get so angry veins would pop out on his head, and the chef who probably manages their nutritional requirements would go berserk.

“You’re saying that Lutz is good enough to eat your food, but I’m not?” she says, teasingly, wearing the saddest frown.

I may be increasingly flustered, but there’s still no way I can bring parucakes in front of a rich girl.

Lutz chimes in. “The ingredients are... not something we could feed a young lady like yourself.”

“Lutz, you’re so mean!”

Freida pouts. With lips pursed, she pouts. No matter how cutely she may be pouting, though, what’s impossible is impossible. There’s nothing at my house that’s fit for Freida to eat.

Besides, making sweets requires help. There really aren’t many things that I can prepare entirely on my own. At Lutz’s house, I’ve introduced so many new recipes that I always have four boys who will spare no effort to help in order to eat good food. I can’t make anything without ingredients or assistance. Not only am afflicted by the devouring, but I don’t think that Freida, who was not only also afflicted but is also a pampered rich girl, would have much in the way of physical strength nor stamina.

“...Umm, so, how about next time, when it’s spring, we make something together with the ingredients you have here? Your chef could help us too. If that’s the case, we don’t need to worry about the ingredients, and there will be people to help us, and your family can have a little more peace of mind? How about it?”

“Well, that’s marvelous! That’s settled, then.”

As soon as we decide on making sweets together, a knock comes at the door shortly before the guild leader and Benno enter.

“Hey,” says Benno. “You almost finished? We’re leaving.”

“Yes, sir,” I reply. “Umm, Mister Benno. Could you...”

The six small silver coins that Freida gave us in remuneration are quite a lot of money. To be frank, I’m too scared to carry it myself. As I hold it out for him to look after, he glances at the guild leader.

“Sorry, but do you mind if I borrow your parlor for a moment? I’d like to settle up with these two before we head home.”

“Ahh, you wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t dragged you all out. Please, be my guest.”

Benno waits until the guild leader and Freida have left the room, then takes the coins from me and lines them up on the table.

“The materials cost and my commission comes out to three small silver coins; the remaining three are yours. If you hadn’t charged half price for the second one, you’d have earned two more.”

“...This is enough. If I’d sold these hairpins for any more, I’d feel bad about making the ones we’ll sell more cheaply.”

Benno snorts, pulling out his coinpurse.

“What do you want to do with the money? Are you going to bring it all home with you?”
“I’d like to deposit one silver at the guild, and bring five large copper coins home with me.”

“Me too,” says Lutz.

As if he already knew what we were going to say, Benno has already pulled out his guild card and a handful of copper coins. With a touch of our cards, our accounts are settled. I wrap my five copper coins in my handkerchief and place them in my tote bag.

“The guild leader said he’d bring you back to the guildhall in his carriage. Go with him.”

“What about you, Mister Benno?”

“I’ll walk. That carriage is pretty small. Come to the store tomorrow afternoon. Your thread should have arrived by then. We have to decide on a price as well.”

“Yes, sir.”

What could Benno have been discussing with the guild leader, I wonder? He seems far less exceptionally wary than he did before.

Chapter 42

Winter Handiwork

“Hey, Maïne, why is it that you deposit a silver coin at the guild every time? Why aren’t you bringing it all home to your family?”

As we leisurely walk home, having gotten off the carriage at the Merchant’s Guild, Lutz spontaneously asks me this question.

“Aren’t you doing the same thing?” I reply.

“I’m doing it because you’re doing it. I thought there must be some sort of reason for it, so I was copying you. My family thinks that I’m bringing all of my earnings home, though, so I kind of feel a little bad about it...”

For commoners, who are used to scraping through their daily lives without any money to spare, there isn’t really any concept of “savings”. At most, when autumn comes around, they start stashing away a little money in their dresser drawers for winter preparations. They don’t do anything like depositing money at the Merchant’s Guild. Of course, since kids learn things by watching their parents, even the children bring all of their earnings home to their families and spend it all on living expenses.

“I’m saving for next time’s initial expenses, you know.”

“Next time’s initial expenses?” he asks, his head tilted curiously to the side.

Drawing on our own experiences, I explain it to him.

“Remember how after we decided we were going to make paper, we didn’t have any tools, any money, nor any adults that we could ask for help, so even getting a single nail was really hard and we got in a lot of trouble?”

“Yeah.”

It wasn’t all that long ago that we had gotten scolded by Benno for begging Otto for help. Lutz, remembering this, smiles wryly.

“We got lucky when Mister Benno bought the formula for my *‘simple shampoo’* in

exchange for covering all of our initial expenses, but getting all of those tools took a huge amount of money, right, Lutz? Whenever you're starting something, you need money."

"The pot, the wood, the ash, the thread, the bamboo work... now that I think about it, that was *really* expensive, wasn't it?"

Lutz, who has recently been visiting various stores for the sake of stocking up on things, understands the quality and cost of things that are sold not at ordinary street stalls, but actual stores. His face goes pale as he realizes just how much the initial investments for our paper-making enterprise really cost.

"And that's why I'm saving money. Since we made a working prototype for Mister Benno, he said that we were done with initial expenses, right? I think that we'll need even more tools to keep making paper from now on, and I also want to start making something new, and all of that requires money. Once we make a lot of paper, and we start trying to make books, we'll need new tools for that too."

"So, it's for the next stuff, huh..."

I can't figure out if Lutz's expression means he has or has not actually understood this. I stare at him fixedly. He has far more pressing reasons than I to actually need to be saving money, but is he aware of them? I wonder if he hasn't even noticed.

After thinking about it for a moment, I slowly open my mouth.

"I don't really want to say or even really think about this, but... Lutz, if by the time we're baptized your parents still don't approve of you becoming a merchant, what are you going to do?... Have you... thought about that?"

His face twists painfully as soon as I ask my question. He answers in a low mumble, without any strength behind his voice at all.

"...I think I'd have to be a live-in apprentice at Master Benno's shop."

"Yeah, if you want to become a merchant, you'll have to do that, right? I'm glad you didn't say you'd give up."

When Lutz seems me smiling, he sighs, looking just a little bit relieved. He's talking about leaving his home behind at such an early age, which takes tremendous resolve, and I think he must still have some doubts about it. Lutz, however, is moving entirely along his own path, which means that he really will be needing money.

“But, Lutz, think about it. If you leave home to become a live-in apprentice, then until your first pay comes in you’ll still need money for living expenses, the clothing you’ll need for your apprenticeship, and so on. There’ll be a huge difference between the Lutz that leaves home with money saved up for his freedom and the Lutz that doesn’t have anything.”

“Ah...”

Lutz raises his head to look at me, looking completely taken aback.

“I don’t think it’s bad at all for you to take the money that you yourself earned and save it away for your own future, you know. I know we’re supposed to be giving everything we earn to the family, so you might feel guilty about it, but you’re not even old enough to be really working, anyway, and you brought home thirteen large copper coins over five days, you know? That’s more than Ralph brings home from his apprenticeship, you know? So it’s really okay.”

“Huh... I make more than Ralph.”

Lutz smiles proudly. Ralph, who’s still only recently started his apprenticeship, probably brings home only about eight to ten large copper coins over an entire month. The amount the two of us have earned is huge in comparison.

“Maïne, thanks. I’m feeling *way* better about this now.”

“I’m glad!”

Grinning broadly, Lutz suddenly turns away from me for some reason, then squats down.

“What’re you doing, Lutz?”

“Get on my back,” he replies.

“What?”

“We’ve gone to a *lot* of different places today, so you must be getting tired, right? You’re looking a little pale.”

Without thinking about it, I reach up to feel my face. I still don’t feel particularly feverish, so I don’t think I have a fever.

“...I’m looking pale?”

“It’s not that bad right now, but we need to be meeting with Master Benno tomorrow

afternoon, so I think you shouldn't push too hard. My number one job is looking after your health, after all."

"...Alright. Thanks, then!"

It's very true that, after a day of walking from place to place, I'm getting rather worn out. Since Lutz is telling me not to push too hard, things must be getting really dangerous.

Lutz takes me home, with me on his back. I, of course, climb the stairs up under my own power, but since there's a chance I might get too tired halfway up, Lutz comes up with me, leading me by the hand. He's seriously a big help.

To be perfectly honest, climbing the stairs up to my home is the hardest part.

"I'm home, Mommy."

"Oh my, Lutz! It's rare for you to come all the way up here, isn't it? Is Maïne not doing well today?"

"We'd originally planned to just go show the hairpins to Master Benno today, but we wound up meeting the guild leader too, and then he invited us to his house immediately. He said that he wanted us to deliver the hairpins in person. So, I think that she's probably very tired right now."

"I see. Thanks as always, Lutz. You're a big help."

As she says that, she slips a bribe, a medium copper coin, into his hand. When I see the coin, I remember something.

"Ah, that's right! Mommy, I want to give you this before I forget."

"Maïne... what in the world have you done now?"

When my mother sees the five large copper coins I hold out for her, all the color drains from her face. Her eyes go as wide as I've ever seen them, as if there's no way she could have possibly thought that the hairpins were worth anywhere close to that much money.

"This is the money from making the hairpins for Freida. I said that she was buying them for a lot of money because they were so rare, right?"

"I heard you say that, but... really, *this* much money..."

I'm sorry, Mother. There's no way that I can tell you that this is after the introduction,

handling, and materials fees as well as the small silver coin I set aside for my own personal use. Not with this atmosphere, anyway.

“Is this true, Lutz?” she asks him.

“She’s not lying, Auntie Eva. Since I worked on it too, I got the same amount too. Maïne and I split it halfway.”

As he says it, he shows my mother his own share of the money. With that, my mother is finally convinced, and places a hand on her chest to calm herself down.

Hey, wait, Mother. I’m your *daughter*, why don’t you believe *me*?

“Master Benno called us out to his shop tomorrow as well, so we’re going to have to go there again. So, I want to make sure Maïne gets as much rest as she can.”

“Thanks again, Lutz.”

After we see Lutz off, my mother closes the door behind him with a clack. With her eyebrows raised, she throws me straight into bed.

“Don’t overdo it, Maïne. Even so, you sold that for a *lot* of money, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Freida’s really rich, and the thread was really high quality, and we made two instead of just one, you know? Plus, since everyone’s so busy this season with winter preparations, she paid a high fee for that, too. So, if we make it for other people, it’s not going to be that expensive.”

“I see! She was being considerate, since it’s such a busy season for us.”

It seems like my mother’s image of the guild leader and Freida is one of kind, gentlemanly rich people who consider the plight of the poor. Since I don’t think she’s ever going to actually meet these two, I don’t think I need to dispel her illusions. My mother, relieved now that she knows why her child brought home so much money, heads out of the bedroom so that she can work on preparing dinner for the family.

I, left behind in the bedroom, really do feel like a heavy weight presses down on me. As soon as I lay down on the bed, I start drifting off and soon, without even eating dinner, fall into a deep sleep.



When I awaken, it's already morning. Since I'm going to be going to Benno's shop in the afternoon, I decide that I should spend the morning resting. It's only about half my choice. Thanks to the fact that I've been going out quite a bit lately, my body is still rather heavy despite the fact that I got quite a bit of sleep. My family, seeing flickers of signs that my fever may be returning, have forcefully thrown me back to bed as they do their winter preparations.

"Maïne, be good and rest up," commanded my father as he inspected our wooden front door. "You've been working too hard lately! You're making more money than Daddy, you know?"

Tuuli and my mother, as they spread out the thick blankets and carpets we'll be using during the winter so they can air out, tell me,

"You're going to Mister Benno's shop today as well, aren't you? If you don't sit quietly this morning, you're going to collapse again, you know?"

"Maïne, you're not really useful for winter preparations, so focus on what you're actually good for."

And, with that, they prohibit me from leaving my bed. Since there's nothing else I can do, I squirm my way back under the blankets, watching as my family ceaselessly moves about, working on their preparations.

This year, unlike last year, I actually understand what goes into preparing for the winter, so I really thought I could be a little more useful, though...

I think my family's excessive care might be because I came home yesterday, delivered five large copper coins to my mother, then promptly fell fast asleep. I, who can't even satisfactorily do a single thing around the house to help out, earned thirteen large copper coins over the course of not even five days, and then slept so soundly that I missed dinner. They suspect, in their minds, that I must have been doing some absurdly hard labor.

However, over the past few days, I've been going around to a lot of different places, which for me really *is* a kind of hard labor.

When the fourth bell rings at noon, I grab my tote bag as usual and head out the front

door, dressed to keep out the cold.

“I’m off,” I say.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs and meet Lutz, he greets me with a little frown.

“Maïne, you don’t look too good, you know? Isn’t it okay if I go by myself?”

“It’s because we’ve been so busy lately. Mister Benno said that we were going to talk about pricing for our winter handiwork today, though, so I’m going today. I’ll leave carrying the thread to you, Lutz, but I want to go so that I can handle deciding on a price.”

“...Right, pricing, yeah. I still don’t really understand that.”

I can’t, of course, leave deciding prices to Lutz yet, since he still doesn’t understand numbers very well. Today, I just want to go to the shop and discuss things relating to the pricing of the hairpins with Benno.

“Well, at least let me carry you there.”

“What? No, I can’t ask that. You already carried me home yesterday...”

“I’m going to be carrying all the thread back with me today, so I can’t carry you then. So, save your energy for now.”

I know full well that it’s impossible to get Lutz to back down when he gets this stubborn in times like this, so I get up on his back. Even though I’ve grown a little bit taller, I feel like Lutz has gotten even bigger. Although I know it’s because of my illness, it’s still a little frustrating that there’s this much of a difference in size despite us being the same age.

“Lutz? It seems that you’re carrying Maïne, is she all right?”

When Mark sees Lutz approach with me on his back, he rushes towards us, with startled eyes wide open. He reacts far too sensitively to my physical condition. It seems like me collapsing to the ground right in front of him caused quite a bit of trauma. I’m really, really sorry about that.

“...Lately, we’ve been going out every single day to go to various places, so she’s started to get a little tired. I think she’ll probably be stuck in bed after tonight. So, I’d like to finish up our business as fast as we can.”

“I understand,” he says with a nod, then leads us to the room in the back. “Master

Benno, Maïne and Lutz have arrived.”

“Bring 'em in.”

The door opens with a creak, and Mark shows us in, following shortly behind us.

“Lutz has informed me that Maïne’s condition is not very good today. Please consider conducting your business with haste today.”

“Got it. Sit down, you two.”

“Yes, sir.”

As soon as we arrive at the table, we immediately begin discussing our winter handiwork. Benno informs us of the price of the thread, I estimate how many we could make with these quantities of material, and we decide on a price.

“Mister Benno, I’d like to avoid making these hairpins too expensive. Since the thread we’re using is cheap as well, could we maybe price it as cheaply as we need to so that many people would be able to purchase them?”

“I understand how you feel, Maïne, but there’s no way I can sell these at a bargain right from the start. The price is only going to decrease once a lot of these start entering the market. We should be selling these for about three large copper coins at first.”

Since these are for special occasions, that’s a price that my family could hypothetically afford, although it would be a bit of a reckless expenditure. It’s a little harsh, I think, but if sisters could share them with each other, somehow... if I consider that prices will slowly go down from this initial price, I think I can say that this is alright.

“If that’s the case, that’s fine, then. I understand.”

After I nod in agreement, the conversation next moves onto Lutz and my share of the profit.

“For each hairpin, your cut is about five medium coins after the materials cost and my commission. I’ve set it higher than usual, since this is a new handicraft and there’s nobody else I can order these from.”

“Five medium copper coins is *high*?! Doesn’t that mean that we really ripped the guild leader off for Freida’s hairpins?!”

At the price Benno had negotiated, our share after making two hairpins should have been five small silver coins. That’s a hundredfold increase in price.

“That was based on that old bastard’s opening bid, so don’t worry about that.”

“...So, ordinarily, how much would we be getting?”

Last year, I helped Tuuli out with her basket-weaving handiwork, but the two of us were never actually given any of that money, so I was never really curious about how much each one was actually worth.

“For things like winter handiwork, us merchants take our commission, then the master of the sewing or craftsman’s workshops takes his cut as well, so the amount that the people who actually make the thing would get is about one medium copper coin per item, I think? Since this order is going direct to you, without going through a workshop, your cut is high.”

“What?! One medium copper coin... it’s that little?!”

After my initial shock wears off, I remember that the things people back in Japan made at home for a little side income were also pretty cheap. Something like a beaded strap would be something like 50 yen each. If I think about it like that, one medium copper coin each isn’t that surprising. Getting five coins is actually extraordinary.

“At workshops, the only people who can actually buy and sell things are basically just the masters. The amount any given workshop master takes can vary somewhat, though? Maïne, don’t you have any experience with that?”

Since I said we could make hairpins for winter handiwork, he’s asking, don’t we already know how this works? I think about what happened last year.

“Last year, I helped my older sister Tuuli with her work. I was working without any actual knowledge of how much they cost or what the commissions were, and I didn’t see any of the money from that. Huh? Now that I think about it, since we were selling something, we needed a guild membership, wouldn’t we? I wonder if my mother’s registered?”

The one who delivered Tuuli’s and my handiwork was my mother, but I’ve never once heard her mention anything about going to the Merchant’s Guild. When I said I’d gone, she’d asked about it as if it were something very rare.

“Ah, so your mother runs a street stall, does she?”

“No, she usually works as a dyer, I think.”

“If that’s the case, then that was probably work given to her for the winter. Since each worker just delivers the products of work she was assigned to do by her job, there’s no need for each of them to be registered with the Merchant’s Guild. It’s fine if the master’s the only one registered, as a representative of the studio.”

It seems that the managers at the places where craftsmen work handle the actual buying and selling of things, so individual employees don’t need to be registered as merchants. Instead, it seems like craftsmen register with the various crafting guilds.

Whoa, this is the first I’m hearing about that. Then, if I were to get help on making the hairpins, it would have to be after they meet their quotas.

“In other words, last year’s handiwork was assigned to my mother at work, and Tuuli helped her out with that, and then I helped Tuuli out in turn.”

“What did you make?”

“I made things like this. This is the first one I made, so it’s very simple, but I made the others I helped with in my spare time a lot more elaborate.”

Triumphantly, I hold up my totebag to show it off. Benno, in response, smiles bitterly, rubbing his temples.

“What’s the matter?” I ask.

“...So it was *you*, again?”

“Huh?”

Why is he saying “again”? Now that I think about it, I think I’ve seen that particular bitter smile before. Have I, once again, done something bad?

“I recall that amongst all of the baskets being sold near the end of spring, there certainly were some number of finely decorated bags like that. For winter handiwork, if you can’t handle the quantity, your income won’t increase. Since it’s quick and dirty work, there’s a lot of roughly woven baskets out there, so those really stood out far too much, I’m afraid.”

“Nooooooooooooo!”

I, in my free time, tried making somewhat elaborate handbags, and then taught Tuuli how to do it... I never thought that those would stand out so much on the market.

“I wanted to know who made them, and I was able to track down the workshop they

came from, but since all of the winter handiwork was turned in basically all at once, I wasn't able to determine the specific craftsman who'd made them."

"Ah, that's good~ ... you didn't find out..."

I'm well aware that I'm a little different, so I've been trying to keep myself hidden from the world as much as I can, but I have a feeling that doing so might not actually be possible.

"Since a bag you made for yourself would be, of course, as durable as you could make it, I didn't think that the one you carry was particularly unnatural, and there aren't any decorations on it, so I hadn't made the connection until now, but... it seems like every single mysterious thing I've seen in the last half year or so have all come from you, Maïne."

Elaborate bags, hairpins, simple shampoo, paper... now that I'm actually counting them out, I'm growing increasingly perplexed. Now that I've heard Benno's perspective, I can't actually say that my actions were at all those of someone who wanted to stay hidden. Feeling so amazingly ashamed that I have no idea what else to do, I apologize in a tiny voice.

"...I'm sorry, I guess."

"Well, whatever. More importantly, it looks like you have a tendency to make things elaborate in your free time. For the hairpins, just make the same design as the first one you did. Don't change it arbitrarily. This is *final*. Got that?"

"I understand. The colors on them will be different, but they'll all have a unified design."

I never would have thought that the bags I made last year would have stood out so much, and I definitely do not want any new hairpins to stand out so terribly as the ones I made for Freida. I can sidestep this problem entirely by making sure that the design of each hairpin matches the rest.

"I think that concludes all of the business we need to talk about for now. Ah, that's right; you said you wanted to study during the winter, didn't you? I'll lend this to you for now, look over it when you get home."

"...What's this?"

When I look down at the wooden notes he hands me, he firmly pinches my cheek.

“When you get home! Got it?!”

“Yeth!!”

“Good grief... You can bring it back when your fever’s gone back down. Head home right away and get some sleep. Lutz, keep an eye on this idiot. She looks like the type to get in some kind of accident walking home because she’s too busy reading.”

Suddenly remembering the time during my Urano years where I was heading home from school with my nose in a book and got hit by a car, I shut my mouth tightly and look away in embarrassment.



As we leave, Mark gives us the basket he’s prepared for us, full of the thread that we had ordered, which Lutz takes. We depart for home, with Mark seeing us off with an extremely concerned look on his face. We take it at a slow, leisurely pace. On the way, I ask Lutz about something that I want to discuss with him before I’m stuck in bed for a while.

“Hey, Lutz, about splitting things up on the hairpins...”

“What’s up?”

“Since the flower part takes way more time to make than the pin part, do you think we can split it three coins to two?”

