Dislocation

by Vathara

Summary

Becoming Shiroe meant gaining more than a few centimeters and some cool spells.

Notes

A detail in first chapter kind of got jossed by screenshots. I'm leaving as-is, though, 'cause I like it.
Shiroe

At least I don’t have a tail.

It said something about the whole impossible situation, that this was currently on Shiroe’s list of Reasons to Keep Getting Up in the Morning. Not nearly as important as the fact that Naotsugu and Akatsuki needed him to keep it together, but....

Some of the Crescent Moon Alliance’s guild-members had tails. He was not going to ask how they were handling it. Heavy doses of Marielle’s industrial-strength glomps along with a few friends in the same boat, probably. All things considered, he was just glad he’d created Shiroe as a race closer to human-

The enchanter took a deliberate breath, and another drink of tastes-like-water. It was a sunny day. They had a rescue to carry out. They had something to do, that mattered.

It didn’t help. A strategist’s mind kept circling back to one inescapable fact.

This body isn’t human.

Which was not a safe thing to think, despite all the evidence that their physical existences were... more malleable than reality. PKers dissolving into a rain of items. Monster-slain players reviving in the Cathedral. Akatsuki’s form shifting in a flood of light and screams - and now he had to get to know the efficient, silent assassin he’d partied with as a girl, and he was not a closet pervert, thanks, Naotsugu....

Anyway. Whatever they looked like, they had to believe they were still human beings. Though strictly speaking, Shiroe wasn’t sure any Adventurer was human in this world. Human beings died when they were killed.

Like the People of the Land. NPCs are mortal, and we’re not. That’s... not good. If we think we’re human, and they’re not, the city isn’t going to be civilized anymore. If we think we’re not human - those PKers might just be the start. If killing other players isn’t enough of a thrill to give them something to do, and they can’t kill inside a town... Shouryuu and the others are right. If the balance of power between the guilds destabilizes, things are going to get much worse. How can we fix that-

No. He was not going to think about the mess behind them in Akihabara right now. Eighteen members of the Crescent Moon Alliance could take care of themselves, and the one who couldn’t needed them to keep it together to come get her. Serara, Naotsugu, Akatsuki; all of them were depending on the legendary strategist, Shiroe.

It’s kind of hard to be legendary when you feel like you need to kick off the platform shoes.

A couple of centimeters shouldn’t make that much of a difference. Really. It wasn’t that much.

...So why did he keep getting hit with, everything is too short?

He flexed the fingers of his avatar’s hand, still unsettled by how smoothly they answered his will. These weren’t the hands he’d grown up with. Fingers and thumb were a little thinner, a little longer. And stronger. This body could grip a staff or hold a horse’s reins for hours, when a grad
student wasn’t used to hanging onto more than books and papers. This body knew combat, without conscious thought; and every potential explanation he came up with for why just made the abyss of fear yawn deeper-

And he was avoiding the real problem. Again.

*Fifteen minutes. I promised.*

Naotsugu had played with him for years; he knew Shiroe needed a little quiet time for a break after a meal. He’d keep himself and Akatsuki busy.

Glancing out of the corner of his eye to make sure the other two weren’t watching, Shiroe reached into concealing hair. And touched a pointed ear.

He hadn’t thought about it until he’d faced down Marielle yesterday. He knew her race was Elf, he could see the ears. But it hadn’t meant anything, beyond a note in his head on likely stat adjustments and potential NPC allies. She was a pretty priestess with a dangerously low cuteness threshold and a glomp that could bend steel bars; just ask Naotsugu’s armor. Gold hair and eyes and pointed ears... back when Elder Tale was just a game anyone could customize their avatars. It wasn’t a big deal.

Until he’d backed her into a verbal corner, and seen Marielle’s Elf ears poke through gold as they flattened in dismay. And almost lost a strategist’s composure in sheer, unadulterated panic, because his flare of annoyance had come with the oddest sense of hair brushing ear-tips.

*I will not panic now,* he’d thought then. *I do not have time for panic, the Crescent Moon Alliance doesn’t have time for panic, I will panic later. For fifteen minutes. After lunch. If we’re not being attacked.*

Well. This was later.

*We now return you to your regularly scheduled panic attack.... Oh, hell.*

Because at the time, he hadn’t been sure. Not completely sure. Now? He was.

*My ears twitched.*

He could feel the same thing happening now, a point of skin and cartilage flicking against his fingers as his agitation rose. Not that much longer than a human’s; so long as he kept his hair its current rough-and-ready length, no one would probably even notice.

...Somehow, knowing that didn’t help much.

He traced the odd, upswept shape. Felt the eerie tingle as skin brushed skin, ear-tips sensitive in a way they just shouldn’t be.

Took another breath, and deliberately lowered his hand. *Avatar icons don’t change their expression. We had no way of knowing anything would happen with... emotional responses.*

Somehow, some way, he felt as if this was his own damn fault. Which was completely illogical. Elder Tale had been a game.

*And now it’s reality.*

If the world was real, if the monsters were real... then he had to accept that his avatar was real, too.
Even if the consequences were terrifying.

I wasn’t joking about the leaves, Naotsugu.

He was an Enchanter, not a Guardian. Yet he’d heard their enemies closing in as fast as Naotsugu had.

Of course I did, Shiroe thought wryly. That’s why I picked Half-Alv to start with. Enchanters have a hard enough time surviving the first few levels as it is. I knew the Hearing bonus would let me detect mobs closing in on the group more quickly. And a few seconds to pick the right spell makes all the difference.

There had been other reasons to pick that race as well. Some game-useful. Some just interesting. He’d liked playing Shiroe.

But that was when it’d been a game.

So now it’s not. The Enchanter tried to let the panic wash over him, hoping it would fade with another breath. So. If someone had warned me - what would I have changed?

Besides not logging on that night in the first place? Shiroe was his best, his most powerful character. When the triffid had thrown him - it hadn’t been luck that he’d rolled with the fall. He knew what Shiroe could do. Even when he was hurt. Even when he was afraid.

Shiroe’s my best chance. Their best chance.

Maybe they would revive at a Cathedral if they died. But something inside him tensed up at the thought. It was too easy. Too simple.

It’s magic. And powerful magic always has a catch.

If he didn’t want to die, and he didn’t want his party to die, then he had to accept reality. Here and now, he was Shiroe, level 90 Half-Alv Enchanter.

So you have twitchy ears. Live with it. He tried for a smile. It could have been worse. Poor Akatsuki.

Oddly, that thought made the smile come easier. If being Shiroe had bothered him that much, he could have used the shapeshifting potion. But if he had, Akatsuki would have been in real trouble. Roleplaying the opposite sex for a few hours could be fun. Being stuck in the wrong gender? That could be life-threatening.

Compared to that, what were a few ear-twitches?

But when we get back to Earth, I’m going to find whoever developed Novasphere Pioneers. You do not mess with level 90 spellcasters....

Except he wouldn’t be level 90. Not on Earth. That was the whole point.

I have a party behind me, and I’ll bet we’ll have the Crescent Moon Alliance right behind us. I’m sure we’ll think of something.

Which was good, because his fifteen minutes were just about up.

I have a plan. I can live with this. For as long as it takes.
...Though maybe he’d better schedule another panic attack tomorrow. Just in case.

Shiroe stood, and took a deep breath of sun-warmed air. Touched his pouch, where his summoning flute waited. After all, being stuck here wasn’t all bad. In the game, your avatar’s expression never changed....