“Sounds good. If we’re thinking about the time it takes, I’d be fine with four to one, I think.”

If we’re just thinking about time, then Lutz has the better suggestion, but I’ve got a somewhat different reason behind asking for three to two.

“In that case, since your math is so terrible, let’s stick with three to two.”

“My math?”

“Right! This time, we’ll each take one coin for our commission, and we can pay two medium copper coins for each flower part, and one coin for each pin part. Why don’t we get our families to do those?”

“Huh? Our families?”

Lutz tilts his head doubtfully, as if he has no idea what I could possibly be saying. I press on.

“Yeah! If I think about my own speed for the flower parts, I don’t think I could make

any more than about thirty of them a month. Since we'd be in a fix if we had a lot of pin parts left over, how about to start with you get your family to make thirty pins in a month? Then we can charge a commission for them."

"And that's so we can become merchants?"

Lutz, remembering our earlier discussion about the differences between merchants and craftsmen, seems to be understanding the point I'm trying to get at.

"Right, don't you want to start acting like Mister Benno? You need to study really hard in order to be a good merchant's apprentice, you know? I think it's impossible to make only the hairpin part. Well, if you make any yourself, then I think you can do whatever you want with the money you make from the stuff you make, though."

This is effectively holding money back from our families, which I also don't feel very comfortable with, but we're going to be merchants. If we give our families preferential treatment like that, we won't be able to make a living in commerce anytime soon.

After I explain it to him, Lutz stares down at the ground for a while, but soon he firmly raises his head.

"...I'll give it a try."



Since I'm the one who'll be making the flower parts, the thread for doing so should go in my house, so Lutz carries it all the way up to our door. This is only natural, but my entire family is so shocked by the fact that we've come home with such a huge quantity of thread that they stop working on their winter preparations.

"Lutz, what's all this thread for?"

Hey, you know, why are you asking Lutz that and not *your own daughter*?

Grumbling about our difference in reliability, I offer an explanation anyway.

"This is the thread for making hairpins. Since Benno's going to buy the finished product from us, he bought the thread for us in advance. This is the raw materials for my winter handiwork, so don't just use it on your own!"

"I understand," says my mother. "Thanks again, Lutz. Here, eat this, it's tasty!"

She hands Lutz a small bottle, filled with the jam she's just finished. Lutz gladly accepts it, smiling brilliantly, and then leaves for home with a bounce in his step.

"I'll get this into the storeroom," says my father, "so Maïne, get to bed."

He picks up the basket full of thread to bring to the storeroom, shooing me briskly towards the bedroom.

"Urgh, at least let me wash off first! I didn't get to yesterday, and I went out today too so now I feel really gross."

"Perfect timing," says Tuuli, "the water's just starting to get hot. I wanted to get clean too, so I'll bring it in for you."

"Thanks, Tuuli."

For the last year, I've been regularly wiping ourselves down to get clean, along with Tuuli. Lately, she's started feeling bothered whenever she goes more than three days without washing off. She sets things up for bathing in the bedroom in the spot that's closest to the stove and thus the warmest. As she washes herself off, she starts speaking with an earnest tone.

"Maïne, last year you didn't know how to do anything at all, so I was super surprised when you found yourself a job all by yourself, you know."

"Are you making baskets this year, too?" I ask, soaking a towel into the bucket and then wringing it out.

Tuuli moves her pleated hair out of the way, wiping down the area around her scalp, while explaining her plans to me.

"Yeah. Mom's work is worth way more than I can make from the handiwork at my job. I'm going to be cutting up the wood we'll need for making baskets from now on, and peeling all the bark off."

"Oh, really? You don't absolutely have to do the handiwork from your own job?"

Was she not assigned anything to do by the master of her workshop? I tilt my head curiously to the side, since I'd heard from Benno that they worked on a quota. Tuuli chuckles quietly.

"It's just pocket money. There's other people that make a lot, and some people are also

busy making clothes for their families, so it's not mandatory, you know?"

"Aaah, so everyone's got their own deal."

I thought that I could get Tuuli to help me out after she'd filled her own quota, but if she doesn't really have to actually meet a quota, then I wonder if there isn't any problem with having her help me right from the start?

I briefly look over at her, smiling broadly.

"What I'm making this year is hairpins, like the one I made for you. I can make two medium copper coins for each one I make like that."

"Huh?! Really?! That's a lot of money, isn't it? Can I help too?"

"Yeah, let's work together!"

When I say that, Tuuli gets really happy and excited. Her eyes brighten at the thought that if she makes a lot of them, she can get some pocket money.

"Hey, hey, Maïne. Can I do anything to help prepare?"

"Mister Benno already got us all the thread, and Lutz is making the pins, so we don't need to do any more preparing. As long as we've got thin needles, we should be fine."

"This'll be super nice if we don't have to do any groundwork first," she says, laughing gleefully to herself.

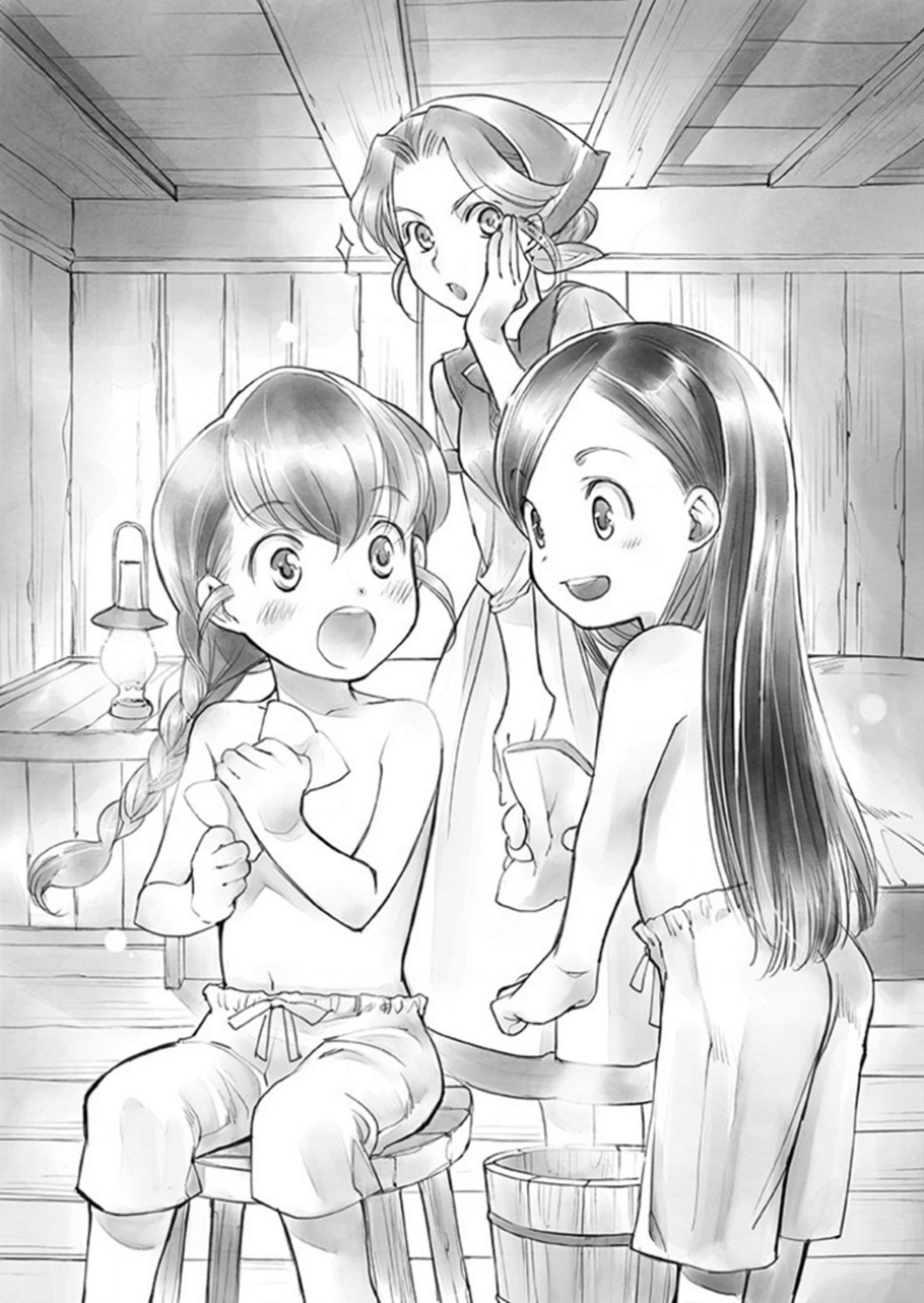
Her smile suddenly freezes. She blinks her eyes once, then points at something behind me. When I turn my head around to see what's the matter, I see my mother standing behind me, scowling, tapping one hand against her cheek, thinking about something with a profoundly serious look on her face.

"Hey, Maïne. Once I'm done with your new dress, I can help too, right?"

Lutz, what do we do now?

My mother's getting fired up.

We might need more pins.



Chapter 43

Lutz's Education Plan

While I idly laze about in my bed, my fever returns, just like Lutz predicted. This fever, brought on by exhaustion, is mild, so all that happens is that my whole body feels heavy. Since this isn't the all-consuming fever of the devouring, I should be able to cure it with plenty of quiet bed rest.

That, at least, has been what I've been thinking over the past three days. Although I'm getting increasingly irritated about my unbroken fever, I get scolded whenever I try to leave my bed on my own, so even though I'm sluggish from oversleeping I can't do anything but stay in bed.

...Aaaaaargh, so bored.

Today is pig-slaughtering day. Unlike last year, I've managed to gain enough of my family's confidence that they're letting me stay here and watch the house by myself, so the headed out for that early in the morning. They made a sandwich for my lunch and filled everyone's cups with water and left them in the bedroom for me so that I would neither get too hungry nor get too thirsty without any way to deal with it.

In this dead-silent bedroom, I technically could move around if I wanted to, but I know that all that would do for me is make my fever linger even longer, so I don't have any choice but to stay quietly in bed. However, with nobody to even talk to, there's no helping it: I am so, *so* bored.

If only I had a book...

I have a tremendous quantity of failed prototype paper with me, but I still haven't used it. All it's been doing since I've brought it home has been sitting in the box at the foot of my bed, neatly stacked to one side, gathering dust. Ever since we successfully finished our prototype, I've simultaneously been really busy and really fired up about wanting to make my first book.

Above all, though, since these are failed prototypes, both the material quality and sizes

are all over the place. While I do have some paper that's almost successful, I also have pieces that are such total failures that are badly ripped or crumbling to pieces. There's paper that's so thin that it's nearly see-through, to the point where I'm almost scared to touch it, and paper that we reinforced so much that it looks brittle enough to break.

Out of the pieces that were almost perfect, the ones that got twisted when we tried to paste them up to dry out are still probably the easiest to use. If I were more skilled with my knife, I might be able to use the sheets that dried successfully but we couldn't remove without ripping big holes in them, but cutting out only the pieces of the page that are actually usable proved to be surprisingly difficult. I really want a tiny, slender blade with a very sharp cutting edge, like a hobby knife. That would be much easier to cut with.

I think that if I wanted to make a book with this paper it would take a considerable amount of time. This winter I'll have a lot of extremely productive free time, it seems.

...Ah! Now that I think about it, even if I don't have a book, I have the board that Mister Benno gave me.

I remember that, before my fever flared up, Benno told me that I should look this over when I returned home. I think that I'll probably be fine if I read it while lying in bed.

I get up unsteadily, open the box that I keep my clothes in, and retrieve the approximately A4-sized board from my tote bag. Flopping back down on the bed, I start to read.

"This is... the outline of a training course for new employees."

It contains a listing of the minimum amount of knowledge that it's been decided that newly-entering apprentices should be taught. To break the contents down into broad categories, apprentices will need to know:

- How to look after their appearance and give proper greetings.
- How to write all of the fundamental letters and numbers.
- How to use a calculator.
- How to perform monetary exchanges to a certain degree.
- The list of commodities in which the shop trades.
- The names of the merchants that associate with the shop.

“Hmmm, the things the two of us can study ourselves are... writing, math, and monetary exchanges, I think. Everything below that is probably going to be taught to all of the new employees during training, so I think we can put it off for now...”

As I monologue, mumbling, I start making study plans for the winter.

First off, I wonder how many of the fundamental letters and numbers Lutz remembers? I taught them to him a while ago, but they're the kind of things that you tend to forget if you don't use. I'll need to verify what he's forgotten, then teach those to him again. Instead of practice sentences, I wonder how well it would work if I had him write out order forms, formal introductions, and so on? They're full of vocabulary words that he'll need for work, so I don't think there's much harm there.

To be perfectly honest, I actually don't know how to write many words that aren't strictly work-related. Here, there's no dictionary, and the words that have been taught to me were either drilled into me by Otto so that I could help him with the budget or are merchant-related ones taught to me by Benno or Mark. I think I've got a solid grasp on my work-related vocabulary. However, I don't know how to write any common nouns or verbs.

“As for using calculators, I know how to add and subtract, but I've never asked Mark about how to do multiplication or division on them so I don't know that yet, hmmm...”

I can work out all sorts of calculations by hand on my slate, but it's essential for me to learn how to be able to use a calculator, too. In order to avoid standing out too much from the other apprentices, I should be able to do things the same way that everyone else does.

“I really want to teach Lutz first- through third-grade arithmetic, but I don't have either textbooks or workbooks, so teaching him is going to be really tough. Since I have to prioritize, I think the counting system and doing large monetary conversions is probably the biggest priority, and then getting him to do addition and subtraction, at least in the ones digit. Then, we can move on to the general concepts of multiplication and division... wait, can we actually do this over the winter?”

Drilling in how to work with numbers takes three years, so of course doing all of it over the course of a single winter is impossible.

As I let out a heavy sigh, I notice that my fever is wriggling around inside me, a

pressure building up like it's about to burst open. I press my fingertips into my temples, gritting my teeth.

I don't *actually* scream "don't come out," though.

Imagining tightly screwing on a lid, I shut it back away, then breathe a sigh of relief. It hadn't been for very long, but fighting against the devouring has actually made me hungry. I reach over and pick up the sandwich my family had left for me. I take a big bite then, while I chew noisily, start thinking about personal appearance and greetings.

"Now this is the biggest problem: looking after our appearance and giving proper greetings. Neither of us really know to what extent a merchant needs to prepare their appearance, or what kind of greetings and phrases are unique to merchants, if any..."

I have some idea of what the work clothes, which we will have to buy, are like, having seen the various employees at both Benno's shop and the Merchant's Guild. I have no idea how much any of that would actually cost, so I'll need to verify that with Benno later.

As for the greetings, those are on the list of things I want someone to teach me. I already know that people here don't ever greet each other by bowing, but I don't know what the correct way to greet someone in the merchant world actually is. All I've seen is people smiling at others who they've just met while lying through their teeth. Although, I have a hunch that neither Benno nor the guild leader had been doing any sort of *typical* greeting.

At some point, while I was staring at the board I got from Benno and thinking hard, I gradually drifted off to sleep again. When I wake up, I see my family's already returned home, and are busy bringing their various pork products into the storage room.

"Welcome back," I say.

"Oh, hello, Maïne! Did we wake you? How are you feeling?"

"...Better, I think."

Now that I'm awake, I actually feel *very* refreshed, so I think my fever's gone down. Tomorrow, I'll still be staying at home so we can wait and see, but the day after tomorrow I think I'll be able to move around again.



The next day, Lutz, with a basket strapped to his back, stops by to pay me a visit on his way to the forest. Although my fever's gone down, today's another day in which I shouldn't be leaving my bed, so I'm extremely happy to have someone to talk to, even if it's only for a little bit.

"Hey, Maïne! I heard you're feeling better? Tuuli told me a little while ago, when she met me downstairs."

"Yeah, since last night. I'm staying home all day today to make sure, but tomorrow I think I'll be able to go out."

"Oh, okay! It's been a long time since you've been sick for so long, I was worried."

It seems that both Lutz and my family have been very worried, since I haven't had a fever that's lasted this long in quite some time.

"You missed helping prepare the pork this year, too."

"Ahhh, it just can't be helped, this time of year."

I've slowly become more-or-less used to going to the butcher's and seeing chickens get sliced up, but there's no way I can go along with the rest of the family thinking that I'm going to enjoy this once-per-year experience. I still can't even make myself want to participate. I actually caught myself thinking that I was so lucky that it came and went while I was still stuck in bed with a fever.

"Yesterday," I say, "I looked over the board that Mister Benno left us and put together an education plan for us. Tomorrow, I'd like to go to Mister Benno's shop, return this board, and ask him if I could buy a calculator, maybe..."

"...Oh, that's right, what's on that board, anyway?"

Lutz claps his hands together, apparently having only just remembered that the board even existed, and leans forward curiously. He looks like he's ready to listen to every word.

"It's related to the education apprentices get. Lutz, how much of your letters and numbers do you think you remember?"

"All the ones you taught me...?" he says, tilting his head doubtfully at me like the answer was obvious.

Startled, I open my eyes wide. I didn't expect in the slightest that he'd completely remember everything.

"What? Really?! You don't usually use them, but you haven't forgotten any?!"

"...Well, you know, it's so rare for someone to be able to teach me things, so once I finally learned how to write, I didn't want to forget, so I kept writing on the ground or the wall with my finger, and then after I bought my slate I've been practicing on that ever since."

"Lutz, that's amazing!"

Lutz is an even harder worker than I thought. Wait, no; I've still been thinking that it's only natural that people get educated, and that it's easy to get any information you want whenever you want it. I wonder if this is too naive? I've never actually thought about not wanting to learn knowledge that I'd finally received. After all, if I ever forgot it, I could just get a book and read about it again. If I just remembered what kind of books I can find things in, then I could easily obtain, on demand, any information that I wanted. I've never had a need to memorize the entire contents of it before.

"Nah, I'm not amazing at all. You're the amazing one, being able to read really large numbers like you can."

"Then, I can teach you how to read big numbers too! Pick up that slate."

I teach him about the ones, tens, hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, and ever-larger digits. The town marketplace uses three-digit numbers, so he can read those easily, but it seems he doesn't understand numbers larger than that. Holding the slate in place, I run through the digits until Lutz starts counting along with me. After reading them aloud many times, I write up a series of suitably large numbers on the slate.

"Alright, question one. How do you read *78,946,215*?"

"Ummm, one, ten, hundred, thousand, ten thousand, hundred thousand, million, ten million, so..."

Lutz tackles each problem earnestly and, in no time at all, starts to be able to read numbers up to the ten millions. I wonder what's higher, his memory or his concentration skills? Lutz's specs are way higher than I thought they'd be. We'll be able to put a ton of effort into studying this winter.

If he's this smart... there's not actually a single thing I can actually beat him in, is there?

As I start feeling a little sorry for myself, Tuuli comes back up from downstairs, bringing a bucket of water from the well with her. When she sees Lutz, she shouts in surprise.

“What the... Lutz?! Weren't you supposed to go to the forest? Everyone else left already, you know?!”

“Yikes! Sorry, Maïne. I gotta go! Thanks for teaching me!”

Panicking, Lutz shoots to his feet, then dashes out the door. At that speed, he should be able to catch up to everyone else well before they even reach the gate.



The next day, my family grants me permission to leave the house, so Lutz and I head out to Benno's shop in the afternoon, when he has the free time to meet with us. However, when we arrive, the entrance is closed, and a single guard stands quietly outside.

“Huh?” I say. “I guess it's still lunchtime...”

“Want to go back to the central square and sit down for a bit? Standing around the whole time would be really hard, right?”

“Yeah, you're right. Finding someplace to sit down sounds like a really good idea right now.”

As the two of us discuss how we're going to kill the time, the guard beckons to us, as if he's completely recognized our faces.

“I'll go ask the master if it's okay to let you two in. Would please you wait here for a moment?”

“Yes, sir, and thank you!”

The guard disappears into the shop, then immediately returns, opening the door wide to let us in. Inside, the shop is gloomy with the windows and doors shut. He leads us briskly back to the office in the back and opens the door. Inside, the sunlight streams brightly in through the window, and a brilliant fire burns within the hearth.

“Maïne, are you feeling better now?”

Benno, who seems to have been in the middle of some work, sets aside his pen and ink

and stands to greet us.

“Yes, sir. I’ve come to return this board to you. I also have some questions I’d like to ask, is that okay?”

“Sure, go ahead. I’ve got some things I’d like to talk with you about too, but you two go first.”

Benno gestures to the table we usually sit at, and prompts me to begin.

“Thank you very much for lending me this,” I say. “Thanks to it, I was able to form some ideas about a plan for studying during the winter.”

“Oh?”

“Ummm, as I was reading it, a few questions occurred to me. I understand that taking care of our appearance and giving proper greetings is necessary, but to what degree do we need to take care of our appearance? Also, if merchants have any specific greetings or phrases, unfortunately neither of us actually know them.”

“Ahh,” he says, studying us carefully.

“To start with, although you two are commoners living near the south gate, you aren’t grungy at all, so all you need to worry about is your work clothes. You can get the minimum for about ten small silver coins, so if you start saving now, then by the summer you could probably afford it.”

“Ten small silver coins...,” mumbles Lutz, dumbfounded. “I’m so glad I copied Maïne and saved some away...”

To Lutz, whose mother spins thread and makes all of the clothes for her family, the concept of spending ten small silver coins on clothing and shoes comes as an enormous shock. I’m shocked as well, but clothing here is not something you get off the shelf. It’s all made to order, so I thought that the price was going to be something around those lines. It’s definitely very expensive, but it’s still something that we could buy if we work very hard come springtime to earn money making paper.