And he had to see the look on Akatsuki’s face.
Naotsugu

Chapter Summary

It's awesome being a Guardian.

Chapter Notes

The bunnies have been shamelessly encouraged, I know exactly who’s to blame....
Much thanks to Kryal for providing some translations of Japanese Wikipedia bits. Ah, juicy canon background info.... :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Well, Naotsugu reflected, the good news is, I’m not going to have to fight through the morning commute for a while.

He let his glance slide toward where Shiroe sat in quiet contemplation after their tasteless lunch. Or what looked like contemplation. The white-and-gold cloak didn’t seem to as much as twitch from here, but Naotsugu would bet the paycheck he probably wasn’t going to see that their strategist was very quietly, very responsively, having a controlled freakout.

Heh. Can’t blame him.

After all, he’d done some not-so-quiet and definitely not responsible freaking out of his own, before Shiroe’s call had come through. One minute he’d been logged on for the first time in two years; refreshing his memory on everything a level 90 Guardian could do, and warming up a few panty-chasing lines calculated to make a too-serious engineering grad student bang his head on his desk. Because seriously, Shiroe always needed to loosen up. Just a little. And they’d have a brand-new expansion to explore together, this was going to be so much fun-

The clock clicked over.

Bam.

It hadn’t even gone dark. Naotsugu just had the weirdest sense that he’d just missed something... and where was all this sunlight coming from?

Panicking in plate armor? Bad idea.

At least he’d been in a rather nice forest clearing, and not next to a whole bunch of other panicking people. He’d heard some yelling, but it’d had more of a tone of “what the freaking hell!” than the sound of anybody actually hurt. So he’d grabbed onto something he’d read once about the first rule of getting lost: sit down and stay put.

Waking up in Seldesha pretty much counted as lost in Naotsugu’s book. Especially when, in one who-knew-what-happened blink, he’d gone from being a twenty-five-year-old businessman in
(ahem) okay shape, to a Guardian in full plate, sword, and shield.

Moving around was weird. He knew the armor weighed a lot. He could tell by the thump of his gauntlet on his chest, or the momentum when he slung his shield and longsword over his back. But it didn’t feel heavy. It felt like... heck. Like the familiar constriction of a salaryman’s suit and tie. Like he was just used to it.

Naotusgu liked to think he didn’t spook easily. But this was - well, spooky. And if all that yelling was a bunch of people just as spooked as he was, things could get messy. The kind of mess he didn’t want to get into without serious backup, even if he did look like he could handle a whole biker brawl on his own. And speaking of look like....

He’d spent more time than he wanted to think about just staring at the water. Lucky him, he’d based his character icon on his own face, more or less. So the face looking back was odd, but not quite as odd as being able to walk around in sheet steel without even breaking a sweat.

Right now, that’s me. Huh.

Weird or not, he’d known he couldn’t stay by that pond forever. The trick was picking a direction to go. Yelling meant people. Yelling also meant those people were scared and upset. He’d been listening hard, trying to judge which faint yells had the best chance of belonging to people who were upset, but not so upset they couldn’t think-

Ring.

Shiroe’s icon. Shiroe’s invitation to chat. The one player Naotsugu most wanted to see; the one guy he knew he could depend on to keep a level head in any and all disasters. Whatever this mess was, their chances of getting out of it had just skyrocketed.

He could have hugged Shiroe for showing up. Not that he’d tell their shy strategist that. The poor guy had a hard enough time dealing with girls as it was.

Which was part of the reason Naotsugu had decided to ham up the Panty Warrior as soon as they’d determined neither of them had a clue what was going on. Because the second he’d seen the enchanter half-stumble down the hill to meet him....

Poor Shiroe, had been Naotsugu’s startled, gleeful thought. He’s going to be beating girls off with a stick!

If Hasegawa Naotsugu had had to describe Shirogane Kei to Missing Persons, the word he would have had to use was average. Average height, average build; even his glasses somehow looked like average grad-school glasses. Drop the younger man into any Tokyo crowd, and you couldn’t find him. Bring him to a party? Naotsugu had learned to check the quiet corners, but other than that, most people wouldn’t even realize Kei was there.

The Enchanter Shiroe was not average.

*Half-Alv*, Naotsugu thought now, carefully not watching as Shiroe’s fingers explored dark hair. *Wish I’d read up more on that race.*

Sure, he knew the basics. Some unthinkably long time ago, Alvs had been the most mystically advanced civilization in all of Seldesha. Then... well, what had happened depended on who you asked, but everybody agreed that the last of the Alvs had died out centuries ago.

Only before they had... heh. Alvs had liked humans. Some of them had liked them a lot. Meaning
to this day, usually in the most unsuspecting families, a bunch of throwback traits would get together and have a party, and a Half-Alv would be born.

*Kind of the ultimate Ugly Duckling story,* Naotsugu reflected. *If the little swan grew up to throw lightning bolts.*

The longer he’d known Kei, the less he’d been surprised at the guy’s choice for his character. Nails that stuck up got hammered down, and Shirogane Kei had seen a lot of hammering.

*Shiroe’s going to start breaking the hammers.*

Naotsugu had seen hints of that the first night, when they’d faced the briar weasels. One minute Shiroe had been trying to strategize their way through the fight the same as always, and doing a pretty good job considering everything was suddenly real, stinky teeth were snapping at their faces, and the controls were acting like a useless stack of pop-ups. The next-

Maybe getting tossed by that triffid had rattled loose the chains of proper behavior in Kei’s head. Naotsugu almost wished he could go back and thank it.

*Ignore the commands. Feel the motion!*

Sounded kooky, but it worked. And it was *awesome.*

Though not nearly as awesome as that fight with the PKers last night.

*“I wouldn’t mind giving them the money.”* Shiroe’s voice had turned downright evil. *“That is, if they can beat us.”*

With that, the last qualms Naotsugu had about facing other players vanished. Shiroe was backing him, all the way. The PKers might think they had the numbers. *He* had a strategist.

And he was a Guardian.

*You’re not getting past me to Shiroe. Don’t even try.*

They did try, of course. They were idiots, but they weren’t stupid. Healers, mages, warriors, *then* anybody else. And Shiroe was obviously a mage.

*Anchor Howl!*

Thinking back on it now, Naotsugu wondered how long it’d take Shiroe to calm down enough that he could ask the enchanter what spellcasting *felt* like. Because the Howl wasn’t anything as simple as just calling an attack. It was like... like reaching out and *demanding* the world pay attention to him. Like feeling all the eyes in a smoky bar about to boil over into a fight, and *daring* them to take him on.

*You don’t get to hurt him. You don’t get to touch him. Not without going through me first.*

Not one of them had laid a finger on Shiroe. Not one.

*Damn, I’m good.*

They all were. Not just because they were level 90. They worked *together,* assassin and enchanter taking apart their enemies with clinical precision while the idiot bandits had focused on one loud, obvious Guardian.
But what was really awesome was a little moment Naotsugu had almost missed. One quiet, subtle spell, that had pulverized the keystone of their enemies’ whole strategy.

*Astral Hypnos.*

Looking back, Naotsugu thought he could pinpoint when Shiroe had snapped that spell off. The strategist had been directing him toward the most deadly fighter among their opponents, there’d been a subtle silvery glow around his hand....

Just a glow. No whispered spell. No subtle attempt to poke his way through a menu. The enchanter had just reached out for the magic he wanted, and... it came.

*Our little Ugly Duckling’s starting to fledge.*

The food was tasteless, and the whole situation was as crazy as anything out of a fantasy manga. But Naotsugu couldn’t help hoping it lasted a few weeks longer.

*Back with Marielle - he knew what the right choice was. All he needed was a nudge to say it.* Naotsugu hid a grin, remembering that flash of wonder in Shiroe’s eyes, as the enchanter realized his party was going to back him, no matter what. Which was all the strength he’d needed to make the right call. For everyone.

*It’s like a wisteria vine finally reaching out of the shade. He’s growing into himself.*

It was going to be hard to go back to Tokyo after this. For all of them. Shiroe was breaking a tactician’s mind out of the ice of years of don’t stand out. Akatsuki was finally getting the respect no one on Earth was going to give a shrimp her size. As for himself... being a Guardian could be painful. But so much fun.

*Don’t borrow trouble. Like Shiroe said, we don’t even know how we got here. Figuring out a way home could take a while.*

At least Shiroe’s spells of clumsiness from being too tall seemed to be wearing off. Fighting monsters had been good for their enchanter. For all of them, really. Maybe they’d wake up tomorrow and this would all be a dream. Until then, the faster they got used to these bodies, the better.

Especially for Shiroe. A few extra centimeters and a Half-Alv’s build were going to have too many cuties after him as it was. If he hung onto that ungodly cute puppy-growing-into-paws hesitance, Marielle would be the least of his problems. Just look at how fast their Little Miss Deadly had fallen for him. Sure, Akatsuki said she was repaying a debt. Right. Everybody repaid debts with stars in their eyes and little pink hearts dancing over their heads....

Well, not literally. Lucky for all of them. The look on Shiroe’s face when Akatsuki had pledged fealty!

*Thought he was going to burst into flames.* Naotsugu smirked. *You’d think a girl never crushed on him before.*

Then again, he knew Kei. The ultimate quiet Nice Guy. Only most people never knew Kei was a nice guy. All they saw were the sharp eyes and shiny glasses. So yeah. It wasn’t just possible, it was likely.

*Better be a little careful teasing them. Not too careful, Shiroe would notice - but nothing too raunchy.*
He was pretty sure Akatsuki was older than she looked. Nobody could deliver such a perfect knee to the face without the confidence to mean it. But older wasn’t necessarily grownup, and if this was her first real crush... well, there was a huge difference between being an open pervert and being mean. He liked Akatsuki. Even if she was a violent little shrimp. She had great taste in party members.

_How’d she even know Shiroe had that potion?_

Naotsugu rolled his eyes at himself. How else? Shiroe had probably zeroed in on yet another solo player with potential, pointed out a few quests where an assassin would be an invaluable asset to a party, and looked honestly bewildered when said solo suddenly started turning up to party with him.

And now they were all partying together, FTF, and he got to watch Shiroe try to be cool, calm, and collected while the enchanter was staring down the Ultimate Weapon of Deadly Cuteness.

_Hee. Hee hee hee...._

Violet eyes narrowed at him. “What?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Naotsugu caught Shiroe’s shoulders lift. Good. Crisis averted, for now. “Oh, just thinking,” he said mischievously.

“Thinking?”

Now she was suspicious. Smart assassin. Naotsugu stood, and heaved a dramatic sigh. “Thinking... that I can’t believe we agreed to do this! Going all the way to Susukino? I’m going to die from boob deficiency-“

_Bam._

“My lord, may I knee this strange perverted man in the face?”

Yep. This was going to be fun.

Chapter End Notes

FTF - Face to face.
Okay, got better screenshots of Shiroe. (Darn it. Disappointed bunnies.) And more canon info. Apparently in the world of Log Horizon, “Half-Alv” is not at all related to “Half-Elf”. Elves are an existing race; Marielle is one. Alvs are apparently an entirely different race, who were a highly advanced magical civilization, and are now supposedly extinct. Half-Alvs only exist because there’s still Alv heritage in some humans that surfaces as “throwbacks”.
(The available canon info on Alvs actually reminds me of the Old Race in Andre Norton’s Witch World, complete with the dark hair, pale skin, strong magical potential, and association with ancient ruins and Lost Technologies. But that’s just me....)
Akatsuki

Chapter Notes

This one may also be jossed by later episodes, simply because a lot of it is extrapolation. In canon, apparently, we don’t even find out what Akatsuki’s RL name is. Given a lot of the characters seem to have avatar names related to their RL ones, Kryal suggested “Tsukino Akane” for a possible “real name”. One part that is jossed by ep 5 - sorry, I’m keeping that. Updates require logging out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Is Shiroe going to be okay? Is my family going to be okay?

Am I going to be okay?

Akatsuki had no doubt that Naotsugu would be okay. He was the kind of guy who always landed on his feet somehow. Granted, he was a lot nicer than the casually swaggering jocks she’d met. Not that that was much of a surprise either; she couldn’t see Shiroe making friends with a guy who was just a jock....

Her face threatened to warm. Akatsuki focused on dutifully consuming the last scraps of her tasteless lunch. This area seemed to be free from monsters for the moment, but no loyal ninja would let her lord wander too far off in unknown terrain. Enchanters were squishy.

And we shouldn’t let him brood too much. He will, if we don’t keep him busy.

She didn’t know Shiroe as well as she’d like, but as long as she’d known him, the enchanter fixed things. Being stuck in Seldesha was one big, currently unfixable mess. It’d eat him up inside, if they let it.

We’re not going to let it.

Funny. She hadn’t traded a word with Naotsugu on the subject, but she was already sure she had a partner in enchanter-wrangling. It seemed crazy on the surface; Naotsugu was a carefree, casual warrior who joked about being a pervert as if it were a badge of honor.

But when it came down to a fight, he was all tank. Solid, dependable, and just good, in a way that made her feel like she could take a moment, take a deep breath, and choose exactly the right move against their enemies.

She’d never met a tank that good before. Not even in a group with Shiroe quietly sorting people into a party, instead of a random group of players all after the same monster.

If Shiroe had been in Dog-Ears’ party, we’d never have known what hit us.

Not that she thought Shiroe would ever have anything to do with player-killing bandits. That would be just... impossible. The player she’d partied with over the last year had always been honest, forthright, and - rarest of all - kind. Most players wouldn’t bother trying to party with someone who only communicated by text chat. You could only keep your attention on so much at once, after all; and the vast majority of gamers in Elder Tale preferred to keep their eyes on the battlefield.
Yet from the day they’d met, Shiroe had made it work. More, he’d played along; always addressing her as the silent male Assassin, Akatsuki, and acting as if his character were reading her texts as notes and secret hand-signs. To the point he’d deliberately summon a Wisp of Magic Light to the field, if it would have been otherwise too dark to see the Assassin’s motions.

And then there’d been the memorable quests where she’d been typing swift advice to her temporary lord... only to find Shiroe had opened a text chat. A chat where the actions he asked her character to carry out didn’t match what he was saying. At all.

Those had been interesting fights. Especially the one where by sheer awful luck, they’d ended up in a PUG with a would-be Jenkins.

Akatsuki? the text had read. When we’re ready to move, please knee that idiot in the face.

The resulting sputtering over voice chat - especially when Shiroe had used the idiot’s distraction to pull off the rest of the quest perfectly - had made her quickly double-check that her microphone was still off. Before she broke down in epic giggles.