“Next is your manner of speech. Maïne, you’re okay, but Lutz, you need work. You need to learn how to speak politely, otherwise I can’t put you out in front of customers the way you talk now.”

Lutz, having been singled out, is at a loss for words. Picking up how to speak politely is really difficult if nobody around him does it either. I try to think about who the best

person for him to imitate would be, out of all the people we know.

“You could use Mister Mark as a reference for speaking politely.”

“...Urrrgh, it makes me really kinda... itchy, though.”

I can sympathize with the unstable sort of feeling of being suddenly told to change one's manner of speech to something that's entirely unlike yourself. However, if he's unable to do so, he won't be able to stand out in the front of the shop. This is doubly true in Benno's shop, which is rapidly growing its base of noble clientele. If we want to climb to the top, we absolutely need to learn how to manage our appearance, our speech, and our manners.

“That's okay,” I reassure him. “You can do it if you try! You know how Benno usually talks one way, then in front of customers he's suddenly speaking very politely? It would be great if you could do the same thing when you're dealing with customers, too.”

Even though I've never actually seen Benno switch to a more polite manner of speech, even when talking to the guild leader, I'm certain that if he thought he had to, he could do it in a heartbeat. Otherwise, he'd be a terrible fit for a merchant.

“There's no real need for you to talk super politely to me or your family, you know? Also, when I'm talking with the guild leader or Mister Benno, I use different words than I do when I'm talking to you, right? Does that make you itchy, too?”

“Now that you say that... nah, I guess not. You talk normally to me, so I guess I never really noticed.”

If you can smoothly switch between modes, it's not something you ever notice. Even if you start out being uncomfortable with it, as you keep using polite speech, you rapidly become used to it.

“So, for the words you're going to be using just at work, why don't you try practicing how Mister Mark speaks? Start with things like addressing people as 'sir' and 'ma'am' and using 'please' and 'thank you' more often... I believe that would best, wouldn't you agree?”

As I switch to more polite phrasing for the last sentence, Lutz nods in comprehension.

“Yeah, sounds good, sir!”

“Argh, no! I’m a girl, say *‘ma’am!’*”

“*Snrk!* Gaahahahaha!”

Benno, having watched our exchange, erupts in a belly-bursting laugh, slapping the table uproariously, wiping tears from his eyes and clutching his sides.

“Ahaha... well, I have no idea how far you two can get over the winter, but keep at it, kids.”

He shows no sign of calming down, so I peer at him in mild disapproval, though it doesn’t seem to do much. I clench my fist tightly, resolving that we’re going to make so much progress this winter that he’ll be shocked. This jogs my memory, and I remember the favor I wanted to ask of him.

“Ah, that’s right! Mister Benno?”

“What’s up?”

“I’d like a calculator so that I can work on learning how to use it. If I can’t practice, I won’t be able to really master it.”

Mark is capable of using his calculator very quickly, flicking beads around with his fingers while simultaneously thinking of the next steps. I probably won’t be able to get quite as good as him, but for things like abacuses, practice is very important.

“A calculator, hmm... If a secondhand one from my shop is alright with you, I can sell it for six large copper coins. How does that sound? Can the two of you share one?”

“Yes sir, thank you very much.”

Lutz and I tap our guild cards together with Benno’s, agreeing to pay him three coins each. He then gives us our new calculator.

“We’ll be able to study math with this, Lutz.”

“Yeah,” he replies.

“Did you have anything else you wanted to ask?” says Benno.

Something immediately flashes to mind.

“Ah, I’ll need to order a new contract sheet-sized paper frame before springtime, if that’s not too much trouble...”

“Just fill out an order form. Mark already knows what you’re looking for, he can go

handle it.”

“Huh? But...”

When we’d been going around to various places to place our orders, Mark had told us that if we weren’t there ourselves to describe what we wanted, there’s no telling what kind of trouble we might get ourselves into. I don’t think leaving it all to him is the best idea.

“I’ve got something else I need you to do for me. Hey, just write it down, okay?”

Urged onwards, I draw my ordering set out of my tote bag. By now, I’m down to a single board that I can use for ordering.

“Mister Benno, it seems that I’m running out of boards for order forms...”

“Yeah, you’ve done a lot of ordering, haven’t you. I’ll get you some more.”

“Whoa! I’ve almost run out of ink, too!”

Not only have I written a lot of orders, but when we were working on our prototypes, it was necessary for me to use even more ink in order to test how easy it was to write on the paper. I’ve used quite a lot of it by now.

When I say that, Benno’s face tightens sharply. “...I want to charge you for this, but... well, whatever. I’ll call this part of my initial investment.”

I’m a little shocked by this. Otto had said that ink was very expensive and thus not a child’s plaything. However, I’d never heard how much it actually cost.

Timidly, I ask, “If you’ll pardon the digression, might I ask how much a bottle of ink would cost?”

“About four small silver coins each.”

“Eek?!”

Lutz and I couldn’t afford it even if we scraped together everything we’ve saved so far!

“Use it carefully,” he warns me.

“Y... yes, sir. Of course!”

I’d been thinking that I wanted some ink of my own to use for my book-making project, but I think I’ll have to give up on trying to buy it. Using my leftover soot pencils is

probably my best bet.

My pen scratches at the surface of the board as I write out my order. I'm very used to this by now. The tip of the pen quickly dulls, but Lutz immediately sharpens it again for me. I ask Benno to get an average-sized contract for me, use my tape measure to determine its size, and finish writing out the rest of the order.

Benno looks over my completed form, then nods slightly.

"No mistakes or spelling errors at all. I'll get this over to Mark... Maïne, if you don't get that paper frame and can't make any paper, I'll be in just as much trouble as you. Don't worry about it, I'll make sure it's done right."

"Thank you very much, sir."

I'm relieved to hear Benno say that he'll take responsibility for making sure it'll be made correctly. Breathing out slowly, I tidy up my ordering set.

"...Is that all you wanted to talk about, you two?"

"Yes, sir," I say, nodding emphatically.

Benno sits up straight, his expression going serious. Guessing that this is going to be a discussion about some sort of transaction, Lutz and I straighten up as well.

"Well then, I've got something I'd like to ask as well. Maïne, it's about the hair-washing liquid you taught me how to make."

"What is it?"

I'd explained how to make it quite a ways back, when we were still in the middle of prototyping our paper, on one of the days where we were borrowing the key for the warehouse. I should have already told him everything. Since I've already relinquished all of my rights to it thanks to the contract magic, I have no idea whatsoever about what he could possibly have to ask after all this time. As I study him curiously, my head tilted to the side, his expression grows increasingly troubled as he opens his mouth to speak.

"You told me that melil oil is best oil to use, so I've been gathering it until now, but..."

"Huh? Shouldn't melil be almost out of season? Have you not made anything yet?"

Lutz and I exchange glances. Melil should be about out of season. The two of us had

gathered a lot of it already and made it all into simple shampoo. I would have thought that Benno, who is constantly seeking profit, would have started production a long time ago and would have sold a large quantity of it since then.

“Well, I’d acquired a large crop of them, and had a workshop start making it, but the other day they came to me and said that it wasn’t coming out right, even if they made it exactly the way you said. Can you think of any reason that might be?”

I frown as I think about what he said. Fundamentally, the entire procedure boils down to just smashing, then pressing, then mixing in scents. I can’t think of any place in the process that could actually go wrong. I tilt my head to the side in confusion, as does Lutz, who has helped me make shampoo countless times.

“...Even if they’re saying it’s not turning out right, if you’re making simple shampoo, then... it’s not a very difficult process, is it?”

“I know, right?”

I have a ton of ideas on how to make it better, if I only had the ingredients, but in its current simple form, I can’t think of a reason why it would ever fail. It always turned out the same no matter if it was me, Tuuli, or Lutz who was making it.

“I really didn’t want to bring you out, but if we don’t manage to complete this, then this will turn into something the contract magic would have to deal with. Sorry, but could you come with me to the workshop?”

“Yes, sir!” I reply.

If I recall correctly, the penalties for violating a magical contract are very severe. In the worst case, they could even mean death. As soon as I cutely chirp out my immediate response, though, Lutz grabs hold of my arm.

“Maïne, I think you should probably stop for today. Your fever’s only barely just gone back down, and you’re not all the way back to normal, right?”

Lutz is correct, but in this season there’s not going to be a whole lot of time where I’m actually at peak health. This is definitely a season where my fever could flare up at any point, if I’m even just a little bit unprepared. If just not having a fever doesn’t count as being healthy, then I’d never be able to leave my house for anything.

“But I don’t know how long it’ll take me to get totally healthy again, and if we let this

go for too long then the snow is going to start falling, so we should go now, while my fever's down, right?"

"Well, you're not wrong, but..."

Benno pats Lutz's worried head reassuringly. "Don't worry too much, Lutz. I'll carry her, so we won't be making her walk. Not like I can stand walking that slowly, anyway." "...Well, in that case, I guess it's okay, huh?"

With that, Benno picks me up once again, and we head out.

He asked me about what could have caused the failure, but I've never actually seen this fail before.

I wonder if he really understood me?

Chapter 44

The Source of the Failure and the Plan To Fix It

The three of us make our way towards the workshop where they're making simple shampoo, with me being held in Benno's arms. Along the way, Benno asks me a question that seems to be a just a little difficult for him to verbalize.

"Hey, Maïne. About that hair-washing liquid..."

"Yes? What about the '*simple all-in-one shampoo and conditioner*'?"

"That name's too long and hard to say. Is there something else we can call it?"

It certainly is a long name for this world, especially when the people here, like Benno, don't actually understand the meaning of the underlying Japanese and know it only by sound. So, in other words, he's asking for a name for this new commodity that would be easier for his noble clientele to pronounce.

I blink, surprised, then nod at him with a smile. "Ohhh, I just called it that on a whim when Tuuli wanted to know what it was, and it stuck, so I don't particularly care what we call it?"

"...Is that so?"

At the time, I was so happy that my head was no longer so itchy and that my hair had gone from rustlingly dry to silky smooth that I just called it whatever came to mind. I didn't really put any thought into it.

"Yes, sir. Please feel free to call it whatever you'd like."

"You say that, but that just creates new problems..."

Benno frowns, eyebrows drawn together, as he thinks. Naming an entirely new product requires really good instinct, I think. Thinking that he might need a little help, I keep speaking, hoping to give him a little hint.

"We should probably think of this like a brand name. I think it would be best if it were something easy to say and easy to understand. Perhaps instead of finding words that describe what it does, like "hair-washing liquid" or "cleanser", should we describe the

results, like how it makes hair glossy and silky?“

"Hmmm... hmmm..."

As I list off ideas, Benno's expression grows even more and more grim. I wonder if, instead of giving hints, I was stressing him out?

Benno's eyebrows are deeply furrowed, but Lutz just shrugs lightly.

"Since I've been saying 'sim-pull ah-rin-won sham-poo und kun-dishner' all this time, I think it's probably fine?"

"Maïne," says Benno, "Is there... anything... else you'd call it?"

Having perhaps completely failed to come up with any suitable words, Benno looks down at me, seeking help. Since I've been referring to it as "simple all-in-one shampoo and conditioner" this entire time, I can't just arbitrarily come up with some other name for it when prompted. There are similar Japanese words I can use, but that's not going to change the fact that nobody in this world will understand what they mean.

"Ummm? I can't really think of anything, besides something like '*rinse-in shampoo*'...?"

"...So 'rin', 'sham', and 'poo' are necessary, huh?"

"No, um, not really, but I think whatever you come up with would be much..."

Benno mumbles to himself for a while, but in the end, maybe because he couldn't come up with a name that worked, or maybe because "simple all-in-one shampoo and conditioner" is already fixed in his head, or maybe he even just made a decision based on my second suggestion, he decides on just calling it "rinsham".

Uh... is that going to be okay?



When we pass through the central square, Benno turns to walk towards the west. I blink in surprise; I would have thought that, since this is a workshop for pressing oil, it would be on the streets where the other craftsmen are.

"Are there workshops on the west side as well? I thought it would be where the other craftsmen work."

"There's workshops that handle more foodstuffs over there. They have a lot of things coming and going, so being close to the west gate is ideal for them."

“Ah, right, melil fruit is a foodstuff. I’ve only really been using it to make rinsham, lately...”

When I had been at my wits’ end with how constantly my head was itching and desperately wanting to wash it, I hadn’t considered even for a moment that the simple shampoo I was making would have become a commodity. At the start, I was just thinking about what I could actually use, seeing as how I neither had any seaweed nor could use water after washing rice with it. I searched through my memory for everything I knew about shampoo, recalling various magazines about things like natural lifestyles and naturalism, trying to remember everything I could about using natural ingredients in beauty products.

From my memories, I remembered that you could make a shampoo by using plant-based oils coupled with salt or powdered orange peel to use as a scrub. I also remembered that you could make a facial by whipping egg whites until they’re firm, a lotion out of dried plums and sake, and a whole lot of other things, but I didn’t really need either of those things for a child’s soft skin. The pressing necessity was finding raw materials for a shampoo.

...Although getting the oil was tremendously difficult.

I’d wandered around the kitchen, searching for things that might contain oils, and discovered the somewhat avocado-like melil that had been put out on the kitchen table. I thought that it might have oil in it, but I didn’t at the time know what it was actually called, so I couldn’t go and get more of it, and my head was itchy, so everything was terrible. Since curing my itchy scalp was such a pressing necessity, I constantly begged Tuuli to go get me more of them, not knowing in the slightest how difficult gathering things from the forest actually was. Thanks to that, my scalp was soothed, and, having brought gloss and silkiness back to my hair, I could focus in earnest on building a more hygienic lifestyle for myself.

Tuuli, thank you!



The workshop that Benno brings me to is something like a large warehouse. Just as I had heard about workshops that did a lot of work with foodstuffs, various smells drifted through the air, mingling together. Various workbenches were lined up throughout the workshop, with different benches seemingly set up for different tasks.

Along the walls, shelves are set up for storing tools, with all sorts of different implements visible on them.

Benno catches one of the workmen. "Is the master here? Tell him Benno's come."

The workman, panicking, lets out a strangled "yes!" and runs off. Benno sets me down, and we wait for the master of the workshop to arrive. Shortly, a slightly plump older man, having been called by the workman from earlier, emerges from further back, his belly swaying as he walks.

At first glance, he's very much a man in charge of someplace that makes food. He has the physique of a man who, from the bottom of his heart, loves to eat. If this were Japan, he'd only be thought of as a little fat, but in this city where food is not overly abundant, a belly like that is considered to be quite fat indeed.

"Master Benno, thank you so much for walking all the way out here.... May I ask who these children are?"

"These are the kids that originally figured out how to make rinsham. I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone."

Benno's eyes sharpen dangerously as he speaks. The workshop master rapidly nods many times in agreement.

"So," says Benno, "have you fixed the problem?"

"No; we've changed the tools we're using, changed the people making it, and a whole bunch of other things, but I have a feeling that we're starting to get pretty far off the mark."

Benno can't conceal his irritation that no progress was being made. When I see how greatly embarrassed the workshop master is, I suddenly feel like I'm somehow being scolded along with him.

I tug on his sleeve. "Umm, would it be possible for me to see how you're making this?" "Sure.... If you notice anything wrong, it'd be a huge help if you could teach me about it. For some reason, the stuff we're making here doesn't actually seem to clean anything."

He leads us to the corner where they make rinsham, and he shows me their process. Since he doesn't want to waste any resources on another failure, he uses a single melil

fruit. He places a heavy weight on top of the fruit, and crushes it in a single instant. It's very different than how Tuuli and Lutz squeeze out oil by using a hammer. Next, the foreman picks up the cloth underneath it, then tightly wrings it out, causing oil to drip into a bowl.

"This is how we make the oil. You with me so far?"

There isn't a single problem I can see with their oil-extracting process. Lutz mumbles that there's no room for error there, so there doesn't seem to be any mistakes, at a glance, with this step of the process.

"The two of us couldn't use a weight to press the oil," I say, "so we had to use a hammer. However, I don't think a difference like that would be enough to cause this kind of error."

"Ahh, a kid wouldn't be strong enough for that, so they'd need to use a hammer, huh."

As the warehouse master mumbles about perhaps trying a hammer next, I make a request.

"That oil. Would it be alright if I take a look at the oil you extracted just now?"

"Sure."

He hands me the oil bowl. Inside, a clear, green oil, devoid of any impurity, sloshes around.

"Ah! Got it."

The instant I see the oil, I realize what's wrong. On one hand, I'm happy that the problem is so simple, but on the other hand, it's for such a depressing reason that I almost want to cry.

"What?! Were we doing something wrong?!" asks the warehouse master, with such ferocity that I think he might bite my head off.

My shoulders drooping a little, I answer. "...It's the cloth you're using."

When I say this, Benno shoots a glare at the warehouse master, whose eyes go wide in shock. Grabbing the cloth in both hands, he brandishes it frantically, flapping it around.

"The cloth?! This is a brand new operation, so we used the best cloth we could get!"

“...That’s the problem.”

“What?!”

Now it’s not just the warehouse master who’s staring at me in shop, but Benno as well. Shrugging, I set the bowl of oil down on the table.

“The fabric that the two of us have at our homes is all very coarse. I’m sure you can see from our clothing, but we don’t have a lot of money. Since we don’t have a finely-woven cloth like this, the oil that we make has a lot of plant fibers and tiny fragments of the seeds mixed in with it.”

The oil that Tuuli and Lutz press isn’t a clear green like this, but whitish and cloudy. The reason is simple. The cloth we’re using is so rough that it can’t even compare to the one they’re using at this workshop. Also, in order to avoid any waste, we press every last drop we can get out of the fruit, and we wring every last drop out of the cloth without caring too much about any impurities.

“Those fragments work as a ‘scrub’... ah, I mean, they are necessary for removing any impurities as you’re washing your hair.”

Essentially, you can take a pure oil like they’ve made at this workshop and add ground salt, nuts, and dried citrus peel in order to make a scrub. However, in our case, the oil itself already worked just fine as a scrub. To make things worse, my lifestyle isn’t one where I can talk about adding more things to it. The best I could do was mix the large quantity of herbs I gathered from the forest in to it to make it smell better.

The workshop master seems befuddled by my explanation, his mouth hanging open. It seems the source of the problem was vastly outside his expectations. It wasn’t what I was expecting, either. For the final product to deviate so much from the sample just because of the decision to use good-quality oil... I bet he’s sick to his stomach.

Benno, having understood the source of the problem, lets out a sigh of relief. He picks up the squeezing cloth with his fingertips, then shrugs.

“Never would have thought it was the cloth. For something to fail just because we’re using a high quality thing... I’d thought that there was some sort of trick to mixing the herbs in.”

“The herbs are basically just there for the scent.”

The warehouse master breathes an enormous sigh of relief. With an expression that's somewhere between relieved and troubled, he whispers to himself.

"If we need a rougher cloth, the stuff we've pressed so far is useless, huh..."

"Um?" I say. "You can use it, you know? It would be a waste if you didn't."

"Eh?"

If I could, a pure, high-quality oil like this would actually be what I'd want to use. If you added a scrub to this, then you'd wind up with a product of much higher quality than the rinsham that I was making.

"All you need to do is add a '*scrub*' to the oil you've got so far. If you pick your ingredients carefully, you could make something much higher quality than what I made."

"Oh," says the warehouse master, impressed. "Young lady, you're quite knowledgeable, aren't you?"

As the warehouse master looks at me praisingly, I notice that Benno's eyes are suddenly gleaming with a terrifying light, like he's just spotted fresh prey.

"Um..."

Shit. I got carried away and said too much. All the blood drains from my face. I glance over at Lutz, who is staring at me with an expression so amazed that he doesn't even have to say what a huge idiot I am. This is *exactly* what happened when I accidentally let too much information slip to him, earlier.

Aaaaaargh! I'm a colossal idiot! Am I even *capable* of learning?!

The corners of my mouth twitch slowly into place as I try to paste a smile onto my face.

Calm down, calm down, I still haven't leaked anything, everything's just fine.

"If you add anything rough to the mixture, there's a chance it could injure someone's scalp when they're washing, so please be careful about that."

Smiling, I try to make a quick escape, but Benno clamps down hard on my shoulder, a ferocious grin on his face.

“It looks like you know about quite a lot of other things, don’t you?”

I *do* know a lot more, but I cannot let myself say anything else lest something slip out. From now on, I want to live a calm, tranquil life here, so Benno having strange suspicions about me would be very problematic. Somehow, I have to escape from Benno’s interrogation.

Since Benno didn’t know the previous Maïne, he won’t have the same sort of mistrust that Lutz did, so the conditions are different this time. If I try hard enough, I think I should be able to manage. I’ll show him somehow.

Although my back grows cold with sweat, I refuse to be dominated by the force of Benno’s gaze. I brace my legs, put on my best smile, and bluff as hard as I ever have.

“I’ll have to charge for anything more. I’ll need an information fee. That’s all I’ll say for now.”

“How much?”

Benno smiles broadly, raising his chin a bit, telling me to name my price, but no matter how much he might offer I have no intent on telling him any more. However, if I say that out loud, then negotiations would be over immediately. Right now, I need to figure out how to get Benno to withdraw.

My heart pounding furiously in my ears, I frantically shake my head.

“...You have a product you can sell already; if you want more, how much are you willing to spend to purchase that information?”