I wonder. Akatsuki folded her hands through a few of the signs she’d daydreamed; goblins, ahead, five, flickering off her fingers as easily as brushing kanji on a page. If I signed at Shiroe - would he sign back?

She was afraid to find out. Being a ninja was her dream. Not Shiroe’s.

And she’d had so many dreams of it. Kendo practice was stiff. Flashy. For show; even in the fiercest national competitions, unless someone made a mistake, no one got injured for real. Which she was fine with - but it was nothing like the cool, focused discipline of a ninja.

She’d persisted, even so. The few schools of ninjutsu that might have realistic training weren’t in the range of a student’s budget. So she’d studied, and trained... and spent a lot of practices imagining the situation was just a little different.

Silent, the ninja bows over her sword in the high hall. She shall serve her master in this, as in all things; for boredom is yet another chance to train the empty mind....

A formal bow to a daimyo. A silent check of her equipment; both lethal as a blade, and the skilled knowledge of makeup and current acceptable topics to pass as just an ordinary girl. Acting the perfect assistant in a tea ceremony, to get closer to her target. She’d pick one fantasy of being a ninja for the day, and quietly live it as much as she could. It made life as a pretty little girl bearable.

And then she’d found Elder Tale.

Suddenly, for a few hours a day, she could be the dream. Be cool, competent, disciplined Akatsuki; tall and aloof, a silent male Assassin as focused and deadly as she could make him. She’d explored all the secret places of Seldesha, a new wonder around every corner; fighting and dying and learning how not to die again. Level after level, honing her skills....

But past a certain point, solo adventuring got awkward. You needed a group for the tougher monsters, the most intricate dungeons, the most interesting quests.

Damn it.

At least a lot of the higher-level players were as much into roleplaying as she was. “Assassins are lone wolves”, didn’t get you funny looks. More, “Of course!” and “As you wish, my silent friend.”
Which was nice, but....

_{Something is missing._}

What, she hadn’t been able to pin down. Until the day she’d approached an odd group with a high-
level Enchanter, who’d apparently found a way into a dungeon she’d never even **heard** of.

“Lone wolves? So you are.” The voice had been gentle, but definitely male. “But if you would
consent to join our pack for the next few days, I believe it might be to all of our advantage....”

And a text window had popped up.

**Normally this dungeon would take a lot more players, Akatsuki-san. But I’m not sure how many
more people we can bring into the group, not if we want to run it this week. There’s a secret
passage that comes out behind the boss in the last room. Only an Assassin can use it. It’ll take
precise timing, but if we plan it right.... Interested?**

A private offer. So the group wouldn’t feel pressured to let her in, and she wouldn’t feel pressured
not to refuse. So that if she didn’t trust the Enchanter’s ability to create a viable plan - more than
that, to create a plan a group of strangers could execute, and then convince the rest of the group to
follow it - then he would be the only one she insulted.

It was polite. Precise. **Thoughtful.** It played to her strengths, specifically, rather than just slotting
her into the lineup as yet another DPS.

And it required him to trust her, as much as she trusted him.

Impulsively, she’d reached for the keyboard before she could think twice. **I await your command,**
**Shiroe-dono.**

*Er, -san is fine, really.*

**That would be inappropriate, Shiroe-dono.**

...**As you wish?**

She’d grinned behind the mask of her avatar, intrigued, and - for the first time in a long time -
simply happy. Every ninja should have a sworn lord; whether that lord knew it or not. And she
might just have found Akatsuki’s. If this dungeon worked out.

It had. As did the next, and the next. Not every mission they shared was successful; even Shiroe
might miss something in Elder Tale’s ever-shifting landscape of quests and monsters. But the
enchanter always had a fallback plan or three. They might sometimes retreat to fight another day,
but rare indeed was the adventure in which one of Shiroe’s party died.

**I trust him. And I don’t even know his real name.**

Shiroe and Naotsugu were character names, like Akatsuki. They hadn’t volunteered their real
names, and she hadn’t figured out a way to ask without breaking character. And... she just couldn’t
do that. Not yet. Not after the horrific way she’d woken up in this world.

She’d been online, gleefully anticipating the new update, waiting for the servers to reboot so she
could log in and find Akatsuki’s sworn lord in the middle of all-new trouble. Because he **would** be.
Shiroe attracted trouble like honey did wasps. Enchanters were squishy; Shiroe knew that better
than anyone. Yet he could **not** see a new part of the world and not poke it, any more than he could
walk by an upset young player in over their head-

The clock had clicked over.

The next thing she knew, she was standing on the green roof of a ruined skyscraper in Akihabara.

...No. Akatsuki the *male Assassin* had been standing on that roof. With Tsukino Akane’s terrified mind somehow along for the ride.

Her reflexes had been off. Her balance had been horrible. She hadn’t had a clue what to do next, or even if she could get out of the building without breaking her own neck. She’d tripped more than once, painfully.

*What happened? Where am I? What do I do? Did this happen to anyone else?*

*Did it happen to Shiroe?*

It should have been a crazy thought. But the view beyond the roof edge was Akihabara, as she’d seen it hundreds of times in the game. She was in Akatsuki’s body. And the last thing she remembered was waiting for the Novasphere Pioneers reboot.

Shiroe had been waiting for it, too.

If that wasn’t a coincidence, if other people had also been transported to a world that shouldn’t exist-

*Shiroe could be here. I have to find him. I promised to protect him!*

Right now, that promise seemed laughable. She couldn’t even protect herself.

*Even shrimpy little Akane could protect herself better than I can right now! Everything’s too small, I move too far - if only this body were smaller-*

She froze, one hand against a wall to hold her up. There was a way. If this was Seldesha, if magic was real - she knew exactly what she needed.

*A character adjustment potion. They’re rare, and expensive. But Shiroe has one. How can I find him?*

If this was Seldesha... Akatsuki had the Tracker subclass. If she could figure that out, she could find him.

*Maybe. I don’t have a starting point, I don’t have a trail, he definitely doesn’t have a lair-*

She bumped wrapped knuckles off her forehead. A Tracker could do a lot more than just find trails. Some of her tracking was inherently mystical. Seek Prey, for example, let her character reach out and *sense* the presence of what she sought. At least, that’s what the flavor text on a Tracker’s abilities said, adding that welcome touch of lore and legend to simple game mechanics about icons on a mini-map.

Mystical or not, she’d found Shiroe with it before. In the game.

*Even when I’m not looking for him. There just aren’t that many level 90 Enchanters out there.*

The trick was how to access it. She didn’t have a menu.
Maybe... maybe if I just close my eyes and reach out....

Far below, something seemed to burn bright as the sun.

Akatsuki blinked away what had to be sunspots; either from the menu that had suddenly shimmered into her field of view with the Seek Prey mini-map lit, or from the massive suit of armor strutting far below. Argh. Tanks-

A tank with a mage companion. Tall. Slender. With a familiar white and gold cloak, light glinting from round-lensed glasses.

**Shiroe?**

Shiroe... with someone. Someone she didn’t know.

She hesitated on the ledge, catching her altered self against the wall before she could trip. Maybe... maybe she shouldn’t go down there. There were other icons on her mini-map, other players nearby that she might know. Others who knew Akatsuki... the male assassin. Not a girl.

*If I go to someone else, they’re going to laugh. And then... even if they stop laughing, what could they do?*

Shiroe might laugh, too. She hoped he wouldn’t-

He tripped.

*Shiroe’s... clumsy?* Akatsuki thought, incredulous, as the enchanter picked himself up out of the grass. *But I’ve seen him in the game. He’s no DPS, but his agility’s definitely above average for a mage-

Oh. Oh, *no.*

*Shiroe’s avatar. It doesn’t match his body, either.*

The mingled rush of worry and relief made her stomach churn. If... if he was clumsy in that body, then maybe he would understand.

*He’s an enchanter. No matter what happens, he can still cast spells. But I can’t fight like this!*

She’d never doubted she would have to fight. Wasn’t that how manga like this worked? Players trapped in a game turned real, until they died or fought their way free. It was impossible. It was pure fantasy.

It was real. Real as the arms and legs that always reached farther than she meant to. Getting her fingers to manipulate the icons to bring up text chat was horrible-

*No keyboard.*

Well, she thought, eyeing some handy rubble, there was always the *direct* approach.

Her aim had been atrocious, but at least she hadn’t flattened them.

*He saw me. He knows me. But he doesn’t know.*

Making her way down to where Shiroe and his armored companion waited in the ruin took every bit of inward focus she had.
That’s Shiroe? she’d thought, finally getting a good look. *He’s... that can’t be....*

His icon’s gaze had been sharp; Shiroe’s was a laser. The icon hadn’t had concentration lines near his eyes, that smoothed out when he saw Akatsuki was in one piece. The icon hadn’t had *imperfections*; a lock of wayward black poking up near the part of his hair, writing callus on his fingers, a shy hesitation in his smile.

It was just as well Naotsugu had stuck his brash foot in his mouth. Squealing like a fangirl hugging Pikachu was not how she wanted Shiroe to remember their first in-person meeting.

But he really, really was cute. Much cuter than his icon.

And Shiroe hadn’t laughed. He’d been upset. Worried. She could see it in the way he fingered his staff, as if racking his brain for a spell that could fix this. He hadn’t even tried to bargain for the rare potion. Just handed it over, and hauled his clanking friend to the other side of the screen to give her some privacy.

She’d swigged the potion, and caught her breath. If everything worked like the game, this should take her back to the character creation scene-

Her body caught fire.

Pain. Everything was pure pain. She couldn’t think; she could barely breathe.

*Give me something I can fight in!*

No console to select her stats. No casual scroll of character models to choose from. Just pain, and her determination to fight; her will matched against bone-melting agony, struggling to hold the image of one perfect kendo form, blade slicing the air like silk....

The absence of pain almost made her black out.

*Over.* She blinked, registering how everything seemed to have jumped a foot taller. *Well, at least I should be able to walk....*

*Why is my head so heavy?*

She caught a hank of long, raven-violet hair, and blinked. The color spilling over her fingers was almost the same as Akatsuki’s had been, but the length-

*This model is definitely a girl.* She breathed a sigh of relief, then frowned. *If I’m going to fight, I need to keep this out of my face.*

Her fingers were moving without thought, finding something to tie back most of the long strands in a few oddments from her gear. Huh.

*Now I just need to face the pervert.*

Though the look on Shiroe’s face as she stepped out had been utterly worth it. He was just so pale. And his face had gone from snow-white to maple-leaf-scarlet in a heartbeat.

She’d seen her friends flirt. She knew what a flustered guy looked like. But she’d never seen it because of her.

Then he’d done his best to bury the blush and everything along with it under *I am going to be professional.* Which - well, on one hand, darn. On the other - Shiroe in problem-solving mode was
familiar, in a place where nothing was like Earth. Shiroe was a rock standing against the sea, and she wasn’t too proud to shelter behind him.

Neither was Naotsugu. Which made the Assassin and the college student perk up, intrigued. She knew guys. She definitely knew tanks. Even the nicest guys had an ego, and tanks were all about attention.

But unlike the tanks she’d dealt with in most PUGs, Naotsugu seemed to get all the attention he needed from poking fun at a flustered Enchanter and dishing out Curb Stomp Battles as needed with a shield, a sword, and a grin. Taking orders from a skinny, glasses-wearing wizard? Getting kneed in the face by a girl half his size and weight? All part of the day, along with random monsters and bad panty jokes. Maybe under ordinary circumstances she would have been reluctant to party as a girl with someone who openly called himself a pervert. But Shiroe trusted him. Because he trusts himself. And those who trusted themselves - really trusted themselves, not just strutted around acting like they did...

People like that, could be trusted right back. No wonder Shiroe had been glad to find him. So-called pervert or not.

Besides, she was pretty sure she could handle him. The faces Naotsugu had made as she’d stretched....

Oh, that had felt good. No matter how hard she’d practiced, she’d never been able to just flex like she could now. Or peer through the darkness like a cat; with Nightvision, she’d never have to worry about being caught off guard in the dark again. And Sneak and Silent Move, wrapping her mind around here-I-am and there-I-will-be to flicker between them like a shadow cast by a candle-flame....

I never want to stop.

Though this world had its own grim perils. Too many of which came in the form of other Adventurers. PKers. Despicable.

Yet she wasn’t sorry about that fight. She’d trusted Naotsugu, because Shiroe did - but that night was the first time she’d been sure he trusted her. Deliberately tanking three DPS-specced fighters, counting on an Enchanter with almost no attack power and an Assassin he couldn’t see to take down their foes before the massed attack brought him down....

Naotsugu had trusted her. Shiroe had trusted her; she’d known that visual on four was meant for her, as in find who cast that root and do something about it.

Which meant attacking other players. She didn’t like it - but they’d attacked her party first.

We’re trapped in another world. Half of us are scared to death. And they treat this like - like it’s still a game? Like they can just terrify people, hurt them, and it doesn’t matter because we come back to life?

Despicable. Utterly beneath contempt. And her party had counted on her to be the cool, competent Assassin, delivering that harshest of lessons.

Her party trusted her. Even when she looked like a cute little kid. That was warming, if a bit scary.
Though not nearly as scary as how Shiroe had read the PKers’ minds. Akatsuki had a hard enough time wrapping her mind around the petty malice that would attack another player. Shiroe had predicted the entire fight.

*He knew they’d try to eliminate Naotsugu. That they’d underestimate Electrical Fuzz because it’s a weak attack, and never pay attention to the light left behind. That Naotsugu could use that opening....*

Shiroe had known every move they were going to make. Down to Dog-Ears’ faked surrender. And Akatsuki’s response.

*You will not touch my lord!*

It still unsettled her now, thinking of that sudden, deadly strike. In that moment, she hadn’t been roleplaying the stoic ninja. She’d been Akatsuki, the enchanter Shiroe’s loyal Assassin, dealing death in furious silence.

Shiroe hadn’t even flinched.

Scary.

But better than the brooding. Shiroe might try to pass it off as just thinking. She knew better. He wasn’t “doing nothing”, no matter what he might think. He was gathering information, trying to figure out what of this world was and wasn’t like the game. He was crafting tentative alliances; Marielle might act like a total flutterby, but the Crescent Moon Alliance was holding together, and they’d be a solid, quiet powerbase to contact other guilds and start building something beyond each group looking after themselves. He’d been out in the darkness looking at campfires, instead of retreating to an inn. Trying to figure out how to *fix* things.