I smile sweetly at him, and we lock eyes for a little while. The sheer ferocity in his reddish-brown eyes makes me instinctively want to back down, but there is no way I can give in. I know that no matter what I say, people look at me funny, but I can’t say anything more right now.

Benno breaks eye contact, calling out to the warehouse master.

“Can we borrow your negotiation room?”

“Y... yeah, go right ahead.”

The instant the warehouse master replies, Benno grabs hold of me tightly, picks me up, and literally abducts me towards the negotiation room.

“Aaaaaah?!”

“Maïne?!”

“We’re just going to talk! Nobody come in!”

Lutz staggers as Benno roars, freezing in place. The workshop master nods rapidly in agreement as well.

Benno, having forcefully taken over someone else’s negotiation room, sits me down on a chair, then sits facing me. After staring at me for a little while, he opens his mouth.

“Two small gold coins.”

“...what?”

I misheard. I have to have misheard. I’m pretty sure I just heard him offer a tremendous sum, but I definitely have to have misheard.

I notice that my jaw has fallen open in shock, but since I’ve obviously just misheard, I frantically compose myself, snapping it shut. When I do so, Benno repeats himself, enunciating very clearly.

“I’ll pay two small gold coins. Tell me about any improvements, changes, alternate plants, absolutely everything that you can think of. All of it.”

If he’s willing to pay two small gold coins for improvements and changes, I have to wonder just how much he’s estimating that he’ll be able to sell rinsham for. If it’s a luxury good like Freida’s hairpins, is he planning on massively overpricing that too when he sells it to his noble counterparts?

“...Mister Benno, just how much are you planning on selling rinsham for?”

As I stare back at him, Benno’s eyes narrow slightly.

“That’s none of your business,” he scoffs.

“But I’m trying to sell you information about how to manufacture it, so it is *literally* my business, isn’t it?”

Convinced that saying that will end the discussion immediately, I breathe a sigh of relief in my heart, and put my hands on the table as I prepare to stand up.

“Three small gold coins. Not a copper more.”

Benno firmly grabs my hands as soon as I put them on the table, and with a pained expression, raises his price. The eyeball-popping sum of money makes my heart waver, but if he’s unwilling to raise the price any further then negotiations are obviously over. For the sake of my peaceful future, I need to dodge any further investigation.

“I must ref...”

“Take it and save it. The only thing that can help with the devouring is money.”

Just as I was about to decline, Benno suddenly stares at me intently, clenching his jaw and speaking in almost a whisper. My eyes go wide in astonishment.

“...Mister Benno, do you know about... the devouring?”

“I thought there was a chance, so the other day I had that old bastard tell me everything he knew.”

“Huh?”

When Benno says “that old bastard”, he means the guild leader. I wonder what the guild leader told him? Does this have anything to do with the fact that he was a lot less wary around him after we delivered Freida’s hairpins?

With a different sort of impatience than before coiling around my heart, the strength leaves my body. Having been halfway out of my seat, my butt lands hard on the wooden chair.

Seeing that I’ve sat back down, Benno leans low over the table, bringing his face close to mine, then starts speaking in a voice so low that only I can hear. Strangely, despite the fact that he’s whispering, his voice strikes my eardrum with perfect clarity.

“His granddaughter had the devouring too, same as you, but between his money and his connections to the nobility, she was saved. Sell me the information you have and save the money so that you’ll be ready when the day comes.”

“And by that you mean...”

“When the fever in your body... can’t be kept in check anymore.”

Comprehension floods through my body. I had been kind of thinking that the devouring fever was a little more active lately, but I thought it was just my imagination, or that it was because of my physical condition. So, Benno and the guild leader think that someday the devouring fever is going to spread out so wide that I won't be able to force it back down, huh?

When comparing my own life to the risk of being found to be disturbing after giving up this information, the conclusion comes far too quickly.

I still don't want to die.

I finally made some paper. I've finally managed to create an environment where I can make a book this winter, though it'll be made out of failed scraps. I've gotten used to this lifestyle, and I've started getting along really well with my family. I've started to discover ways that I can be even just a little useful, despite being so useless all around.

I've finally started to enjoy living here.

I can't die now.

Simultaneously, I consider what would happen if I gave Benno this information and he decided he found me disturbing.

If Benno thinks I'm disturbing, what would happen? Unlike Lutz, who knew the previous Maïne, all Benno would think is that I'm a child that knows a disturbing amount of strange information. I don't think that being disturbing is enough of a reason to have me killed, and since he isn't tied closely to my family like Lutz is, if he tells them that I'm creepy, it won't actually be that damaging.

In the worst case, he distances himself from me and Lutz, and the two of us can no longer become apprentices at his shop. However, in that case, we could take the guild leader and Freida's offers instead. It's not like we'd have nowhere to go if Benno casts us out.

If having enough money means I can live, then I want to live.

"...Understood," I say, looking up at him. "Three small gold coins it is."

He nods slightly, releasing my hands. Then, after we touch our guild cards together, he

arbitrarily grabs my tote bag and yanks out my ordering set.

“Hey, that’s my bag!”

“And these are my things.”

“I mean, you’re right, but please at least excuse yourself first!”

“Ah, excuse me,” he says, in a tone of voice that makes me think he’s not actually the slightest bit sorry.

Taking pen and ink in hand, he gets an order form ready to use as a notepad.

“Well then, how about you start telling me? Let’s start with how you think we can sell the failing oil from before.”

“You need to add some sort of ‘*scrub*’ in order to loosen the dirt. There are a lot of different things you could use as a ‘*scrub*’, but I think the best thing to use would be salt. If you grind salt into a fine enough powder, it will not only clean off any dirt but should also serve as a deodorant.”

“Salt, you say?”

In my memories of what I’d read, the simplest solution would be to take a vegetable oil, then mix it with finely-powdered salt. Benno’s eyes widen, perhaps because he wasn’t very familiar with salt and was a little surprised.

“...Then, if you add dried ‘*citrus*’, I mean, ummm, feriginne peel, ground up very fine, then it’ll clean and smell much better than if you didn’t add anything else.”

“Feriginne peel, okay. Anything else?”

He glances up at me, pen still clacking on the board as he writes.

“Anything else? Mixing in tiny pieces of ‘*nuts*’... argh, nüst would be good, I think. I haven’t been able to do any of these, though, my family *really* doesn’t want me to waste anything,” I say, with a small laugh.

Benno stares at me pointedly, like he’s just heard a particularly interesting piece of information.

“You haven’t done any of these, but you still know them?... Maïne, who *are* you?”

“That’s a secret. Small gold coins won’t buy *that*.”

Benno twists his mouth, looking like he swallowed a bug. Sitting in front of him is a

person he doesn't himself understand. Under his suspicious gaze, my heart suddenly starts pounding again. The longer this goes on, the less composed I become. I'm not strong at all.

I paste a smile onto my face, then make a gamble that could overturn everything I've worked for.

"You'd fire a creepy kid like me, wouldn't you?"

"Wh-?!"

"I was ready for something like this, giving you that information, you know?"

Benno looks down at the table, noisily scratching at his head, then lets out an enormous sigh. He shakes his head back and forth slowly, then looks up at me.

"No, if I thought I could make money off of her, I wouldn't want her getting snatched up by someone else, so I'd keep her locked up as tightly as I could. I'm a merchant, after all."

Having noisily stood up, he reaches out and gently ruffles my hair, like he always does. With that familiar action, he tells me that we're maintaining the status quo. After I breathe a long sigh of relief, I shove his hand, which was still ruffling my hair, away, and stick my tongue out at him.

Chapter 45

Tronbay Appears

This is the season where it's absurdly difficult to get out of bed in the morning. While I hide under the sheets, grumbling about how cold it is, my father, who's already almost done getting ready for work, calls out to me.

"Maïne, are you feeling alright today?"

"Hmm? No worse than usual? What's up, Daddy?"

I wonder if he saw me squirming around under the covers and guessed that I'd come down with something? I abruptly hop out of bed, earning a worried frown from my father.

"Otto wants to meet with you to discuss this winter's work, so he asked me if you'd come to the gate when the weather was clear and you're feeling all right."

"Oh! I don't have a fever today, and I don't have anything arranged with Mister Benno either, so I'll go to the gate today."

The gates open at the second bell, so when it draws near, I wave goodbye to my father as he heads off to work. Then, quickly, I change my clothes, right there on top of the bed.

"Mommy, Tuuli. I'm gonna go to the gate today."

"Oh yeah," says Tuuli. "There's not that much stuff left in the forest to gather anymore. Mom, it's better for Maïne to stop going to the forest now, right?"

"You're absolutely right," replies my mother. "If she gets a fever and faints again she'd be in big trouble, so it's for the best that she doesn't go to the forest with just the other kids anymore."

Lately, the weather has gotten very chilly, and the season where it's easiest to catch a cold has come around. Lately, there are more and more days where even I can recognize that my physical condition isn't particularly good. If I keep pushing hard, I'll only be a burden to everyone around me, so I should take care of myself and stay out of the forest.

“Hey, Maïne!” calls Lutz as I head down the stairs carrying only my tote bag. “You going to the gate today?”

In order to make sure I don’t catch a cold, I’ve been dressed in a ton of layers of clothing. Unlike me, the other children look comparatively nimble, since being bundled up like I am makes it rather difficult to move. There isn’t very much time left before the snow starts to fall, so today’s the last spurt of activity towards gathering firewood.

I walk along with the other children as they head towards the gates. Lately, I’ve been able to walk fast enough that I don’t get separated from the rest of the children anymore. Every time I try to push a little harder, though, Lutz shoots me down with a stern warning.

“Right, so we’ll stop by here on our way back, so wait here, okay?”

“Okay! Good luck with your gathering, Lutz!”

I wave farewell from the gates as the others continue on towards the forest. I don’t see my father anywhere, but I find one of the younger gatekeepers I’ve made acquaintances with and have him let me into the night duty room.

“Mister Otto, are you here? It’s Maïne!”

As I open the door and step inside, I see that the shelves along the walls are packed full of thin wooden boards for the budget estimations.

“Hey, Maïne! Thanks for coming out.”

“Hello, Mister Otto, it’s been a while.”

After we exchange crisp salutes, he ushers me to the chair closest to the fire. It’s a little on the tall side, so I have to halfway climb up onto it, but once I’m settled, I pull my slate and slate pencils out of my bag.

“How often do you think you’ll be able to make it out here this winter?” he asks.

“Ummm, I talked it over with my father, but we decided that I could come on days when I’m feeling well, the snow isn’t too bad to walk in, and my father is working either the morning or day shift.”

First of all, there aren't very many days during the winter where I'm feeling very well. Since I'm at least a little bit stronger this year than last, I really hope that the number of times I catch a cold and wind up stuck in bed are both rare and brief, but I have no way to really predict how often it will actually be.

Next is the weather. There aren't very many days during the winter where there isn't a snowstorm, either. On sparkingly clear days, there's nothing to worry about. My father says there's nothing to worry about on days when the snowfall is light, but once it actually starts drifting from the sky I think he'll stop me.

And, finally, my father will be on the night shift for basically a third of the winter in total.

"Most likely," I continue, "I'll barely need two hands to count the number of days I'll be able to come out here, I think."

"...Well, I'd guessed as much, but really, you only helped me out for one day last year and it was still a huge help, so I've really got my hopes up for this year, too. I'll be very glad for your help no matter how often you can come."

"Thanks!"

It's a good thing that I'll be able to earn a bunch of slate pencils by just doing calculation work. Since this year I'll be helping with Lutz's education, we'll need a lot more slate pencils than I did last year, so I plan on working as hard as I can.

"Ah! When I'm working on the estimations, you'll be providing the slate pencils I'm using, not me, right?"

"Heh... hahaha! Well, aren't you thinking like a merchant now? Of course the slate pencils are part of the cost. Don't worry about it, just calculate."

After I suddenly remembered the question I needed to ask, Otto's eyes went round for a moment before he burst into laughter. I may be getting laughed at, but at least now I can do my work without any doubts. I roll up my sleeves a little so that I won't accidentally rub out any numbers, then pick up my slate pencil.

"All set," I say.

"Right, here's today's work."

Otto brings over an enormous pile of wooden boards and drops them on the table with a clatter. These are the tallies of the furnishings and equipment used by the higher-

ups at their duty station. It seems like Otto is in charge of doing the accounting for this entire post. Hanging his head, he tells me that he'd brought this on himself by pointing out a mistake in one of his superiors' calculations.

I start working on totaling up the sums, triple-checking my work to make sure that I don't make any mistakes, either.

"Otto, you here?! Come out, it's an emergency!"

A soldier bursts into the room, looking frantic. Otto quickly jots a line down on his sheet to mark his place, then dashes out of the room, telling me over his shoulder not to let anyone touch his calculator.

It seems that, for some reason, the entire guard contingent at the gate has been called to action. From the corridor on the other side of the door, I can hear the rush of countless footsteps, amplified to a roar by echoes off the stone pavement. In this enormous commotion, there's nobody outside that I could ask what's happening right now.

I've been to the gate countless times to help out, but this is the first time I've seen it be this ridiculously noisy. Left all by myself in this room, I feel thick, cold anxiety slowly oozing into my heart.

Is it... okay, for me to be here?

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. As I look around the empty room I've been left alone in, I suddenly feel the lurch of vertigo. My fever, refusing to overlook even the tiniest lapse in my concentration, suddenly thrashes about within me, as if it's pointing out the weakness in my heart. Recalling my life's irritations, I send my will through my body, forcing the fever back into the depths of my heart, imagining screwing a lid shut on it so tightly that it cannot escape.

"...Whoof, I'm tired."

After struggling so hard against the devouring, my anxiety about what's happening outside has dramatically decreased. I sit back down to resume my calculations, but Otto immediately comes back into the room. He quickly finishes up the calculations he'd finished thus far, and starts tidying up his share of the paperwork.

“It looks like a bunch of tronbay has appeared in the forest. The kids came running for help, so more than half of the gate guard headed out to deal with it. I’ve got to go stand by the gate, but, Maïne, can you stay here and keep working? Also, if any letters of introduction show up, I’ll direct them here, so please take care of them for me.”

“Right, understood.”

With the cause of the disturbance identified, I feel a little bit better, and I get back to tackling the remaining work. Now that I think about it, Lutz had mentioned that tronbay started coming around in the fall. I wonder, maybe we can get some tronbay for ourselves.

Hm? Although, it looks like the soldiers will be participating as well, so maybe it’s grown too much by now, to the point that we won’t be able to use it for paper? I wonder...

Last time, it was possible for the children to cut it down by themselves, so I turn back to my calculations, thinking that it’s not something anybody should be quite so worried about. After a while, though, I once again hear the clamor of people talking though the closed door.

“Maïne,” says Otto, “Lutz has come back. He says he has something he wants to discuss with you and would like for you to return home with him. What do you think?”

“If he cut down any tronbay, I think that’s what he’ll want to talk with me about, so I’ll go home. I’ve finished the calculations from here to here.”

“Thanks, Maïne, you’re a great help.”

By the gate, I can see soldiers and children alike milling about, seeming to have just returned from the forest and carrying bundles of raw tronbay. As I scan the crowd, looking for Lutz, my father rushes up to me, a chunk of wood as big as I am hoisted up on his shoulder.

“Maïne! Look at the size of this tronbay that your daddy cut down!”

“Whoaa, that’s big! Is that gonna be firewood?”

“No, tronbay doesn’t burn very easily, so we won’t do that. I’m going to make furniture out of it instead. When there’s big house fires, things made of tronbay sometimes don’t burn up, so it’s used for making things you put your valuables in.”

“...Huh, I didn’t know that. That’s really cool!”

As expected of such a mysterious plant. To not burn up, even in a huge fire... that’s not

even wood, anymore!

As I let out an astonished breath at this new surprise, I notice Lutz standing behind my father, beckoning me closer.

“What’s up, Lutz?” I ask.

“Heh, Lutz,” says my father, looking down at the basket on Lutz’s back, “were those skinny sticks all you could manage to cut down?”

He puffs out his chest pridefully, like he’s just won a competition. I’d really like him to stop competing against children. It’s embarrassing. I let out a long, exasperated sigh, but I can see a lot of the other soldiers and children nearby comparing the size of the trees and branches they cut down, since it’s so difficult to cut down once it matures.

“There’s not really any use for thin branches like that,” says one.

Since tronbay hard to burn, you can’t use sticks like that as firewood, and such young, soft wood couldn’t hold back the heat of a blaze, so it can’t be used as furniture, either.

“These sticks are uuuuseless!” says another child. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him angrily chuck the pile of slender branches he was caring to the ground with a clatter.

“Ah, those are perfect for me,” I say.

Even if that child doesn’t need them, they’re perfect materials for making high-grade paper. It would be an enormous waste to throw away such slender, soft wood.

“You really don’t need them?” I ask.

“...N... no!”

Suddenly noticing how many people were staring at him, the boy runs off, shouting at me over his shoulder. As I gather up the pile of sticks he discarded, other children come up to me, offering me similarly slender tronbay cuttings out of their own baskets.

“Hey, take these too. All I’d get if I brought these home is my dad mad at me.”

“I’ll give these to you. I don’t need them.”

Shortly, a huge quantity of sticks has been piled up around me.

“Lutz, I’ve... got a lot of wood here.”

“...Yep.”

Lutz and I set to neatly organizing the pile of branches into neat stacks, then cramming Lutz’s basket as full as it can get. My father, dumbfounded by this turn of events, looks back and forth between me, Lutz, and the overstuffed basket, a troubled scowl on his face.

“...Hey, Maïne. What are you going to *do* with all that?”

“We use young, soft wood to use, so this is good. Lutz, let’s go?”

I turn my back on my father and walk away. Lutz follows, scratching his head, looking a little troubled himself.

“When I was cutting the tronbay down, I was thinking we could use it as raw materials too, but... we have to actually use it within like five to seven days, right, otherwise it doesn’t work?”

“Yeah, that’s right, what’s wrong?”

“...What do we do now? I really don’t want to go stand in the river during this season, and we don’t have enough extra firewood to steam this stuff for over a bell... do we give up?”

I’m well aware that in this season, even if you were to go to the forest, you wouldn’t find very much in the way of firewood, but I’m *also* certain that if we let all this tronbay go to waste for such a reason, Benno would be so indignant that his eyes might pop out of his skull.

“...I understand what you’re saying, but maybe we should go talk to Mister Benno first?”

“Yeah, I guess he’d get real mad if we just threw it away on our own.” He lets out a long sigh. “Man... I reeeally don’t want to go stand in the river when it’s this cold out.”

We plod our way towards Benno’s shop, but, as one might expect, the watchman outside tells Lutz that he can’t let him in looking like he just came back from gathering sticks in the forest, so he’ll have to stay outside. At the watchman’s call, Mark comes out from within the store and escorts me inside. A customer is just leaving Benno’s office when I enter the store. As we pass each other, he looks down at me, notes my

mismatched appearance, and snorts disdainfully.

I *really* should order those clothes sooner rather than later. I don't want to lessen the dignity of Benno's shop just by being here. I need to keep saving as much money as I can.

Benno looks mildly surprised when I'm shown into his office.

"What is it? We didn't have a meeting scheduled today, right?"

"We didn't have anything schedule, no, but I needed to talk to you... to be frank, tronbay showed up in the forest today."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, Benno stands up so suddenly that his chair clunks behind him. He leans forward excitedly across his desk.

"Did you say tronbay?! Did you cut it down?!"

"Yes, sir, we were able to get quite a lot of it. It's just, well..."

"What is it?"

"Making it into paper is... hard."

"Why?"

He frowns dubiously at me, not seeming to understand. I open my mouth to reply, guessing that he's absolutely about to get angry.

"Ummm, well, we, we need to steam the wood for a bell's worth of time, which we don't have enough firewood for, and then we..."

"You imbecile!"

I was about to say that we couldn't soak it in the river like we need to, but before I could finish listing all of our reasons, Benno impatiently cut me off, yelling in a voice like the crash of thunder.

"You can buy firewood literally any time of the year! You can't possibly have *thought* of comparing it to *tronbay*, which is exceedingly rare! And don't even try to tell me that you can't do that cost/benefit math!"

"...That's what I thought you were going to say. Since I'd like to buy firewood, may I ask Mister Mark to take me to the lumberyard?"

Since there is no way that anyone could possibly mistake me for a child who has

already had her baptism, if I were to walk up to a store and ask for some firewood they'd probably just look at me suspiciously and shoo me away.

"...Where's Lutz?"

"Waiting outside, sir. We came here immediately after he returned from the forest, so he's not really presentable enough to enter the shop..."

As I speak, Benno rings the small bell on his desk, summoning Mark.

"Mark, please go ask Lutz if Maïne is okay to walk to the lumberyard today."

"Certainly, sir."

"Maïne, write up your order form here," he says, tapping on the desk.

I shake my head. "Ummm, since all I had planned to do today was go to the gate, I don't have any of my ordering forms with me."

"...I have some here."

Benno produces a thin wooden board and some ink, and I start writing out my order there on the spot.

"Mister Benno, I just want enough firewood to burn for one bell's worth of time; what should I write?"

"Just write it like that. I'll probably be able to sell off any surplus." "Yes, sir," I reply.

As I write, Mark returns with Lutz's answers.

"It seems that it would be better for Maïne to not do any more walking than she has already. When you've finished writing up the order, he and I will head for the lumberyard ourselves."

"Thank you very much," I reply.

After I hand him the finished order form and see him off, Benno hands me a stack of several wooden sheets.

"Read these when you have some time."

"Gladly!"