*But he can’t fix all of this himself. So - I’m glad we’re out here. One girl. One rescue. Let’s complete a quest, and get our feet under us with a victory.*

They needed that victory. Her lord maybe most of all. Akatsuki knew how easy it was to turn inward on yourself in silence; to bury what you wanted in the casket of what everyone else expected. But this world, this impossible situation - it was completely beyond the boundaries of the expected. If they were going to survive, they needed to go outside that box.

*We need to be free.*

A dizzying thought. Partly from exhilaration; this world was a dream made real, and she wanted to soak in every moment of it. Partly from guilt; breaking out of her family’s box was necessary, but she was going to miss them so much.

But she didn’t have any regrets, Akatsuki thought, as they picked themselves up to start off again. Except one; and that was so unimportant, she shouldn’t even mention it.

*I wish... I wish I thought living the game would be as amazing as playing it....*

“Wait.”

Summoning whistle in hand, Akatsuki blinked at the other two. What exactly were they holding? They looked like carved wooden eagle heads. Only eagles didn’t have ears-

The whistle soared out forever.
Wings. That sound is... wings....

“You didn’t think we were going to get to the far north on horses, did you?”

Gryphons!

Face still red, Akatsuki hung onto Shiroe as they took off into the sky, breathing in fur and feathers and the faint ozone tang of magic. Endless blue was veined with clouds, and Seldesha spread out below them like a silken quilt of rivers and forests and fields....

No. It wasn’t going to be as amazing as the game.

It’s going to be better.

Chapter End Notes

PUG - pick-up group; players who may not know each other well getting together in an informal party.
Jenkins - as in Leeroy Jenkins. (See TVTropes. Mwah-ha-hah....)
The Odds of Not Drowning

Chapter Summary

Naotsugu’s subclass is Frontier Scout. Thank goodness....

Chapter Notes

Monsters are one thing. Falling bridges, quite another.

Wet, Naotsugu thought as he lifted his pair of mutually-smitten idiots up onto the rocky shore. Thank goodness he’d had a moment to tuck most of his armor back into inventory before diving after Akatsuki. And for the fact that the Frontier Scout subclass had a bunch of useful survival skills. Like, say, swimming. Very, very wet.

But Shiroe was breathing, and all of them were in one piece. Good.

“We should give him a potion!”

Akatsuki, freaking out as she stripped the soaked cloak and components-pack off their Enchanter. Naotsugu couldn’t blame her much; that’d been one heck of a drop.

Still, one of them had to keep a level head. “When he can’t hold his breath?” Naotsugu pointed out. “If the river didn’t drown him, we don’t want to do the job for it.” He made his voice casual, matter of fact, as he hung white fabric up on a boulder to dry. “Look at his HP. It’s not down that much. Just give him a few minutes.”

“A few minutes-!” Akatsuki turned Shiroe on his side so any water could drain. She watched him keep breathing, one dainty hand curling into a white-knuckled fist. “What was he thinking?”

“What, you think he was thinking?” Naotsugu teased. “He lets you take on the monsters. That was a bridge, and he....”

The Assassin was glaring at him. With an Evil Aura of the hue of you are not making sense, and you had better start right now.

Hardcore roleplayer, Naotsugu remembered. Right. “He never talked to you about real life, huh? Don’t feel bad,” he hurried on, before Akatsuki could bristle any scarier. “Took us months to get him to open up in Debauchery Tea Party. Too many years of every player and his uncle wanting things from him, you should have seen what I had to set up to meet him and we were living in almost the same neighborhood... Shiroe’s an engineer. Will be, if we get back - anyway. Like I said; that was a bridge, not a monster. If a bridge falls, people get hurt. And it’s an engineer’s fault.”

Wide purple eyes blinked at him. “But-!”

“Did I say he was thinking?” Naotsugu shrugged. “Most of the time he’s pretty good at keeping the
two separate; Enchanter and engineer. But we’ve been here for weeks. He can’t block out a weekend and say, *I’ll be an Enchanter for five hours*. He *is* an Enchanter. All the time.” He gave her a dead-serious look. “Which means he can’t shut off the engineer, either. We’re going to have to watch him, more than I thought.”

“Watch him?” Akatsuki sputtered. But her knuckles were loosening. Just a little.

“Heh.” Naotsugu glanced at his friend’s even breathing, and propped his sword and shield up against the boulder with the cloak. “We should have been dead just hitting the water. You know that, right?”

Akatsuki swallowed. “...Yes. I know.”

“Shiroe knows it too.” Naotsugu grinned, and stood up to stretch. “Gryphons and other worlds and mini-ninja. I guess that was just one impossible thing too many for a while!”

For a second, he was sure he was going to get another knee to the face.

“Uh....”

Akatsuki dropped out of stance to fuss over their bedraggled Enchanter. “My lord!”


*Got to figure out a way to hint around that the chibi’s good for him,* Naotsugu thought, drying off his sword as if he’d never been worried one bit. *Hmm. Maybe, “what is it with your love life and falling rocks”*?

Heh. Maybe not quite.

Eh, not to worry. He’d think of something.
Shiroe (revised)

Chapter Summary

The less-jossed version. Heh.

Chapter Notes

Ep 2 and 3 jossed some, so... here’s the rewrite. Hee.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At least I don’t have a tail.

It said something about the whole impossible situation, that this was currently on Shiroe’s list of Reasons to Keep Getting Up in the Morning. Not nearly as important as the fact that Naotsugu and Akatsuki needed him to keep it together, but....

Some of the Crescent Moon Alliance’s guild-members had tails. He was not going to ask how they were handling it. Heavy doses of Marielle’s industrial-strength glomps along with a few friends in the same boat, probably. All things considered, he was just glad he’d created Shiroe as a race closer to human-

The enchanter took a deliberate breath, and another drink of tastes-like-water. It was a sunny day. They had a rescue to carry out. They had something to do, that mattered.

It didn’t help. A strategist’s mind kept circling back to one inescapable fact.

This body isn’t human.

Which was not a safe thing to think, despite all the evidence that their physical existences were... more malleable than reality. PKers dissolving into a rain of items. Monster-slain players reviving in the Cathedral. Akatsuki’s form shifting in a flood of light and screams - and now he had to get to know the efficient, silent assassin he’d partied with as a girl, and he was not a closet pervert, thanks, Naotsugu....

Anyway. Whatever they looked like, they had to believe they were still human beings. Though strictly speaking, Shiroe wasn’t sure any Adventurer was human in this world. Human beings died when they were killed.

Like the People of the Land. NPCs are mortal, and we’re not. That’s... not good. If we think we’re human, and they’re not, the city isn’t going to be civilized anymore. If we think we’re not human - those PKers might just be the start. If killing other players isn’t enough of a thrill to give them something to do, and they can’t kill inside a town... Shouryuu and the others are right. If the balance of power between the guilds destabilizes, things are going to get much worse. How can we fix that-
No. He was not going to think about the mess behind them in Akihabara right now. Eighteen members of the Crescent Moon Alliance could take care of themselves, and the one who couldn’t needed them to keep it together to come get her. Serara, Naotsugu, Akatsuki; all of them were depending on the legendary strategist, Shiroe.

*It’s kind of hard to be legendary when you feel like you need to kick off the platform shoes.*

A couple of centimeters shouldn’t make that much of a difference. Really. It wasn’t *that* much.

...So why did he keep getting hit with, *everything is too short?*

He flexed the fingers of his avatar’s hand, still unsettled by how smoothly they answered his will. These weren’t the hands he’d grown up with. Fingers and thumb were a little thinner, a little longer. And stronger. This body could grip a staff or hold a horse’s reins for hours, when a grad student wasn’t used to hanging onto more than books and papers. This body knew combat, without conscious thought; and every potential explanation he came up with for why just made the abyss of fear yawning deeper-

And he was avoiding the real problem. Again.

*Fifteen minutes. I promised.*

Naotsugu had played with him for years; he knew Shiroe needed a little quiet time for a break after a meal. He’d keep himself and Akatsuki busy.

Glancing out of the corner of his eye to make sure the other two weren’t watching, Shiroe pressed two fingers against his cheekbone; a conscious, known point of physical sensation he could use as an anchor. And reached out, with something that wasn’t a physical sense at all.

It wasn’t exactly a shimmer. It certainly wasn’t a sound; though it reminded him of the pressure-in-his-bones feeling of touching active speakers. It was if he could suddenly see a B sharp, or hear the stark difference between cerulean blue and pine-green.

Sun-on-cobwebs of old magic in the roadway; untouched, slowly unraveling. Bright shades of power in Naotsugu’s shield, Akatsuki’s kodachi, his own cloak and staff; enchantments that had begun as ancient magic, but flared into new and joyous life with care and use. Enticing whisper-colors of faint magic on the breeze, like gossamer veils, hinting of ruins and lairs and creatures of magic....

*Sense Aura.*

Supposedly the other magical races might develop similar mystical senses. The frail Mystics, for one, might sense living creatures’ magic even more precisely. But he’d wanted a character that would delve into the secrets of the *world*, not other people; and Half-Alvs were supposed to have an uncanny sense for not just magic, but specifically ancient enchantments....

*Check. And it won’t. Turn. Off!*

He hadn’t thought about it until he’d faced down Marielle yesterday. The world had been odd enough around them already, without trying to sort out the almost-colors and not-sounds at the edge of his senses. And Marielle - he knew her race was Elf, he could see the ears. But it hadn’t *meant* anything, beyond a note in his head on likely stat adjustments and potential NPC allies. She was a pretty priestess with a dangerously low cuteness threshold and a glomp that could bend steel bars; just ask Naotsugu’s armor. Gold hair and eyes and pointed ears... back when Elder Tale was just a game anyone could customize their avatars. It wasn’t a big deal.
Until he’d backed her into a verbal corner, and seen Marielle’s Elf ears poke through gold as they flattened in dismay. And almost lost a strategist’s composure in sheer, unadulterated panic, because his flare of annoyance had come with the oddest sense of *coming into focus*.

*Elf-cleric-agitated but magic’s contained, not flaring, just upset but be watchful-*

*I will not panic now,* he’d thought then. *I do not have time for panic, the Crescent Moon Alliance doesn’t have time for panic, I will panic later. For fifteen minutes. After lunch. If we’re not being attacked.*

Well. This was later.

*We now return you to your regularly scheduled panic attack.... Oh, hell.*

Because at the time, he hadn’t been sure. Not *completely* sure. Now?

Shiroe closed his eyes, and turned his head toward one of those gossamer-drifts of magic. Small, sparkly; the sense-of-life said *animal* but the brightness of it said *status effect likely-*

Opened his eyes, peering into the distance. And caught a glimpse of gray feathers, flashing bits of scintillating orange and violet.

*It’s a dazzle-dove.*

A low-level monster, usually only dangerous if you got careless and managed to get Dazzled near something nastier. Which, oh, he *might* have done, many years ago....

*So you’re sensing auras. It’s not visible, like ears or a tail. As long as you don’t stare at things that aren’t there, no one will probably even notice.*

...Somehow, knowing that didn’t help much.

He squinted at the not-quite-colors. No; it wasn’t moving his eyes that made a difference. It was moving his *attention*. Which could actually be useful. Just as he’d found in the game, being in utter darkness wouldn’t stop him from having *some* clue where anything magical was.

*Non-magical is another matter. But most ruins in Seldesha have background levels of magic... which is why it’s not always safe to live in them, brr.....*

He took another breath, and deliberately lowered his hand.

*The online game only gave you sight and sound. There was no way to know anything about... other senses.*

Somehow, some way, he felt as if this was his own damn fault. Which was completely illogical. *Elder Tale had been a game.*

*And now it’s reality.*

If the world was real, if the monsters were real... then he had to accept that his avatar was real, too. Even if the consequences were terrifying.

*I wasn’t joking about the leaves, Naotsugu.*

He couldn’t really distinguish individual leaves. But he could feel the general shape of *trees growing around magic*, and Akatsuki could zip through the branches without stirring a one. Just a
bright flash of *there-and-gone*.

And it’d been so comforting to feel that flash in the darkness, whenever she stepped out of Sneak. If startling. He was an Enchanter, not a Guardian. Yet he’d known where his ally was....

And he’d known their enemies were closing in as fast as Naotsugu had.

*Of course I did,* Shiroe thought wryly. *That’s why I picked Half-Alv to start with. Enchanters have a hard enough time surviving the first few levels as it is. I knew the Sense Aura bonus would let me detect mobs closing in on the group more quickly. And a few seconds to pick the right spell makes all the difference.*

There had been other reasons to pick that race as well. Some game-useful. Some just interesting. He’d liked playing Shiroe.

But that was when it’d been a game.

*So now it’s not.* The Enchanter tried to let the panic wash over him, hoping it would fade with another breath. *So. If someone had warned me - what would I have changed?*

Besides not logging on that night in the first place? Shiroe was his best, his most powerful character. When the triffid had thrown him - it hadn’t been luck that he’d rolled with the fall. He knew what Shiroe could do. Even when he was hurt. Even when he was afraid.

*Shiroe’s my best chance. Their best chance.*

Maybe they would revive at a Cathedral if they died. But something inside him tensed up at the thought. It was too easy. Too simple.

*It’s magic. And powerful magic always has a catch.*

If he didn’t want to die, and he didn’t want his party to die, then he had to accept reality. Here and now, he was Shiroe, level 90 Half-Alv Enchanter.

*So you can feel magic. Live with it. He tried for a smile. It could have been worse. Poor Akatsuki.*

Oddly, that thought made the smile come easier. If being Shiroe had bothered him that much, he could have used the shapeshifting potion. But if he had, Akatsuki would have been in real trouble. Roleplaying the opposite sex for a few hours could be fun. Being stuck in the wrong gender? That could be life-threatening.

Compared to that, what were a few weird lights in the edge of his vision?

*But when we get back to Earth, I’m going to find whoever developed Novasphere Pioneers. You do not mess with level 90 spellcasters....*

Except he wouldn’t be level 90. Not on Earth. That was the whole point.

*I have a party behind me, and I’ll bet we’ll have the Crescent Moon Alliance right behind us. I’m sure we’ll think of something.*

Which was good, because his fifteen minutes were just about up.

*I have a plan. I can live with this. For as long as it takes.*

...Though maybe he’d better schedule another panic attack tomorrow. Just in case.
Shiroe stood, and took a deep breath of sun-warmed air. Touched his pouch, where his summoning flute waited. After all, being stuck here wasn’t all bad. In the game, your avatar’s expression never changed....

And he had to see the look on Akatsuki’s face.