On these wooden sheets is more knowledge that could be called common knowledge for merchants: information about how contracts work. I hum happily to myself, overjoyed to be reading, but as I continue to skim, questions start steadily popping up

inside my head.

“Mister Benno, will this firewood purchase be treated as part of the initial investment?”

“.....”

Benno soundlessly turns to fix his gaze directly on me, giving no answer.

“Also, I’ve been thinking that this was kind of strange, but the other day when we delivered the prototype you said that that was the end of what you’d call initial investment, right? But, unless I’m mistaken, didn’t the magical contract state that it would last until our baptismal ceremonies? Are you not planning on covering the cost of the larger paper frame as part of the initial investment?”

If I had to think about why Benno would specifically have me read about contracts, the only thing that comes to mind is the subject of our contract magic.

“...Tch, you noticed?”

“Why would you try to cheat me?!”

“I wasn’t really trying to cheat you. That was a test, to see whether or not you two could remember the contents of a contract you’ve signed. I wanted to see how you’d respond if you caught your partner in violation of the contract. Since you hadn’t said anything, I was wondering if you’d forgotten.”

He snorts dismissively, drumming his fingers on the top of his desk as he stares fixedly at me. After a brief moment of speechlessness, I lock eyes with him seriously.

“When you said that the initial investments were finished after we’d completed our prototypes, I thought to myself, ‘oh, I guess that’s what it was’. I never thought that you would try to cheat us, Mister Benno, and since the contract magic burned up the original written copy I had no way to check the terms for myself.”

He snorts again, his lips creeping up into a sneer.

“If the original contract got burned,” he replies, shrugging, “then you should have either written down a copy elsewhere or completely memorized it. You’re too naive.”

“...I’ll keep that in mind, sir.”

He’s not at all wrong. If you don’t get a copy of a contract, then it’s your job to either copy it down somewhere yourself or commit it to memory. I was just foolishly leaning

on the fact that I was told the penalties for breaking a magical contract were severe.

“Now that you’ve pointed that out, then, yeah, I’ll pay for the rest of the initial purchase.”

“You say you’ll pay for it *now*, but don’t we have a contract that says you needed to pay for it anyway? Wouldn’t that have been a breach of contract?”

I frown at him, lips pursed tightly together. Benno, however, smiles triumphantly, looking at me with a face full of joy.

“If I’d *said* that I wouldn’t, that would have been a violation. This one was your fault for not doing more research. If you asked me for something, I’d pay for it and, since I paid, there wouldn’t be a violation. If you’re going to be a merchant, you have to remember these things.”

“...Urgh...” His smirk grows only smugger when he sees how vexed I am. “If you’d read through all that information on contracts and *still* hadn’t noticed, I was planning on taking advantage of it even harder,” he laughs.

Since Benno so kindly gave me a hint so that I’d realize what was happening, I’m going to be optimistic about this and look at it as him trying to give me valuable training towards being a merchant... but vexing things are still so vexing.

Determined not to be fooled again, I go over the sheets again, paying much closer attention this time. When I’m in the middle, though, Benno suddenly stops working and calls out to me.

“Ah, that’s right. Maïne, can you accelerate the schedule on your winter handiwork?”
“My family’s already done with preparing for the winter, more-or-less, so I think that it might be possible, if we needed to?”

The amount of time it takes for my family to complete our winter preparations is largely determined by my father’s work schedule. Although every soldier at the gate needs to prepare for the winter, there’s no way that they can all simultaneously take leave of their posts to go do so, so they take turns taking days off in order to spread the workload. Last year, my father’s days off were very late in the season, so we were only just barely able to get things finished in time for the first snowfall, but this year we’ve finished with comparatively plenty of time to spare.

“Do you think you could make about, say, ten or twenty hairpins of different colors?”

The guild master's granddaughter has been bragging about hers, so I've had a lot of enquiries about them.... Including several that I can *not* turn down."

"I thought Frieda wanted to stand out by having the only one at the winter baptismal ceremony? Wouldn't doing this make hers less special?"

I tilt my head doubtfully to the side. Is it really okay to do this when the entire reason we overcharged her so much was because it was going to be special, I wonder?

Benno's eyes falter, just the tiniest bit. "...Hers are going to be the only ones that match her perfectly. The rest of them are going to be off the shelf, so that'll make hers just stand out even more. There's no problem."

"If there's no problem, then that's fine with me, but if you need these to be finished in a hurry, are you willing to pay for expedited service?"

He seems momentarily dumbfounded that I just demanded extra money from him. I smile sweetly back.

"Whenever and wherever you can take money, take it, it's something to be taken," I recite.

"Right? I'm studying under *you*, Mister Benno, trying to be a merchant like you are."

I chuckle to myself as Benno makes an unreasonably disgusted expression, his entire face pulling taut.

"Ten medium copper coins per hairpin. That's double what it was before, so there's no problems there, right?"

"That simply won't do. I must ask for either eleven or thirteen medium copper coins, if you would. I must consider the share of the profit that Lutz and I have previously agreed on with respect to the differences between the flower and the pin portions. If I don't, it would be very inconvenient for me."

We had previously told our families that the flower portions were worth two coins and the pins were worth one. Since Lutz and I are to split the remaining coin evenly, having an odd number of coins left to split would be, honestly, a bother.

"Can't be helped. Eleven it is. You're getting good at this," he says, ruefully.

"I am quite humbly delighted to be praised for such a small thing, sir."

"...Really, where *did* you learn to talk like that?" he murmurs, halfway between amazed and amused, and shrugs his shoulders.

“Ah, also,” I say, “I’d like one coin per hairpin I have to make right now. I’d prefer if this was prepayment, but if you need to take it out of my savings, that would be fine, too...”

“Alright, I don’t mind paying you in advance, but what’s this for?”

“To weave a spell of urgency,” I reply.

If I need to make ten of these before the snow starts to fall, then I need to enlist the cooperation of Tuuli and my mother and, in order to do that, I need to give them some motivation. My mother, in particular, has been doing winter handiwork for many years now, and knows just how large the payment I’m promising for each of these is, compared to other things she’s done. So, she has some doubts, somewhere: either we’re being deceived somehow, or even if we do make these we won’t get paid. If I can actually give them money for each of these they make, money that they can use right now for additional provisions, then not only can I earn their trust, but I can also boost their motivation as well.

A knock comes at the door, and Mark reenters the room.

“I’ve returned,” he says. “The firewood you ordered will arrive here by the time the gates close. Someone from the shop will deliver it to you tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you very much,” I reply.

“Now then, it’s very cold outside, so please take care.”

After Mark ushers me out of the shop, I see Lutz standing to the side, the basket on his back conspicuously empty. It seems that on the way to the lumberyard they stopped by the warehouse so that he could deposit the tronbay there. Ah, of course, no wonder that he wouldn’t have wanted to bring me along.

We walk slowly home, through streets that rapidly darken as the sun grows dim behind the horizon. It really *is* cold, so I want to hurry home as quickly as possible, but if I run as fast as my instincts tell me, it’s absolutely certain that I’ll get sick again.

As we plod onwards, I discuss with Lutz the plan for accelerating the schedule on our winter handiwork, telling him about how I secured an expedited delivery fee and my plans for getting my family to help so we can make it on time. Lutz nods once, then scrunches his eyebrows in concern.

“So, I’m not worried so much about what’s going to happen if I can’t get my family to help and I have to do everything by myself. It’s the tronbay I’m worried about.”

“The tronbay?”

I tilt my head to the side concernedly. Lutz lets out a huge sigh, his shoulders drooping.

“...Hey, Maïne. You’ve been told you can’t go to the forest anymore, so is there actually any way we can still prepare the tronbay? Am I really going to have to do it all by myself?”

“This time I think we can do it all in front of the warehouse, so I can help you there. Although, we’d have to be outside for at least a bell, so I don’t know what my family would say about that...”

There’s no way I can actually leave the town’s gates, but if we’re talking about doing something like going to Benno’s shop, the trip itself isn’t particularly difficult. The exposure to the cold, however, is the difficult part. If I’m outside for a long period of time, the chances of me getting sick are strikingly high.

“The warehouse... you mean we don’t have to go to the river?!”

His eyes have gone very round with shock. However, even if you think about it, asking him to carry the pot, the steamer, and the firewood to the forest all by himself would be completely unreasonable.

“Before, we were getting both our raw materials and the firewood out in the forest, so it was more efficient for us to do our work out there too, but this time, we already have the tronbay and the firewood here in the workshop, right? We don’t specifically need to go out to the forest for this, so we’d be overdoing it if we dragged everything all the way out there.”

“Ah, really? I was going to have to lug all of that stuff...”

It seems like he was so worried about the fact that he was going to have to work alone that he hadn’t even thought about the sheer quantity of stuff he was going to have to carry out to the forest.

“We won’t have river water to immediately dunk the wood into after it’s steamed, but the reason we do that is so that we can expose it to cold water in order to make it easier to peel the bark off. The water in the well should be more than cold enough this time of year. We’ll need to draw water from the well several times in order to make sure that the water we’re soaking the wood in doesn’t get lukewarm, but that’s way easier than going to the forest, right?”

However, Lutz's face grows even more gloomy. There's no way I could have allayed all his concerns in at once.

"That's... easier, but... what about after that? How are we going to preserve the bark?"
"If we could get all the way to preserving the white bark, that would be great, but it's not like it's impossible to preserve the black bark either. It might make stripping it off a little more difficult later, but in this weather me going to the forest is dangerous, and you even thinking about going into the river is suicidal, so let's stop there."

"Alright!"

With the final cause of his worries dispelled, Lutz looks ahead, face shining. He broadens his gait just a little bit as we walk, constantly repeating things like "oh man, I'm so happy, this is a huge relief".

When we get home, I'm going to need to ask Tuuli and my mother for help with the handiwork... and then we're steaming the wood tomorrow, huh...?

As I continue to plan out what I need to do after this, my thoughts begin to drift gradually off course, perhaps because I'm really hungry.

...And now that we have a steamer, I really want to eat some piping hot steamed sweet potato, ooh, or some fluffy buttery mashed potatoes. We don't have any sweet potato equivalent, but I'm pretty sure I can get a tuber around here that's enough like a potato. I'll get the potatoes, and Lutz can get the butter, so tomorrow we can have mashed potatoes, right? Aaah, that'll be so good! Mashed potatoes are great for warming up both your body and your soul. Yep, that's settled.

At some point, while I'm lost in my imagination, we arrive at the water well in front of our houses. Lutz stops walking and turns to look at me.

"Maïne, I'll go get the warehouse key from the shop, and then when the firewood arrives I'll come and get you. Wait at home until then, okay?"

"Got it. Remember to get the butter, too!"

I give him a huge wave, then disappear into my building. As I climb the stairs, I can hear Lutz's stunned voice echo in through the windows.

"Eh? What?! Butter?! What butter?! What do we need butter for?!"

Huh? Did I not tell him? Oops.

Chapter 46

We Made It At Once

As soon as we finish with dinner, my father heads immediately for bed, since he has to work the dawn shift tomorrow. In order to make sure we don't disturb him while he's trying to sleep, the rest of us relocate to the kitchen, where we can quietly busy ourselves with whatever work we can do, quietly, to kill time before we need to go to bed as well.

Now that my father's gone into the bedroom and started getting himself ready for bed, I jump right onto the topic of winter handiwork.

"So, today, Mister Benno told me that the hairpins we made for Freida were getting really famous, and there's a lot of people wanting to buy them, so he wanted to know if we could maybe get some of our winter handiwork done early. He says he wants more like Tuuli's hairpin."

"...Well, it's not like we *can't*, but..."

Tuuli and my mother exchange a glance, then frown doubtfully at me. The rest of that sentence is clearly written on their faces: it's not like they can't, but it would be way too much work to accelerate production enough. Their reaction is exactly what I expected, so I go fetch my tote bag and pull out the proof: two medium-copper coins, which jingle as I set them down on the table.

"It's just a little bit, but I was able to get him to let me hold onto some money in advance, so if you can get one done, I can pay you for it!"

In the next instant, the two of them abruptly stand up, their chairs clattering behind them, and move to the part of the table closest to the stove, where it's just a little bit brighter.

"Uh? What?"

I've suddenly been left behind, sitting dumfounded in my chair like an empty-headed fool. Meanwhile, Tuuli has dug out enough slender needles for the three of us, and my

mother has disappeared into the storeroom to fetch the basket full of thread. I'm a little overwhelmed by how perfectly in sync the two of them are, but I hop down from my chair and pull it over to the table. As it clatters along the floor behind me, my mother calls out to me.

"Maïne, do you have a sample we can base this off of?"

"Um? It's just like Tuuli's, I think?"

Reacting instantly to my words, Tuuli immediately spins around and heads to get her hairpin out of her wooden storage box. Thanks to her rustling about in the bedroom as she searches for her hairpin, I can hear my father groggily speak up.

"What's happening? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Gunther," replies my mother, calling to him from the kitchen. "Good night!"

By the time I've gotten my chair over the table and climbed up onto it, the preparations for our handiwork have been completed.

"Maïne," asks my mother, "what colors should we use?"

She rummages around within the basket of threads, but I haven't actually told her what colors to use yet. All I've said so far is that the design needs to be like Tuuli's hairpin.

"We don't know what the customers' hair color or favorite colors are, so Mister Benno told me that he wants ones with lots of different colors. Let's do these like Tuuli's and pick three colors, and make the same number of flowers."

"Got it. How about white, yellow, and red?"

"I think that'll be cute!"

The instant the words leave my mouth, my mother starts knitting ferociously. Since she helped make Tuuli's hairpin last winter, she already knows how to do it, and now she's working so very, very quickly. In the approximately fifteen minutes it takes me to knit one flower, she's churned out five. Soon, we've knitted four of each and turned it into a little bouquet.

"He'll be happy if there's a bunch of different ones to choose from, right? Maybe I should do white, yellow, and blue...? The same colors as mine. Maïne, what are you

gonna pick?”

Tuuli giggles happily to herself as she digs through the many different colors, picking out three that she likes. She seems very pleased with the hairpin that I'd made for her last year, which makes me happy as well.

“I think I'll do pink, red, and green. The green flowers are going to look like little leaves, which I think will be really cute.”

“Yeah! Really cute.... Hey, hey, Maïne, how do you make these?”

Tuuli, probably thinking that she'd better not disturb our mother as she single-mindedly weaves away, scoots her chair next to me, it clattering against the wooden floor. Since the hairpin that we're using as an example had been made for Tuuli's sake, she hadn't had any part in making it.

“Oh, it's not really that hard. So, you loop it like this, and then you thread it through like this...”

I explain to Tuuli how to weave these tiny flowers, demonstrating as I went. Since these are much simpler than the roses we made for Freida, Tuuli picked up on it immediately.

“Got it! Thanks, Maïne.”

She clatteringly drags her chair back to its original position, then starts quietly, steadily knitting. After a while, once I've finished my third flower, I glance up at the rest of the table, and am overwhelmed by the sheer difference in quantity. My mother has already finished enough little flower to make an entire hairpin, and Tuuli has six flowers rolling around in front of her.

Whoa, now *these* are some sewing beauties.

Both my mother and Tuuli move their hands so quickly that my own movements can't even compare. They can do these in practically the blink of an eye. I may be the one who brought this arts-and-crafts stuff here, but now I'm being outstripped in both speed of production and quality of product. I decide that, at the very least, whatever I make is not going to be obviously inferior to what they make when compared, and I start moving my needles again.

Ordinarily, winter handiwork is done while we're trapped inside by the snow and left with far, far too much time on our hands. It's something that we do because there's nothing else to do, and we idly chat with each other while doing it. Tonight, however, thanks to the gleam of the coins lined up on the table, the two of them are focusing their entire effort on knitting as quickly as they can, with not a single word coming out of their mouths.

"Alright, done! Now what, Maïne?"

I look up, startled by Tuuli's sparkingly enthusiastic voice, and see that she has twelve flowers lined up in front of her.

"Whoa, Tuuli, that was fast! You're really amazing. Ummm, after this, we sew them onto a bit of cloth... wait, argh, cloth! I didn't account for cloth!"

"Usually," my mother says, "we provide our own materials for winter handiwork, so it's okay if you use whatever scraps we have lying around here."

My mother has already retrieved a scrap of cloth and sewn her little flowers onto it, turning it into something that looks like a proper hairpin.

"...When I go see Mister Benno to collect the money for these, I'll put in a request for some cloth, too."

"He's already paying us two whole medium copper coins for each of these, so there's no need to go *that* far."

...What? Man, how unfair *is* ordinary winter handiwork?

Even as I was deciding for myself that I'd have added cloth to my calculations by the time winter rolls around and we get started in earnest, Tuuli has already brought a basket full of scrap cloth out of the storage room.

"Look at the one Mommy's finished as an example. Sew the flowers on, but don't put too many of the same color close together. If you sew everything together so that you can't see the cloth beneath, then it'll really look like a little bouquet of flowers."

"Got it, thanks!" replies Tuuli.

By the time Tuuli finishes putting together her second hairpin, it's almost about time to pack everything away for the evening. Ultimately, I was able to complete about half of the flowers for one hairpin, Tuuli made an entire pin herself, and my mother's

eighty percent along the way towards making her second.

“Now then, here is today’s pa~ay!”

“Woohoo!”

I hand the two of them two coins each, and put the two finished hairpins in my box for later.

“Alright now,” says my mother, “you two go to bed.”

“What about you, Mom?” asks Tuuli.

“I’ll just finish up this half-complete one here, first.”

She points at the eighty-percent completed hairpin in front of her with a grim smile. At her speed, she’ll be done in no time flat. Tuuli and I quietly head for bed, taking care not to wake our father in the process.

I wonder, though; why is it that by the time we wake up there are *two* finished hairpins sitting on top of the table?... You pulled an all-nighter, mother. Tuuli didn’t want to go to bed last night, so now she’s gonna be mad.

“Moooom, no fair! Why’d *you* get to stay up late?”

“Sorry, Tuuli. Now, it’s time for you to go to work! Take care, take care.”

Tuuli sulks furiously as my mother apologetically ushers her out the door. With an extremely disagreeable expression, she runs off, yelling “as soon as I get home I’m going to make *lots*, okay?” Once she’s gone, my mother hands me the two completed bouquets, and I give her four coins in return.

“Here’s the money, so that I don’t forget by the time you get home from work. I’m going to be going to Mister Benno’s shop again today. I’ve gotta go get the pin parts for these from Lutz, get them finished up, and get paid, otherwise I can’t get the rest of the money for you and Tuuli.”

“Alright. Take care of yourself today, Maïne! And say hello to Mister Benno for me.”

My mother tucks the coins into her coin purse, then starts heading out the door. “Let’s work hard tonight, too!” she says with a broad smile as she waves goodbye. She shuts the door behind her firmly, and I hear the clack of the lock as she turns it. I keep smilingly waving goodbye until I hear her footsteps fade away, then let out an exhausted sigh.

Crap. The power of money is *way* too strong. I hadn't thought I'd get anywhere close to this kind of speedup. The fact that my mother would stay up so late to keep working was far beyond my expectations. If I don't get these hairpins finished up and sold so that I can replenish my cash reserves, I'm going to be in serious trouble tonight.

"Well, first things first, we gotta peel off all the tronbay bark, though."

I have no idea when Lutz will be by to come pick me up, so I start making sure that I've got everything ready to head out on a moment's notice. First off, I collect a couple of the potato-like kalfe roots. Then, I grab my slate, slate pencils, and calculator so that we can study while the bark is steaming. Since we're going to Benno's afterwards, I make sure not to forget to bring my ordering set, too. Finally, In order to complete my own half-finished hairpin, I grab my knitting needles and thread, my seven already-done flowers, a scrap of cloth, and a needle and thread for sewing everything together.

I pass the time waiting for Lutz to arrive by working on more flowers, my needles making tiny little movements as I knit. After I manage to finish two, I hear a pounding at the door, followed by Lutz calling out, "Maïne, you home?"

"Good morning, Lutz! Hey, about those pins, did you finish any?"

"I got five done so far...?"

"Bring all of them with us. I'm bringing my needles and thread too. We can finish these up while we're steaming. We *have* to sell these to Mister Benno tonight."

When I mumble that we wound up finishing four of them last night, Lutz's eyes go wide.

"Wh... That's way too fast, though?! I thought you said those flowers were super hard to make and took a crazy long time..."

"Yeah, I had no idea they'd get done so quickly, either, so I'm honestly in a bit of a hurry now."

"...Got it. You just need me to bring the pins, right? Anything else?"

There is one more thing that Lutz absolutely cannot forget to bring today.

"What about the butter? Did you get any?"

"So I didn't hear you wrong, huh... I'll go get some. Wait downstairs for me after you lock up, okay?"

It seems that, somehow, he hasn't prepared any. That was a close call, I nearly missed out on being able to eat steamed, buttered potatoes. I wave as Lutz deftly runs down the stairs, gather up the things I'd prepared, and head outside.

"Man, it's cold..."

There's no sign of anyone else around our warehouse, which is piercingly cold, overpowering the warmth of the clear sunlight shining down. Since there's no hearth inside the warehouse that we can light a fire in, we get set up right in front of the warehouse so that we can steam the tronbay and strip off the bark.

After we put our bags inside, Lutz piles up some rocks to make a stove and sets the pot on top of it while I line up pieces of tronbay inside our steamer. In no time flat, though, the steamer fills up completely.

"Lutz, looks like we're going to need another steamer."

"I'll go get it."

Previously, all we were doing was working on prototypes, so we never really needed to steam that much wood at once. However, this time, we need to steam all of the raw material that we have on hand. Since we'd had another steamer ready from the start so we could steam two layers at once, Lutz kindly goes to retrieve it for me.

"These okay to put on the pot yet?"

"Yeah, I'm just about finished getting this wood stacked up in it."

While Lutz gets the steamers situated on top of the pot, I stack up the rest of the tronbay. Then, I take the two kalfe roots I brought with me and make a cross-shaped cut on each of them with my knife so that the heat can get into them better, then I line them up in the steamer with the wood. Once these steam for about twenty minutes, I'll finally be able to eat delicious, buttery, steamed potatoes (although they're not actually potatoes).

Sitting in front of the pot, close to the fire, I get back to work on making tiny flowers. Since it takes me about fifteen minutes to make each flower, by the time I'm finished up, plus the time it'll take to get everything squared away, the tubers should be just about finished.

“Lutz, could you get some of the leftover bamboo in the warehouse and make me a couple long sticks? Pointy ones, pointier than the ones you made last time.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Why, you ask? I need them to check to see if the *‘battered potatoes’* are done.”

“Um? Hey, Maïne, what are you up to?”

“Oh, I just wanna eat some food you need a steamer to make... do you not want any, Lutz?”

“If it’s food then I want it! You mean *‘buttah’d poh-tay-toes’* are food?!”

Ah, that’s right, I must not have explained what battered potatoes are. Although, there’s already cooking here involving sautéing tubers in butter, so they should be something he could be eating regularly.

Now that he knows that there’s food in the steamer too, Lutz cheerfully makes me a pair of bamboo skewers.

“Hey, Maïne. These *‘buttah’d poh-tay-toes’*, are they tasty?”

“I really like them, myself. I think it’s something you’ve probably already tasted before, though?”

Since it takes far longer for the pot to actually come to a boil than I originally expected, I wait until I’ve finished two flowers, instead of just one, then check on the status of the tubers.

“Alright, Lutz. Get that lid off!”

Standing on top of Ralph’s failed something-or-other, I brandish the skewers tightly in my right hand while gripping my cooking chopsticks in my left, waiting for Lutz to take the lid off the steamer.

“Maïne don’t stick your face too close!”

As soon as Lutz removes the lid, a huge burst of steam leaps out of the steamer. As soon as the scalding vapor clears away and I can see inside, I see the two tubers resting on top of the tronbay, tinted a vibrant golden brown. With my right hand, I carefully insert the skewers into each of the tubers. They come back out easily without the potatoes breaking apart, so I think they’re done pretty well. I swap the chopsticks in my left hand with the skewers in my right, and get them ready.

“Lutz, I need a plate!”

“You think this place *has* any?!”

“That board over there’s fine, bring that over! Then get the butter ready.”

“Maybe you should have done this instead of making decorations!”

“Ngh, you’re right...” I say, ashamed.

As soon as I lift both of the tubers out of the steamer and set them down on the board, I have Lutz immediately put the lid back on the steamer. I hop down from my makeshift step stool, then immediately widen the cross-shaped cuts on each of them and shove butter inside. The butter melts into the soft flesh of the tubers immediately, and the scent it gives off is irresistible.

I’ve been getting more and more excited as these get closer and closer to completion. Lutz, on the other hand, merely looked disappointed as soon as he saw what I took out of the steamer.

“...Hey, those are just kalfe roots. I had really high hopes, since it’s your cooking...”

It seems that he’s disappointed that this is something he’s eaten before. Kalfe roots are a very common crop in the nearby areas, so they’re an ingredient that shows up on everyone’s dining tables very frequently. I wonder if he’s tired of them? I can see how he’d be disappointed; this is extremely simple cooking. I didn’t even peel them first.

“Right, right! These are just kalfe roots cooked with butter, and you’ve eaten lots of these before, right? So you don’t need to eat one, do you?”

“...I’ll eat it.”

I ignore Lutz as he grumbles to himself, quickly peeling the skin off the very top of the tuber. I wrap my hand in my apron so that it doesn’t get scalded, and pick it up. I bring the steaming potato up to my mouth, open wide, and take an enormous bite.

The surface of the tuber had cooled down quickly thanks to the frigid air, but the insides are piping hot as they melt within my mouth. Since they were steamed with the tronbay, they taste faintly of wood, like they were smoked. This flavor has intertwined with the savoriness of the butter, making a flavor that’s nothing like anything I could find at home.

“Mmm... ,” I say, squirming in pleasure at the taste. Lutz, next to me, simply lets out a

sigh, breath white in the cold air, then takes a bite of his own tuber. Immediately, his eyes fly wide open, and he stares in shock at the tuber. He looks back and forth between me and his food, looking like I'd tricked him somehow. Tilting his head in confusion, he takes another bite.

"...This is *good!* What is this?! This tastes totally different from the boiled kalfe root we eat at home!"

"It's because they're steamed. All the nutrients and flavor are locked in there by the steam. Today, since we steamed them with the tronbay too, it picked up the flavor of that too, like if we smoked it, so it has a really luxurious sort of taste."



While we gleefully dig into our kalfe roots, I tell Lutz about what what happened last night while we were working on the hairpins.

“...So, yeah, Tuuli and Mommy were really amazing last night. They’re really fired up about tonight, too. I couldn’t even get one done, though, so I got reminded about how useless I really am, hah.”

“Don’t get too proud.”

“How about you, Lutz? How’d it go?”

Lutz, who’s finished his entire kalfe root already, sadly licks the last remnants from his fingers, then shakes his head grimly.

“Nobody seemed to have any interest in anything I was doing, so even when I asked them for help, they all just pretended to ignore me.”

“I see. Well, how about I come to your house today and cast my magic spell?”

“Magic spell?”

“Yup! Once we get our money from Mister Benno, I’ll go home with you, so look forward to it!”

Now that we’re done eating, I ask Lutz to draw some water from the well, then wash my hands and rinse out my mouth. Then, I take out the calculator that I’d brought and set it in front of Lutz.

“Ummm, so, today, we have four completed hairpins to sell.” Since we’re discussing business, I make sure to speak clearly and politely for Lutz. “Yesterday, Mister Benno paid us for one in advance, so today we will be paid for three. Each hairpin earns us eleven medium copper coins. Now then, how much money will we make today?”

As I explain the problem, Lutz listens with a serious expression, moving his fingers across the beads of the calculator.

“Thirty-three!”

“Correct! Well done, Lutz! Next, we’ve already established that you need to make twenty total pins. Yesterday, you made five. How many do you have left to make?”

As I thought, Lutz gets frustrated when doing calculations that involve carrying or borrowing numbers, even when he has a calculator to help him, because they can’t be done immediately. If he can’t learn how to do single-digit calculations automatically in his head, these things will take a while even if he has a calculator, so for now I take

away the calculator, write a bunch of numbers on my slate, and have him start working on practicing addition.

“Let’s just work on memorizing this,” I say, speaking casually again. “You gotta get fast enough at this that you can answer immediately when asked something.”

Lutz grumbles, but gets to work studying. Meanwhile, I sit down next to him and work on finishing up my hairpin. By the time it’s done, it’s nearly noon, and the tronbay has finished steaming.

“Lutz, once I get each of these in the water, take them out please.”

One by one, I use my chopsticks to place the steamed sticks of tronbay into the tub full of water from the well. They hiss with steam as I push them down into the water, then Lutz takes them out and puts them onto a nearby board. Since this isn’t flowing river water, the water in the tub quickly warms up.

“The water’s getting pretty warm,” says Lutz. “One sec.”

While I wait for Lutz to draw fresh water from the well to refill the tub, I sit down and start working on stripping bark from each stick. Once the tub is full, I go back to soaking new sticks. This repeats for some time. After all of the wood has been removed from the steamer, I steadily keep working on stripping bark while the wood is still warm, and Lutz cleans up the pot and steamer. Finally, we hang the strips of bark from nails in the warehouse to dry, and our work for the day is complete.

“Woohoo, all done!”

“Alright, cleanup’s all done too!”

Since I’d been stripping hot bark for so long, even after hanging everything out to dry my fingers are still prickling with heat. The cool air feels really nice on them right now. I take in a deep breath, filling my lungs with the cool, crisp air.

“...Huh?”

I’m not despairing over anything. I’m not anxious about anything. All I feel right now is the relief and sense of freedom you feel after finishing a difficult task.

Even still, the devouring fever rages within me. Reflexively, I turn all of my strength

inwards, focusing on pinning it down again.

“Whoa, Maïne?!”

Since I’ve suddenly gone rigid in front of him, Lutz shakes me frantically. I want to tell him that I’m trying to concentrate and that I want him to stop, but I’m struggling so hard against the pain that I can’t form any words. I shakily reach out my right hand and catch one of his. He grabs onto it tightly with both hands.

“What the...? You’re burning up?! Maïne, are you alright? Can you hear me?!”

I focus on my tightly-squeezed hand, struggling to shut down the fever as I’ve done so many times before. Even though I’ve been imagining building a strong wall around my inner core to keep it shut in, this time a fragment of it managed to penetrate straight through.

Get back *in there!*

I manage to force the last embers of it back down into the depths of my heart, but I think this time is the longest it’s ever taken me.

Immediately after my fever goes away, I’m suddenly weighed down by fatigue so heavy that I don’t even want to move my mouth to speak. I don’t really have the strength to stand anymore, so I sit down on the spot. Lutz, still holding tightly to my hand, is pulled along, crouching beside me.

“Huh? Your fever... went down? What the hell is this? Hey! Maïne! Are you okay?!”

“...That was... the devouring. You know, the thing Frieda was talking about?”

I let out an enormous sigh as I answer, and Lutz frowns worriedly.

“Wait, hang on. You’re saying that there’s no sign at all that you’re suddenly about to get really sick?”

“It comes really quickly. Until now, it’s only happened when I’m feeling really strong emotions, but lately even the tiniest flicker of emotion seems to let it out... man, that startled me.”

I really *was* startled, but I picked such an ordinary word to finish that off with to try to lessen the raw shock of it all. Lutz, though, still looks like he’s almost about to cry, still

clutching my hand tightly. Trying to give him at least a little peace of mind, I smile broadly up at him.

“Is there... anything you can do?”

“...Frieda told us already, didn't she? It takes a huge amount of money. Mister Benno said the same thing.”

The blood instantly drains from his face, leaving him white as a sheet.

“And, since that's that, shall we go to Mister Benno's shop now so that we can earn a little money?”

I show him a happy smile, hiding the honest fact that putting in any large amount of physical effort would be intensely difficult. Lutz clenches his teeth tightly, then lets go of my hand and spins around so that his back is facing me.

“I'll carry you to the shop.... It's all I can do, after all.”

“It's all you can do? Don't you already do a lot for me, though?”

“Argh, just get on!”

I hear a quaver in his voice as he's urging me on. I pretend not to hear it, though, and lean against his back, draping my arms over his shoulders.

Man, I'm beat, I think to myself.

Back when I was Urano, living life without ever looking up from my books, I'd never had a friend who'd cry for me like this. I don't know if saying anything now is the right thing to do here. I've read about it in books, but I'm still not sure at all.

Lutz, you're too kind. No matter how useless I am, you stay with me. I'm not even the real Maïne, and you know that, but you've forgiven me.

“If I ever pass out from the devouring, Lutz, it's not your fault at all. It really, really does come without any warning.... And there's no way I'm gonna lose anytime soon. I haven't made a single book yet.”

I can hear Lutz sniffle, but he doesn't reply.

Chapter 47

Interlude: The Power of Money

“If I ever pass out from the devouring, Lutz, it’s not your fault at all. It really, really does come without any warning.... And there’s no way I’m gonna lose anytime soon. I haven’t made a single book yet.”

Maïne’s voice is quiet, right next to my ear, as she tries to reassure me.

I don’t want her to see my miserable, crying face, so I’m carrying her on my back. However, since I’m doing so, I don’t have a free hand to wipe the tears running down my face. One by one, the teardrops fall onto Maïne’s sleeve, leaving little wet spots.

I want to help her, but I can’t. I can only grit my teeth at how powerless I am.

Maïne always keeps saying that she’s completely useless, but I don’t know what I’d do without her.

When I said I wanted to become a trader, my family disregarded it completely, telling me not to be ridiculous, but Maïne just smiled and told me to follow my dream. When I was first introduced to Benno, I was so terrified that I wanted to flee on the spot, but Maïne held my hand and helped me through it. When there wasn’t anything I could do on my own, Maïne stuck with me, helping me think and helping me act so that I could become an apprentice. Even now, when I’m wondering if it’s even a good idea for me to become a merchant, Maïne’s teaching me how to write, how to read numbers, how to do math, how to think about money... everything.

And despite all that, there’s nothing I can do to help her when she’s suffering from the devouring.

I don’t have the kind of money to help her. I’ve started to earn a little bit of money, but all that was things that she thought of. If I hadn’t helped her, if she was stronger, if she’d gotten more help from the adults, I wonder if she’d have been able to make paper a lot faster and earn a lot more money? If that’s the case, would she have made enough money to save herself?

I can't think about anything else. I'm so weak that I'm miserable, regretful... shameful.

If I wasn't a kid, if I was an adult, I wonder if I'd be able to help her? If I was a merchant like Master Benno, if I had that kind of money, maybe I...

I swallow everything down, grit my teeth, and keep walking forward, Maïne on my back. If there's anyone who can help Maïne, anyone who has enough influence and money to help Maïne, I'll find them at Benno's.

Master Benno will surely save Maïne. He knows just how much the things Maïne can make are worth, so I'm positive he'll help.



When we arrive at the store, Mark and Benno are lying in wait for us. Mark has a worried look on his face while Benno is scowling unpleasantly. Since I still haven't been able to wipe away my tears, I hang my head low, not wanting them to see my soggy, miserable face. As I stare down at the ground, the tips of Benno's shoes come into view.

He sighs heavily. "...this kid."

I thought he'd just walked up to sigh at us, but suddenly all the weight disappeared from my back.

"Eeek?!" cries Maïne, startled.

I snap my head up to see Benno hold Maïne up roughly and then *toss* her over to Mark. My heart nearly jumps out of my chest when I see Maïne hurtling through empty air.

"Wh...?!"

"Whoa?!" exclaims Mark.

As soon as I'm sure that Mark's caught her securely, I allow myself a moment of relief before turning to face Benno angrily. The instant before I start to yell "what are you doing to a sick little girl?!", he jerks his chin towards the shop.

"Lutz, let's go. You and me."

I open and close my mouth wordlessly, my fervor suddenly evaporating, then follow Benno into the shop. As I try to convince myself that there's no problem entrusting her to Mark, or at least that it's far better than letting Benno take care of her, I hear the door close behind me and frantically wipe my face clean with my sleeve.

Benno motions to the table we always use. As soon as I sit down, he fixes his glimmering, reddish-brown eyes on me. He studies me from head to toe, then opens his mouth.

"...Was it the devouring?"

"How did you..."

"Despite the fact that you were carrying her, Maïne seemed to be doing pretty well. I thought that her fever must have suddenly spiked and then gone down again just as suddenly. You're together all the time, but is this your first time seeing that?"

I nod, gulping. Even though I've been by Maïne's side whenever we went to the forest, went to the store, and worked on making paper, this is my first time actually seeing the symptoms of the devouring manifest.

There wasn't a single sign that her condition was worsening, but suddenly she got a fever so hot that I wondered if her body was going to melt. Something wispy and yellow drifted off from her, like steam rising from her whole body. It was astoundingly terrifying.

"Master Benno, please, help Maïne. I can't do anything. I'm just a kid, I don't have any money, I can't do anything..."

"I can't."

In a quiet voice, Benno immediately shoots down my request.

"Why?! You're a grown-up, you have money, you do a lot of business with the noblemen..."

As I desperately make my argument, Benno's face twists as if in pain, or regret. Grinding his teeth, he shakes his head.

"I told you my business was rapidly growing. When it comes to trading with the nobility, I'm a newcomer on the scene, relatively speaking. I don't have many

connections. I'm still at a point where they see me as someone at their feet, ready to be ripped off.... I can't do anything, either."

"Master Benno... even you can't...?"

I'm left speechless by Benno's completely unexpected words. Benno, who owns this huge shop, who does business with the nobility, is saying that he's powerless to help Maïne; is curing the devouring completely impossible? As everything in front of me starts to grow dim, I remember the one person I know of who *has* been cured.

"But, I thought Frieda was cured... then maybe the guild leader...!"

"I already talked with him."

"Huh?"

Benno takes a shallow breath, then reaches up to scratch at his head. A wry, sarcastic smile floats over his troubled face, and he shrugs.

"He said that, if you have money, you can temporarily stave it off. Since he's willing to spend any amount of money so that his granddaughter could keep living, he's been working with a disgraced noble family this entire time, constantly paying them to use a broken magical tool. Using it just *once* costs him two small gold coins."

"G... gold?!"

When I got the one small silver coin for selling that paper, I'd been so thrilled at how much money I'd just earned, but it seems like Maïne needs gold, not just silver. The thought of such an unattainable amount of money makes my head spin.

"However, even that's only enough to buy about a half year's worth of time. Even if I spent that much money once to keep her alive, I'd have to spend it again before you know it. Maïne, especially, is very young. As she grows up, the symptoms of the devouring are only going to get worse, and more and more frequent. You think I have that much money to spend on a single apprentice? It's impossible, for me."

If what Benno's saying is right, then it really is impossible. There's no way he'd be able to spend that kind of money. However, just saying it's impossible and giving up is giving up on Maïne's *life*.

"There's not much I can do," he says. "I can buy the unusual knowledge that she has from her, giving her some gold to make up for it. When it starts to get too bad to deal with, I'll probably hand her over to that old bastard.... So, what can *you* do?"

Benno stares at me with sharp, predatory eyes. Without thinking about it, I glare back at him. He's an adult, with power, brains, money, and *everything*, and he still can't do anything to help Maine. What could *I* possibly do?

"...I can't do anything at all. I'm just a kid. I'm not strong, I'm not smart, I don't have any money... if there's something I can do, tell me, please."

"Don't make her have to look after you. Don't make her *worry*."

"Wh...?!"

His immediate response makes my breath catch in my throat. He's hit the target so cleanly that I have no way to respond at all. My eyes grow hot with chagrin. Benno's facial expression softens a just a little bit, but his eyes are still sharp as he opens his mouth to speak.

"Listen up, Lutz. That kid out there is not the little girl she seems to be. At the *very* least, even when she's suffering, she doesn't want to make you worry, so she puts on a brave smile for you. Make sure you don't let her trick you with that."

I remember that after the devouring fever went back down down, when her breathing was still heavy and ragged, she had a bright, happy smile on her face. Seeing her smiling like that really did make me feel relieved, but it looks like maybe that was a mistake.

"You're a man, so don't give her anything else to worry about. You can't pretend like you don't know anything, so cooperate with her so that she can buy herself a little more time to live. If you're going to say grandiose things like 'I'm going to make whatever Maine comes up with', then take every single one of her ideas, make them, and sell them! If you've got time to *cry*, then you've got time to *think*. You've got time to *work*. Make some money!"

"...Alright."

I raise my head, full of determination, and Benno's lips stretch into a broad grin.

"Now *that's* the right kind of face, hm?"



“Oh, Lutz!” says Maïne. “You done with your conversation? Look, look! I finished up getting us paid for the hairpins we brought today.”

She’s smiling, as usual, as I come out of Benno’s office to meet her. She has a very carefree expression on, but when I remember Benno’s advice and look more closely I can see that despite her smile there’s a hint of worry in her eyes. Feeling like I should be scolding myself for making her worry, I put on a smile, refusing to be defeated.

“That’s a *lot*,” I enthuse.

“I think we’ll be good for about two or three more days with this.”

“Two or three?!”

“Honestly, I have no idea just how far my mother’s going to rampage through this project, and Tuuli’s just as fired up as my mother is...”

As we banter back and forth, I can see Maïne start to loosen up, bit by bit. I think I probably managed to give her a little bit of peace of mind. Behind me, Benno comes out of his office with his usual stern expression, shrugging his shoulders.

“Don’t just chit-chat in my shop. If you’re done with your business here, then go straight home and, Maïne, get right to bed. Lutz says you’re not a hundred percent right now.”

As Benno waves his hands to shoo us out of his shop, he seems to suddenly think of something and amends his previous statement.

“Mark, go with these two. It’s dangerous for kids like these to be walking around with that kind of money.”

“Certainly, sir.”

In order to make it easy to pay Tuuli and the others, Maïne got all of the money in medium copper coins. Since there’s thirty-three of them, they’ll probably jangle loudly when we walk around. If unbaptized children such as ourselves carry around that kind of money, then, of course, we’d be incredibly conspicuous.

Now that the danger of being robbed or attacked has been pointed out to her, Maïne forgoes her usual “no thank you, it’s all right” routine and obediently offers the bag of money to Mark. Mark exchanges a brief look with Benno, then reaches down to pick

up both the bag and Maïne herself.

“I-I can walk on my own!!”

“Were you not just carried here by Lutz, Maïne? You’re such a good girl, so please come along quietly so that the rest of us can rest easily.”

“Nnngh...”

Maïne, having lost any means of resistance, stops struggling and just hangs her head. It seems like she doesn’t have any way to fight against Mark’s gentle words.

This is a good discovery. I should work quickly to learn how to talk like Mark.



On the way home, Maïne and Mark discuss things like how to handle the winter handiwork and how to manage the finished products. I pay close attention, since I’m going to be doing the exact same thing too.

I thought that we were going to go our separate ways when we reached the plaza with our water well, but Mark doesn’t put Maïne down, saying that he’ll bring the money all the way to her home and explain things to her family. I part ways with the two of them, deeply appreciative of how considerate Mark is.

“Lutz, I’ll stop by later,” says Maïne.

I wave goodbye at them as they head into the building, then I turn towards my own home. My feet suddenly feel like lead weights as I drag myself forwards.

“I’m home,” I say, as I close the door behind me.

“What, empty handed today?”

Zasha, my oldest brother, looks me up and down, raising an eyebrow. For unbaptized kids like me, going to gather things from the forest is effectively a full-time job, but since I’ve lately been going to Benno’s shop a lot, I haven’t been able to do enough gathering. My family, I know, doesn’t actually care about the circumstances why.

“Seriously. You didn’t even go earn any money, huh?”

If I’d come back with some money, things might have been a little better, but only a

little. Ralph really doesn't like how much money I've made in such a short period of time, and lately he's been really strict with me.

I put my things in my room, lie down on my bed, and let out a long sigh. Ever since I started saying that I wanted to be a merchant, everyone in my family has been uncomfortably icy towards me. I know that if I just said I was going to give up on that and be a craftsman instead, things would instantly improve, but I also know that I'd regret that forever.

Knock, knock!

"Good afternoon, Miss Carla. Is Lutz here?"

"Oh, Maïne! It's good to see you. I just heard him come home a little while ago... Lutz, Maïne's here!"

At the sound of my mother's voice, all of my older brothers immediately rush forward, dragged by Maïne's invisible grip on their stomachs. By the time I manage to make it out of my room, she's already been completely surrounded to the point that I can't even see her anymore.

"What's up? Do you have a new recipe?"

"I'll help! What do you need?"

"Nuh-uh," she says, "not today. I'm just here to pay Lutz what I owe him."

"You owe him?"

"Yep! He helped me with my winter handiwork, so I owe him for that."

Maïne squeezes her way out of the crowd and walks up to me, with the kind of self-satisfied smirk she gets when she's scheming something. "Lutz, your hand, please," she says, and I stick it out. Then, she exaggeratedly places coins into the palm of my hand, one by one.

"You helped with five pins, so I owe you five medium copper coins. One, two, three, four, five. That's right, right?"

"Yeah."

The coins clink against each other as she places them into my hand, and I'm suddenly aware that the gazes of all of my older brothers are firmly fixed to the spot. My palm seems to tingle under the pressure of their stares, and I hear someone gulp nervously.

“Hey, Maïne. You said Lutz helped you, was that those sticks he was making yesterday?”

Maïne, waiting for Ralph to say those exact words, puts on a sweet, but very, very forced, smile.

“That’s right! I’m making hairpins, so I asked him to help with the pin part. One pin is one medium copper coin.”

“*That’s worth that much?!*”

Zasha’s eyes fly wide open, staring again at the coins in my palm. Zeke, his doubts seemingly erased now that he actually sees me holding money, takes a sharp breath and looks over at Maïne.

“...Does it have to be Lutz that does it? Can I help too?”

Zeke is the one to ask the question, but it’s on all of my brothers’ minds. All of them turn to look at her. She looks back at them easily, smiling and nodding.

“No, it doesn’t really have to be Lutz. But, they need to be a specific size, and they need to be polished really smooth so that they don’t catch in anyone’s hair, so it’s not really casual work, you know?”

As soon as my brothers hear those words, they all scramble to be the first to talk themselves up.

“Maïne, Maïne. I’m way better at woodworking and carpentry than Lutz is. I do it every day at my job, you know.”

“Me, I’m definitely better than Lutz.”

“If we’re talking about experience, then I’ve got the most of it, right?”

Whoa, whoa, wait a minute, guys. Who was it yesterday that told me I should go off and make those boring little sticks all by myself?

“Oh man, I can’t believe we were so stupid yesterday!”

“Lutz, why didn’t you tell us you were getting paid for these?”

“Were you going to hog all the money for yourself?”

I’m pretty sure I told them about it, but they probably ignored me, thinking I was

making things up. My brothers' memories have been repainted by the power of cold, hard cash, making me into the bad guy here. All of my brothers are staring at me with a dangerous look in their eyes, and I'm suddenly extremely aware of how terrifying money can be. As my brothers start closing in around me, Maïne claps her hands together.

"So, would you three make them for me, then? I'd need five from each of you. If you make more than that, I won't be able to use them. I'll be back in three days to get them, okay?"

"Yeah, leave it to me!"

"I don't even *need* three days."

"I can do them right away."

Maïne holds up a single finger, grinning impishly.

"Precision is more important than speed! If you don't make them exactly, I won't be able to use them and you'll have to redo them.... Oh, right! You should ask Lutz about how big they need to be and what kind of wood you should be using. Okay then, I'll see you guys in three days to pick these up!"

My brothers, with big smiles on their faces, wave to Maïne as she heads out the door. The instant the door shuts behind her, though, their attitudes immediately change. They grab onto me tightly and drag me to our room.

"So, what kind of wood do we need?"

"How big are they?"

"You're not getting *anything* this time, heh."

Their tools are already in their hands as they close in around me, demanding an explanation. I'm left dumbfounded by their complete and utter turnaround from yesterday, where they didn't even bother paying attention to what I was doing.

"Don't just *stand* there!"

"Tell us, quickly!"

"O... okay!"

I answer all the questions they have about the kinds of wood and how to make them, and they immediately set to work. In the blink of an eye, I've been completely tossed

aside. Then, most frustratingly, my brothers start immediately churning out beautiful hairpins, far faster than I could have made them, thanks to their job experience.

Ah. Is this how Maïne feels when she's always saying she isn't good for anything?

I, having been forgotten in a corner, get out my slate and calculator. This is something that I should be doing. I can leave the crafting to the craftsmen.

On our way home, Maïne had told me to do three things.

First, on a board, I should make a note of the number of pins that we make. Then, I should make sure that I keep that board hidden securely, so that nobody can arbitrarily add more to it. Lastly, I should use my calculator to work out what my total commission on these is, remembering that my commission for each pin is four medium copper coins.

"Aha, done!"

"Man, I'm way ahead of you."

"Ralph, that looks kinda sloppy. If you don't do it right, Maïne can't use it, right?"

From the sounds of it, my brothers have started competing to see who can make them the best.

"Lutz, how's this look?"

"...Yeah, that looks great! Good job, Zasha."

Zasha has finished one, so I've made four coins.

"Look, I'm done too!"

"That's perfect, Zeke!"

Zeke finished another, so now I'm up to eight.

While I'm sitting here practicing my writing, I'm not actually making anything myself, but when see my commission fees steadily ticking up on my calculator I suddenly understand.

Now *this* is being a merchant, huh? Now that I've seen the power of money firsthand, my desire to know how to handle it well has only been strengthened.

Chapter 48

Maine Collapses

It's been three days since Lutz's older brothers promised to make hairpin parts for me. Today is the day I go to pick them up.

During those three days, I didn't leave the house at all, spending my hours working on making tiny little flowers. Since the devouring fever has been very active lately, roiling about in my body, I've not been feeling particularly good, so I haven't really wanted to go outside at all. I've even been attacked by the fever in the middle of the night, leaving me exhausted and sluggish the next morning. Honestly, since I have no idea when or where the devouring is going to strike next, I'm feeling kind of uneasy about how I could collapse at any time.

While secluded at home for the last few days, I managed to complete enough flowers for two hairpins. If you include the one I made before, I was only able to make three out of the whole twenty. All the rest were made by my mother and Tuuli. The sheer difference in speed is pretty depressing. The two of them, as before, seemed to race against each other while making their flowers. Tuuli's speed has improved immensely by now, and between the two of them they made twelve more pins' worth of flowers over the last three days. Right now, they've split up the work to get the last pin finished.

"I'm gonna go over to Lutz's house now. I gotta go pick up the pins and give them their money," I say.

"Have fun," say the two of them, in monotone unison. Neither of them even look up, they're so engaged in their work.

I put fifteen medium copper coins in a small coin purse and walk out the front door. I head down the stairs, exit the building, walk through the water well plaza, start climbing the stairs of the building that's basically in the front.

Lutz's home is on the sixth floor, but they've rented two floors' worth of space. There's lots of stairways, and going up and down them is really difficult, but the interior is spacious. Even though there's four boys living there, it's not actually that cramped. Lutz, however, says that it's full of all sorts of craftsman's tools and there's a lot of

space set aside for work, so it's not really as big as it sounds.

I knock on the door and announce myself, and after a moment the door swings open with a creak, revealing Auntie Carla.

"Good afternoon, Auntie Carla. Are the boys home? I'm here to pick up some handiwork that I asked them to make for me."

"They are!" she says, beaming. "They've been waiting restlessly for you all morning."

Once she says that, her face darkens a bit. She furtively glances around a bit, then leans in, speaking in a lower voice.

"...Hey, Maïne. Lutz is really serious about being a merchant, isn't he? He's being *very* stubborn, so the mood in the house has been pretty bad lately. Even still, he doesn't look like he's going to back down. Wanting to be a merchant isn't something to tear up a family over! Don't you agree?"

I'd already heard from Lutz that things weren't going particularly well for him at home, but this looks more serious than I'd thought. He may be worried, but Lutz does not back down. After all, he's already made up his mind that he's going to be a live-in apprentice if he has to.

"I don't think I can answer that, Auntie Carla. Lutz is the one who'd make that decision, you know?"

An outsider like me butting into a parent-child dispute is only going to sow more discord, so I just tilt my head doubtfully to one side. Carla, having not gotten the agreement she was looking for, frowns sourly, her lips pointed.

"Well, I guess you're right. If I'd had a girl, *she'd* do what her parents said, but boys just don't listen to anything. They're so disagreeable."

Well, as for me, I have no real intention of living my life like my parents want me to. I'll just keep that to myself, though.

Auntie Carla's grumblings show no signs of stopping. Her sons, very much used to how troublesome their mother's ranting could be, stay out of sight lest they get dragged up into it, and Auntie Carla hasn't yet invited me inside. I should just politely agree with her and head her off before she gets really going. Unlike the older ladies who are more

than willing to have long conversations outside by the water well as snow piles up around them, I have no particular desire to stand here and chat in this freezing entranceway.

“It must be rough living with four boys, Auntie Carla.”

“It is! And they don’t even appreciate how hard they’re making it on me. You know, the other day...”

Ahh... crap. I have a feeling I’m going to be out here forever.

At about the time I start to wonder if I should just start over entirely, I hear Lutz call out from within the house.

“Hey, Mom. Didn’t Maïne come to pick up that handiwork? She needs to get it before the snow starts falling, so I think she’s in a bit of a rush. It’s also really easy for her to get sick, so let her in, please!”

“Ah, that’s right. Come in, Maïne.”

“Thank you,” I say.

Lutz and I exchange glances. *You seriously saved me, thank you so much*, I say silently. *Sorry my mom talks so much*, he replies.

Finally, I’m able to enter Lutz’s house. It really is warm in here compared to outside.

“Lutz,” I say, “did your big brothers finish their work? And did you make sure to practice your math?”

“Yeah.”

“...Maïne, are *you* perhaps the one teaching Lutz how to do math?”

Lutz’s mother, seemingly having listened in on our conversation, asks that question in a somewhat pointed voice. There’s an undercurrent of “don’t make my life any more difficult” buried in there, which I completely disregard, instead turning to smile up at her.

“Yeah! I’ve been helping with math at the gates.”

“Ahh, you’ve been helping your father, then? That’s so wonderful. It would be *really* nice, though, if Lutz would help *his* father out with his own apprenticeship.”

In this world, a young girl generally helps her parents out with their work until she

gets married to a boy that her parents introduce her to. Then, she helps her husband with his work. If she were in a rural farming area, she'd be helping out with farm work, so she'd marry a farmer.

In other words, while I, the daughter of a soldier, have been studying various things, others have had the expectation that it's so that I can eventually become the kind of wife that can support a soldier. It is actually really difficult to be the wife of a soldier, with their irregular work hours and such, and whether or not she's able to adapt to it depends largely on if there are other soldiers in the family and if she already understands what the job entails.

I wonder if Carla had heard that my father is letting me help him out at the gate to help me with my future prospects? Unfortunately, I'm rocketing along the path towards my merchant's apprenticeship, and have not even the tiniest shred of an intention of becoming the wife of a soldier.

As I head deeper into the house, Lutz's brothers are lying in wait, gripping hairpins in each hand. When I get close, they all simultaneously stand up, shoving their fistfuls of pins in my face.

"Hey, Maïne! Take a look."

"I got these done in no time at all."

"I think these are perfect!"

"W-whoa!" I stammer. "Line up! By year!"

Having a whole bunch of sharpened hairpins thrust into my face is actually terrifying. I wave my hands frantically as I dodge out of the way. In a flash, the three of them line up in order of age, just like I asked. One by one, I examine each hairpin and deliver them their pay. Not a single step had been skipped. The smooth finish and expert craftsmanship causes a smile to float across my face.

"All three of you did way better than Lutz did! You really are professionals. Tuuli and Mommy are better than me at what I'm making at home, too. Hey, guys! Do you think I could ask you to help me with my handiwork this winter, too? I'd have to wait to pay you until the spring, but the pay would be the same."

"Yeah, leave it to us!"

The three older brothers agreed to the work with big smiles. Thanks to the fact that they're going to be doing the actual handiwork, Lutz should be free to focus all of his

efforts on studying.

“Lutz, did you do the calculations? How much is it?”

“Six thousand leon, so six large copper coins.... Is that right?”

This time, Lutz’s older brothers made fifteen pin parts. Since each one makes him four medium copper coins, that’s six large copper coins in total. He’s making a killing just off of the commission.

“Yep, that’s perfect! Let’s keep practicing calculations like that. I’m gonna go bring these home now and finish them up; how does going to Mister Benno’s shop tomorrow sound?” “Sounds good to me.”

By the time I gather up the pins and return home, the final decorations have been completed. I work with Tuuli and my mother to sew everything together and finish off each pin.

“I’m gonna go bring these to the shop tomorrow and bring back the rest of the money, okay? You guys were so fast, I couldn’t keep up with the amount of money I already had.”

When I’d originally asked Benno to give me some money in advance, I thought that we’d wind up delivering only ten hairpins. I’m actually kind of shocked that we managed to make twenty. Both my mother’s raw determination in the face of money and Tuuli’s massive speed increase were far beyond anything I could have imagined.

“Heh heh, I’m getting pretty fast, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, Tuuli, you’re amazing! We’ll be able to make so many of these this winter.”

“Right! Let’s work hard and make a bunch!”

I must tip my hat towards Tuuli, who is walking steadily along the road of becoming a sewing beauty. I simply cannot compare.



The next day, Lutz and I head for Benno’s shop, completed hairpins in hand. As we walk along the cobbled road, Lutz asks me a question.

“Hey, Maïne. Do you have any other things you can to sell?”

“Huh?”

“Master Benno told me that if you wanted to do anything about the devouring, you need a lot of money. When we start selling paper in the spring, it looks like we’ll sell it for a really high price, though, but if you had anything else, then... If you think of something, I’ll make it, after all.”

Seeing the honest worry in his face, I start to think if there’s any new products I could come up with to do something about the devouring.

“Hmmm, let me think. All the things I’ve come up with until now that can earn a lot of money are things aimed at wealthy people, huh.”

It’s obvious that everyday necessities are goods that require spending constant amounts of money. Even the hairpins, though, if we increase the quality of the thread and change the designs, the pricing will be way different, and paper made from the very rare tronbay will be more expensive as well. As such, if we want to make a ton of money, what we need are products that the upper class are likely to want.

“I don’t really have a clue what wealthy people want, though. Rinsham, hairpins, and paper are all things that used to be all around me.”

“Man, your world must have been amazing...”

Lutz, who’s fully aware of the fact that I have memories that aren’t just Maïne’s, is not only not creeped out by it, but is actually interested. So, when it’s just the two of us talking, that’s the only time I don’t have to keep my memories of Japan purposefully concealed.

As I’ve only become more and more nostalgic about it, I haven’t been able to say anything but the most amazing things about it, so I think the image Lutz has of Japan is that of an amazing utopia. To me, it certainly was a utopia compared to here, if only because of the proliferation of bookstores and libraries. Even now, if I could, I’d go back in a heartbeat.

“I guess I could try taking hints from ‘*dollar stores*’ and think of things that could improve people’s daily lives? Maybe improving soap, or making more stylish candles? I made some herb candles last year, but I guess those might be a good idea.”

“Herb candles?” asks Lutz, tilting his head to one side and frowning.

“During last year’s winter preparations, the candles were extremely smelling, so I added herbs to some of them to try to eliminate the smell. I found some that smelled

good, but I also found a bunch that synergized terribly and smelled awful, too. My mom told me not to mess with things I shouldn't and forbade me from making them this year."

While I was laying in bed, I'd said that I wanted to make herb candles, but my mother immediately refused and strictly forbade me from leaving my bed. That was absolutely not just out of concern for my health, but probably much more that she was worried about the candles I'd make.

"Man, you get in trouble a lot."

"Urgh... Trial and error is an indispensable part of making things! For some other ideas, my baskets and lacework were pretty popular, so I wonder if I could make some other kind of *'arts and crafts'*... wait, no, *'arts and crafts'* aren't usually very useful at all."

Even while casually dismissing my own idea, I dig through my memories from my Urano period for any useful sort of arts and crafts.

"Hmmm, *'bead accessories'* won't work since I don't have any *'beads'*, making art out of pressed flowers might technically work but I don't think we could actually sell those, we can't do *'tole painting'*¹ since we don't have paints... what do we do?"

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. In the end, what _can we do?"

No matter what we make, we'll need to start by making all the tools we'll need for that, just like we did with the paper. When I think about that, all of my will to actually do any of that instantly vanishes. Honestly, if it's not going to be something that can immediately improve my own life, I actually can't summon up very much energy.

"Ummm, I think my biggest problem right now for coming up with new products is that I really can't get fired up for making a bunch of tools for things I won't actually use in my own life."

"You *have* to!" yells Lutz. "Do you want to *die*?!"

"It's not that I'm not worried, it's just that I'm not very enthusiastic for making things I don't think are necessities, like, next up is a book..."

"Hey, wait! You're the only one actually saying that if you yourself don't think something's essential then nobody else is going to buy it! Think of something we can sell!"

Lutz is a little teary-eyed, maybe from getting a bit too agitated. I pat him gently on the

shoulder.

“Lutz, you should calm down a bit.”

“You’re the one making me agitated!”

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry, sorry.”

As I soothe Lutz’s nerves, somebody suddenly grabs my head from above.

“Aaah!”

“Just what are the two of you talking about in the middle of the street? People are laughing; was that *supposed* to be funny?”

When I hear the familiar sound of Benno’s voice, I look around my surroundings. Just as he says, I can hear people chuckling as they watch the two of us with small smiles. My face goes red with embarrassment, and I channel my urge to lash out angrily into a fierce glare up at him.

“Mister Benno, why might you be here?”

“I’m on my way back from the workshops. What about you two?”

“We finished the hairpins and were going to deliver them to you.”

“Ah, really? Then, let’s go.”

Benno promptly picks me up and starts walking off at an impatiently brisk pace. From over his shoulder, I see Lutz having to jog to keep up.

He doesn’t even put me down once we enter the shop, instead carrying me to his office and setting me next to our usual table. I climb up into a chair, then pull the hairpins from my tote bag, lining them up on the table in front of me.

“Counting the ones we delivered before, this makes a total of twenty,” I say. “Please look them over.”

“...Great, now I can sell hairpins, too. The baptismal ceremony is next Earth Day, so this is pretty urgent.”

Since there’s nobody in my house with any connection with this season’s baptismal ceremony, I don’t particularly care about the details, so I nod politely without paying much attention to what he was actually saying. Then, I realize there was a new vocabulary word I hadn’t heard before.

“...Hey, Lutz. What’s Earth Day?”

“What?! What are you saying... Earth Day is... Earth Day, right?”

Since it seems that Lutz can’t actually explain it, he passes the buck on to Benno. Benno sighs, then starts explaining it to me.

“They’re the names of the days that constantly cycle around. Water Day, Sprout Day, Fire Day, Leaf Day, Wind Day, Fruit Day, and Earth Day, you know?”

Huh? “You know,” he says, but I don’t actually now. This is literally the first time I’m hearing it. Are these the days of the week?

“Spring is the season of water, when the snow melts and the sprouts start to grow. Summer is the season of fire, when the sun is the closest and the leaves are growing. Autumn is the season of wind, when the cold air is blowing and the fruits are ripe. Winter is the season of earth, when all life is sleeping. That’s why Earth Day is the day of rest, when we close the shop.

Earth Day is basically Sunday then. Got it. Since my mother had days off on fixed intervals, I knew that the concept of days in a week technically existed, but since there’s no calendars in my home, my dad has an irregular schedule, and nobody ever actually mentioned any of the days by name, so I just didn’t know them. So, the days of the week have names? Perfect.

“Huh,” says Lutz, “I didn’t know that. I knew what the names were, but I didn’t know what they meant.”

“That kind of discussion happens around baptism time. The baptismal ceremonies for each season happen on the first day of that season, so the winter ceremony is on Earth Day.”

“Ah, I see.”

Since there’s neither garbage pickup days nor any calendars, the average working person, in their day-to-day lives, doesn’t need to know about any other day besides their weekly day off. If the subject isn’t specifically brought up at all, you can live your life without needing to think about it.

Even when making arrangements with people, we haven’t needed to use anything besides saying how many days in the future it’ll be. Perhaps that’s preferred over the days of the week because it’s easier for both parties to understand? From what

Benno's saying, this seems like it's got primarily religious significance. Learning more about this subject makes me kind of uncomfortable, though, so I think it shouldn't be a problem if I just leave it at that for now.

"That's enough about the names of days. How about we finish settling this account?"

"Sure, it's not like it's particularly useful information, ordinarily."

We finalize the transaction. I take the money I owe Tuuli and my mother in medium copper coins, which I put in my coin purse, which then goes back in my tote bag. As for the rest of the money, I touch my card to Benno's to add it to my savings.

"There's one more thing I'd like to talk to you about."

As I was packing up to leave, since our business was finished and I didn't want to get in the way of Benno's work, he grabs my arm to stop me.

"Did you come up with any new product ideas? That's what you were talking about on the way here, right?"

I have no idea for just how long he'd been listening to our conversation, but judging from the fact that his eyes are brimming with expectation, I see that it was him who kindled Lutz's sudden passion in coming up with new ideas.

...Well, I *do* need the money, so it's not like it's *that* big of a problem.

For the last few days, the devouring fever has been steadily growing more restless, and pinning it down has taken longer and been more exhausting each time. To be perfectly honest, I can't be sure my body will last long enough for me to actually save up enough money. There's no actual reason for me to openly say something so extremely pessimistic, so I shrug lightly shrug and decide to play along.

"Mister Benno, can you think of any sorts of things that would sell for a lot of money? I think that if you want to make a lot of money, you need to sell something unusual or an expensive consumable item to the upper class."

"Sure, that's a good start," he says, nodding, with a hint of a wry smile.

"If I'm selling something unusual, though," I continue, "then it loses its meaning once everyone has it and it stops being unusual, but if someone uses a consumable item, that means they have to buy it again, so that's something you can make money off of forever... Now that I think about it, about the rinsham, you're probably making a *lot*

of money off of that, aren't you?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

All of the profits from the rinsham are exclusively Benno's, so he says that with a broad, self-assured smile. Incidentally, the high-quality rinsham should be done as well, so he should be starting to sell it soon. If I can think of something like rinsham, I think it'll earn quite a bit of money.

"My gut feeling is that I should go with more beauty products after all, maybe? You can't underestimate the passion of a beauty-conscious woman, you know."

Cosmetics are expensive. Even though they're expensive, there are many women out there searching for products that suit them and will spend unreservedly on something that might make them a little more beautiful. I think that the nobility and upper class especially will be willing to shell out for effective products. Benno, perhaps having exactly the same idea I am, looks at me with glittering eyes, leaning forward across the table with anticipation.

"What are you thinking?"

"Ummm... personally, I want a high-quality, good smelling soap. After that, since a lot of these are used during the winter, I think candles that have a variety of different scents pretty popular, maybe? I feel like the herb candles I made last week would make a decent product. After that, this is something that I don't need right now, but I think there would be solid demand for some kind of facial lotion."

As things come to mind, I count them off on my fingers, and soon I'm able to list off a few things that might be decent products to sell. Lutz's eyes are shining too, now, as he looks eagerly at me.

"Hey, Maïne," he says, "do you know how to make all those things?"

"Ummm, I know enough to get started. It's like the paper, getting the materials and the tools is going to be a big effort, and there's going to be a lot of trial and error in order to get the fine details down..."

"Alright, give it a shot!" says Benno, grinning broadly as he points right at me. This is the face of a merchant running profit calculations in his head.

I mumble something to myself about counting chickens before they hatch, reaching up to rub at my temple.

“Mister Benno,” I sigh, “it’s really easy to say ‘give it a shot’, but that’s going to be all the way in the spring, and I don’t even know if I’ll even be able to leave the house then... wha?!”

Honestly, will I be able to hold out until spring? That’s a risk, right? The instant the thoughts form in my head, the tight seal within me blasts wide open and the white-hot fever of the devouring surges out. It burns within me like a blazing pillar of fire. I can’t surround it and push it back away like usual, and in my brief moments of panicked confusion it roars out, consuming my entire body.

“Oi, Maïne!” yells Lutz, noticing this sudden disaster. He stands up, his expression changing in an instant.

I find myself unable to put any real strength into my limbs, and I start to sway dangerously.

With my body burning up from a fever that can’t be pushed away, I’m aware that I’m in the process of falling from my chair, but I can’t manage to stop myself.

It’s only the fact that my field of view suddenly changes that makes me realize I’ve hit the ground. Even though I hit the ground with a heavy thud, the heat raging within my body far surpasses the pain of the impact, and I don’t feel it at all. My eyes, somehow still open, see two sets of feet rush up to me through the thick carpet.



“Maïne, are you okay?!”

Lutz grabs my arms to shake me. He instantly lets go, surprised by the heat, but grabs on even tighter. Benno turns around to face the door, not wasting a moment before ringing the bell to call Mark.

“Shit!” he yells. “Mark, get her to the old man’s *right now!*”

“Hey!” yells Lutz. “Didn’t you say you were going to make a book?! Didn’t you say you can’t lose yet?! Maïne!! Keep it toget...”

“Mark,... urry..... e prepare...”

Their shouts gradually fade into the distance until I have no idea what they’re saying anymore. Then, with a snap, I lose consciousness.

Translator’s notes for this chapter:

1. *Tole painting is a kind of folk art that decorates wooden utensils and other objects.*

Chapter 49

Discussing the Devouring With Freida

Engulfed by this fever, I remember that this sensation of being slowly eaten away from the outside in is just like it was before. Just like before, I focus my willpower as best as I can, struggling to somehow push back the fever.

I haven't even made any books yet!

Remembering how I dealt with it the last time it slipped out, I try to wrestle it back into my inner core, but, unlike the last time, it burns far too hot to do so. Although I push and I push, it refuses to budge a single inch.

You're in my way! Get *back*! There's no way I'm going to *die* like *this*!

As I flail stubbornly at the fever weighing down on me, suddenly, it starts to be pulled away in some direction. Just like a mound of dirt in a vacuum cleaner commercial, the fever surrounding me is sucked away with a roar.

Yeah! Get the hell *out*!

I shove more of the fever at the vacuum cleaner as it steadily sucks away. I'm thrilled at how quickly my fever is going down, so I throw glob after glob at it, but then suddenly, from somewhere, I hear something burst open with a loud bang. In that instant, the fever abruptly stops flowing away, and no matter how hard I throw, it just comes back.

Huh? Did the vacuum cleaner... break?

I suddenly realize that maybe *I* was the one to break it, having gotten carried away at cramming things into it.

...Did I just do something awful? What do I do now?

I drift lazily about in the much-reduced clouds of fever for a while, completely

confused. Of course, there's nobody around me at all, let alone anyone I can actually ask for an explanation.

It looks like I've been saved, so let's think about the rest of it later.

Now that the raw heat of the fever has finally gone down, I immediately work to put it away. There's only about half of it remaining, so, unlike before, I can gather it up in my core and seal it away without any particular difficulty. I cram it away into the depths of my heart like shoving old cardboard boxes into a closet and shut the door tightly behind it. Basking in the triumph of finally finishing this job, I feel my consciousness gradually start floating to the surface.



When I open my eyes, I'm once again in a completely unfamiliar world. No, seriously. Although fighting against the devouring has left my body completely and utterly exhausted, my mind is as clear as it's ever been. This isn't a dream.

Where *am* I?

First off, it's dark. My first thought is that it's because the sun's gone down, but on closer examination it's more that the area around my head is dark. There's a little more light down by my feet. So, once I take another look around to confirm what I'm seeing, I now understand that the ceiling, or, rather, the thick green cloth that covers most of my field of view, hangs down around the entire bed. The part of it at my feet has a separation running along it, looking like it could be opened like a curtain.

This cloth is not the fluttery lace canopy around a fairy-tale princess's bed, but a thick, heavy canopy designed to completely block out vision. Only rich people can afford to use cloth like this.

Wait, maybe, did I get reincarnated as a noble this time?!

The bed itself is completely different from my own. Unlike the straw mattress I usually sleep on, warm woolen sheets have been filled with something soft and cozy, like a thick, warm futon¹. The texture is excellent, and it feels like it would be amazing to sleep in.

Back in my Urano days, I had a spring mattress with a quilted top and some very high-

quality blankets, but this last year has completely reconfigured my views of what a bed feels like. As I'm lying here, the mattress isn't rustling beneath me, nor is the pillow beneath my head as I'm looking around. There is no straw poking itchily at me through the sheets, either. This feels rather strange.

Straw mattresses can be warm, too. Once you get used to them, you can even sleep through being bitten by the ticks and the mites. Yep, once you get used to them. Oooh, it's been so long since I've been on a mattress this good. I just want to sleep a little longer like this.

The bed I share with Tuuli is so small that I have to take great care when I'm turning over in your sleep, but this bed is big enough that I can roll around and around with no problems at all. As I'm rolling around, I notice that there's a chair and a small nightstand next to the desk, with a candlestick whose light has long since burned out. None of these things are anything that I've ever seen before.

However, as I'm rolling around, something *very* familiar enters my field of view: my own hands and my own hair. I stretch my hands in front of me and pull my hair in front of my face, verifying that I have not, in fact, turned into someone who is not Maïne.

...So I haven't reincarnated again, then. So, really, where am I?

I dig through my memories, trying to remember what happened to me right before I lost consciousness. Now that I'm thinking about it, I *do* remember Benno saying something about contacting the guild leader, I think.

"...Ah, so, maybe this is the guild leader's house?"

I think I remember hearing that the guild leader had a magic tool that could do something about the devouring, so this is almost certainly the guild leader's house. The level of wealth here supports that theory, too.

"Excuse me," I call out, "is anyone there?"

My body is still so heavy that I really don't want to get up, but I should get a good grasp of the situation. From the edge of the bed, I slowly reach out my hand, pulling slightly on the hanging, curtain-like cloth. Soon, an unfamiliar person slips through the curtain, perhaps having heard my voice.

“Uh, ummm...” I stall.

“One moment, please, ma'am.”

“Huh? S... sure.”

Although I have no idea what's going on, I still can't move. I wrap myself in the blanket, and as I grow warmer, my eyelids start to droop.

Oh, no, I'm getting sleepy again.

When I start nodding off, I hear the sound of a door opening and closing, then the approach of soft footsteps. Just like a student hearing the teacher's footsteps when dozing off in class, I'm instantly wide awake.

“Maïne, are you awake?”

The curtains part, revealing a girl with pink pigtails. She steps inside the canopy, bringing a lit candle with her.

“...Oh? Freida?”

“Yes, it is I. How much of what happened to you might you remember, I wonder?”

She sets the candle on the nightstand and seats herself on the chair next to the bedside. Since it seems we're about to have a conversation, I start trying to sit up as well, but Freida reaches out to stop me.

“The fever this time took quite a toll on your body. I don't mind if you lie down.”

“Thanks, Freida. Although, if I'm lying down like this while we're talking, I think I might fall asleep, so...”

I move my body, pushing myself up into a sitting position. Freida, with a wry smile, reminds me not to overdo it.

“Ummm, what happened to me, huh? Well, I only really remember as much as when I was in Mister Benno's shop, then the devouring came up and swallowed me.... Then I remember that there was way too much of it for me to deal with by myself, but it got sucked away somewhere, so... Freida, did you do something to help?”

I've never experienced anything like that fever vanishing the way that it did. I think that what probably happened was that someone used a magic tool, like Benno said...

and then while that was happening I broke the extremely expensive tool.

The blood instantly drains from my face. In contrast, though, Freida gently nods her head.

“That’s essentially correct. We crammed as much of it as we could fit inside a magic tool that was just about to break. It broke partway through, but I think your devouring fever must be very much lessened. How do you feel?”

“Yeah, much better. Although, I heard magic tools are really expensive...”

Although my face is ghastly pale, Freida smiles again, looking amused as she tells me just how much it costs.

“That’s right. The one that broke just now was two small gold coins and eight large silver. Mister Benno said that you would pay for it, but, can you really, I wonder?”

I can’t help but think that Benno, when buying that additional information about rinsham from me, already knew how much this was going to cost. It would be a little bit too conveniently exact, if that wasn’t the case.

...Huh? Didn’t he open up his bid at *two* small gold coins, not three? If I hadn’t made him go higher, then...

Feeling a little weird about that inconsistency, I nod towards Freida.

“...I can pay.”

“You really do have that much, huh... I underestimated you, Maïne!”

Freida’s eyes momentarily shine with amazement, but then she starts to sulk a little, her cheeks puffing out.

“If you couldn’t pay, he was saying that you’d sign up to work at my shop. Grandfather said that he’d told Mister Benno that the tool would cost one small gold and two large silver coins, so I thought you definitely wouldn’t have enough. It seems that Mister Benno is one step ahead of me!”

Good job, me, turning down that two-gold offer! Also, Benno, *excellent* call on raising your offer at the last minute! Working at the kind of shop that would try to trap people by misrepresenting the price of life-saving magical tools would give me ulcers!

As I breathe a sign of relief, Freida looks at me, her lips pointed.

“What that magic tool did... to use a metaphor, if you had a cup that was overflowing with water, it siphoned off some of the excess. There’s still water left in the cup, and as you keep growing, it’s only going to keep filling back up. Do you understand, I wonder?”

“Yes.”

There was more half a year ago than a year ago, more last month than half a year ago, and more just now than last month. The devouring fever steadily became harder and harder to handle, and it’s only become manageable now thanks to the magic tool absorbing some of it. There’s a lot less of it now, but it’s only going to start building back up again. I’m more than well aware of this fact.

“The troubling part is that the rate at which the cup fills is faster than the rate at which it grows bigger. So, you probably don’t have any more than a year before it fills up again, I think.”

Since Freida has the same devouring I do, I know that she’s telling the truth, and I nod my understanding. Freida makes a visible effort to put all the emotion from her face, and speaks with forced indifference.

“So, Maïne. You need to choose. Will you enslave yourself to a nobleman, or live with your family until you rot away?”

“Huh?”

I blink in disbelief, and a troubled smile flickers across Freida’s face.

“Magic tools are, fundamentally, the possessions of noble families. My grandfather knew about my devouring and spent a lot of money to buy nearly-broken magical tools that the nobility consider worthless, so my family now has a few, but I think that even if you were to look very hard, there wouldn’t be any more out there.”

“Whaaaaaat?! A broken, worthless thing is two small gold and two large silver?!”

My eyes go completely wide with shock. Freida stares at me for a moment, blinking a few times, then slowly tilts her head to the side.

“That’s a small price to pay for your own life, is it not? A properly-functioning magic

tool is something you buy with large gold coins. If a commoner with the devouring wants to live, they need to make a contract with a nobleman to work solely for their sake, buy the tool, and then work for the rest of their lives to pay off that debt.”

Freida looks at me like this is the most obvious thing in the world as she explains it to me, and I realize that this must be an explanation that she herself has been told many, many times.

“...Freida, does that mean that you...”

When I ask her if she’s also going to enter in a contract with a nobleman to buy a magic tool, she suddenly smiles brightly, like a flower blooming.

“That’s right,” she says, nodding. “I’ve already made a contract with a nobleman. He’ll let me continue living here until I’m 15, when I’m an adult. Then, when my coming-of-age ceremony is complete, we’ve agreed that I’ll become his concubine.”

“What?! H, h-hi-his, *concubine*?! Do you know what that word you’re saying *means*?!”

I cannot possibly believe that a word like that could have come out of the mouth of a sweet, adorable little girl like Freida. My mouth flaps open and closed, speechless, but Freida, strangely, looks at me in astonishment.

“...From that reaction, Maïne, you know what a concubine is?” “I mean, a concubine... a *concubine*...”

This is not a word that a six- or seven-year old child should know. On top of that, not only does she know what it means, she is perfectly okay with knowing that she’ll become one. This can’t be happening.

“There was talk about being his second or third wife, but they said that if I were to be his official wife then things like the line of succession and the order of precedence amongst his other wives would become quite complicated. In particular, since our family has more money than many lower-ranked noble families, the chances are quite high that me marrying a nobleman might cause quite a lot of unnecessary strife. That’s what my grandfather told me.”

“Eeeeeeeek?! Guild leader!” I unintentionally shout out loud. “What are you saying around *kids*?!”

Freida’s facial expression hardens, and she looks at me sternly.

“Maïne, don’t think that this is not your problem too. If you choose to live, then you will have to live in the world of the nobility. Unless you’re skilled at social maneuvering, even if you gain a magic tool there are still many other reasons you could be killed. *Information* is key if you want to protect yourself. If he’d hidden that from me, I would have been in danger, you know?”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

As usual, I’d let my stupidly peaceful Japanese thought process slip, and it seems like she didn’t miss it at all. This is not the lukewarm world I had so peacefully lived in.

Freida smiles wryly at me as I apologize.

“Don’t worry about it. My particular case is rather unusual. My grandfather is the guild leader, and very many members of the nobility do business with him, you know? There are those who wish to develop closer ties to my family, and there are those who seek our help, so we were able to select conditions that were the most favorable to both myself and my family.”

“When you say conditions, you mean...?”

Somehow swept along, I tilt my head curiously to the side and ask my question. Freida gives me a look that seems to praise me for actually following along, then opens her mouth to reply.

“I’ll be able to get a shop in the nobles’ quarter. This won’t just be me being given the first floor of my patron’s residence or a detached room on the property, I’d get my very own shop. The startup fees and living expenses would be provided by my family, but this will be the same thing as establishing a branch of our store in the nobles’ quarter directly. We’ll be able to start up the kind of trade we had to abandon due to the devouring. I’m really looking forward to it!”

Freida smiles brightly, her eyes glittering. Her entire posture conveys just how much she’s looking forward to her gleaming future. I, however, am confused.

“I... see. Have you thought at all about marrying someone you love, instead?”

“Now, Maïne, what are you talking about? No matter what kind of life you live, marriage is decided by your father, is it not? There *are* cases where you might pick between a few suiters, but it’s always the case that the man you marry will be decided for you.”

“Ah... you’re right.”

Argh, my common sense is really a lack of common sense in this world. Now that she mentions it, one’s spouse really is decided by one’s father. It’s a relationship between two families.

“So, my family will be able to establish a permanent location in the nobles’ quarter, and even though my patron will take thirty percent of my sales I’ll be owning my own shop, and since I’ll have some physical distance between myself and my patron I’ll be able to escape the more troubling things, so I think these are *quite* favorable conditions for me.”

Watching Freida talk about becoming a concubine while wearing such a dazzlingly cute smile, I am once again reminded of just how much my own intuition differs from that of this world. My feelings right now are complex.

“Although, Maïne,” she continues, “you don’t seem to have anything to offer a nobleman, do you? I thought you’d be quite envious of my situation when I told you about me becoming a concubine. Think about it, Maïne, and try to live a life that you won’t come to regret.”

Ahh, I see. Since I have the devouring as well, if I want to live, I’ll need to find the patronage of a nobleman, too. So, what she’s telling me is that before the next time I’m overwhelmed by the devouring I should think about what I plan to do with myself in the future.

Do I plan on forever indebting myself to a nobleman, or do I die surrounded by my family?

“Thanks, Freida. I’ll think about what I should do. I’m glad you told me all of this.”

“Certainly; you don’t have anyone else in your life that could tell you of these things, correct? If you’re ever worried about the devouring, please come talk to me. We’re the only ones who can really understand each other about what’s happening to us.”

Since the devouring is such a rare disease, it’s similarly rare to find someone who knows about it. It’s extremely reassuring to know that there’s someone I can talk to about it.

“I’m grateful for the offer, thank you,” I reply. “I should probably go home now.”

I've realized that the room is gradually growing darker and darker. The sun will probably be setting soon, I think. I need to return home as soon as I can, or my family will be worried about me. Since our conversation is finished, I move to get down from the bed, but Freida pushes me back down.

"It's okay, your family already knows you're here. Please keep resting."

"Huh?"

"They were here again earlier today."

"Again...? How long was I unconscious?"

I was not expecting it to be a totally different day. As my eyes go wide, Freida puts a hand to her cheek, tilting her head thoughtfully to the side.

"You were carried here shortly before lunch yesterday, and today the sun is already setting. It seems that you're still very exhausted, and it seems like it took you a very long time to wake up even after your fever went down. Even though your fever's already gone down, it's been decided that you'll stay here, just to make sure you're okay, until after the baptismal ceremony the day after tomorrow."

It looks like a lot of things happened without me knowing about them. Even just thinking about what my family must have felt when they were told what happened to me makes my stomach ache.

"Lutz, I believe, will be coming here tomorrow morning, and I think your family might come along too. So it is okay to close your eyes again and rest for now, Maïne."

"Thanks, Freida."

"Before you talk with your family tomorrow, please think hard about your own opinions.... Now, tomorrow, if you're feeling up for it, how about we make sweets together, like we promised?"

Freida stands up, her chair clattering behind her, and picks up her candle, then quietly walks away out of my field of view. I start to ruminate about what she'd told me, my thoughts going between various possibilities, but my body still craves more rest, so even though I'm still sitting up my eyelids start to droop. I squirm my way back under the covers, unable to resist the snug comfort of this bed, and I go out light a light.

Translator's notes for this chapter:

1. "Futon" here refers to the Japanese-style futon, which is a quilted mattress filled with batting, unlike Western futons, which are generally fold-out couches filled with foam.



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