Chapter End Notes

According to the light novel canon, the “flavor text” on anything in the Elder Tale world (items, monsters, races, individual characters) not only began to apply as real once the Adventurers woke in Seldesha, it started expanding over time. With various hilarious and scary results. And the flavor text on Half-Alvs says, among other things, that they’re “tall, slender, and full of curiosity. Descendents of the most magically powerful race on the world of Seldesha, throwbacks born among humans with Alv ancestry, who have a high affinity for mysterious writings and ancient magical ruins”. As Kryal put it, “sounds like the ATA gene turned Up To Eleven”.

So, I have no canon evidence for Sense Aura. But it seems possible, and it was easier to badger the bunnies into going for that given how disappointed they were about the ears....
It's time to start playing for real....

Stop thinking of it as a game. Sitting outside his tent, Shiroe pulled his cloak a little tighter around him against the chill of the night. Thinking. Or maybe trying not to think. The implications, if Nyanta was right....

We already have evidence he is. Maybe it's time to stop thinking. And act.

Staff raised, Shiroe summoned Magic Light.

Shimmering out of the crook of polished wood, the Wisp blinked at him.

The enchanter let out a slow breath, locking gazes with the translucent globe of white light. When Elder Tale had just been a game, the flavor text on Magic Light had said it summoned a minor spirit of light. But in the game, it had just been a bright white sphere floating near his avatar, allowing him to view a battlefield otherwise dark to all but Assassins. The first time he'd summoned it in this world, after the Apocalypse, and seen light looking back....

He hadn’t quite yelped and swatted it. He’d just... looked. And added yet another item to his growing list of Things to Panic About Later.

It blinks. It looks at me, and at where we’re going; almost as if it likes the walk. It reads maps over my shoulder, it hides behind me when the monsters swarm. It acts... alive.

The Wisp was blinking at him now, turning from side to side as if to see why he might have summoned it, then turning back to him with a bob that was almost a shrug.

“No monsters right now,” Shiroe murmured. “Just questions....”

He wasn’t an Assassin. But being a level 90 anything raised your threat perception ability. Shiroe glanced back toward the rustle of skirts. “Serara? I didn’t think you’d be up.”

“I saw the light.” The young druid looked serious, staff gripped in both hands. “Is something wrong?”

“No! No, nothing’s wrong,” he tried to wave her off. “I’m just... experimenting.”

“Experimenting? But Magic Light is a low-level spell....” Brown eyes peered at the glowing Wisp, then widened. “Oh! You think magic might be like cooking?”

“Well,” he ducked his head, “there’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?”

Serara stepped nearer, eyes shining. “It’s cute! Will it let me pet it?”

Shiroe raised an eyebrow. He hadn’t expected that question. Though given Serara’s reaction to Nyanta....
“Um.” Serara nibbled her lip. “Can I pet it? It’s kind of see-through.”

“I honestly don’t know-”

Pale light ducked into the collar of his cloak. Bobbed up a little, as if peeking shyly at the druid.

Shiroe started. The touch was cool, and ticklish. Almost like a tiny fish nibbling at his skin, drinking away sips of energy-

*Oh. Of course.*

“Um... are you going to get tired?” Serara looked a little worried; hand held up empty, not so near as to startle the Wisp. “Magic Light’s a continuous spell, right?”

“It is.” Shiroe kept his nod subtle; he didn’t want to disturb the spirit. “But at my level, my mana regen is so fast I barely feel it. It just tickles a little.” Which gave him an idea. If it really was drinking part of his magic....

*I’ve cast spells with just a gesture before,* Shiroe thought. *I know what it feels like, focusing the magic with my hand.*

So how malleable was magic, now that it wasn’t a game?

*What happens if I just try to call magic? Not a spell. Nothing specific. Just... power.*

For a long moment, nothing happened. He wasn’t even sure what he was trying to do. Every spell he cast was keyed to *something*. Words, gestures, the console....

*If it’s not a game, then someone had to learn magic from scratch. How do I start from the beginning? It’s not like cooking, people don’t go around learning to move energy-*

It was a good thing that Akatsuki wasn’t out here, because for once, he might have earned a knee to the face. People moved energy on Earth. They did it all the time.

*Every martial artist uses chi. And you do it by visualization, and... breathing.*

He drew in a breath, and slowly let it out. Picturing that flow of energy from his heart, down his arm....

Something seemed to shimmer above his fingers, like air above hot asphalt.

Moving slowly, he lifted that hand near the collar of his cloak, palm upward. The Wisp bobbed a little in place, then hovered over his fingers.

Carefully, Shiroe brought his hand down, until he and Serara both could look the Wisp in its blinking spots of eyes. “You’re a Druid. What do you think?”

Wand of Oak in hand, Serara tilted her head, and half-closed her eyes. “It feels... a little like a tree? It doesn’t have roots, and it’s not solid. But it feels more like a tree than a rock, or an animal.”

Shiroe sat up straight, pulse quickening. *Nyanta’s right. I should have known.*

“A little?” She blushed. “I didn’t have much chance to practice in Susukino. Out here, it’s easier... it’s strange, but it’s kind of nice. Can you feel them? Oh, but - you’re an Enchanter.”
“I don’t think I feel them the same way you do.” Shiroe made himself take a calm breath. *She doesn’t know me. I’m looking out for her, but she’s in Marielle’s guild. She doesn’t have to be responsible for me. I can feel magic. I think—*

“Oh! That makes sense.” Her cheeks went pink. “But I’m sure Mr. Shiroe already thought of that.”

“I’m not,” Shiroe admitted, cupping the Wisp in his hand. It seemed okay with one stroking finger, though it edged away if he tried to pet it. “You have an idea?”

“Well… you’re an Enchanter. And I think Guildmaster Marielle said Enchanters can move mana?” She turned a little pinker. “I wasn’t really listening.”

“That’s true,” Shiroe nodded, holding still as Serara carefully reached in to stroke her own finger over the glowing sphere. And hoping he wasn’t blushing too badly. *I was so worried about… not being human… I forgot that our classes might have an effect. Which was very, very silly; he knew Darkvision was an Assassin skill, and that Naotsugu had heightened senses to detect enemies because he was a Guardian. Why hadn’t he thought about his class, not just his race?*

Damn. From that burn on his cheeks, he was definitely blushing. “It’s one of an Enchanter’s special abilities,” Shiroe said hastily. “The ability to redistribute your party’s mana. I would have used it when you were healing Naotsugu, but I didn’t want Londark to realize what kind of mage I was, or he might have been prepared for Thorn Bind Hostage. So… if I can move other people’s mana, why not mine? And I think I just did—”

Light fled up into the crook of his staff, blinking fast.

“Owww.” Serara sighed. “I guess it doesn’t know me.”

“Not yet,” Shiroe murmured. A little surprised; for someone who was so obviously crushing on the Chief, she knew how to stay still and wait. Blinking slowed. Cat-careful, the Wisp edged back down; circling wood, then twining its way around his arm and shoulder, before circling back to settle in his palm as if absolutely nothing had happened. Bright eyes turned up toward Serara, tilting in inquiry.

“Oh, that’s why it feels like a tree!” Serara almost bounced in place. “It likes your staff!”

Shiroe raised dark brows, looking over the staff that fit into his hand as if he’d been carrying it for years. Which… his avatar *had.*

The Prudent Horned Owl Cane, he recalled. *How did the flavor text go? ‘It is said that it aids the possessor’s thoughts with its wisdom, lighting a path through uncertainty….’*

Lighting. And the Wisp was a spirit of light.

“Shiroe?” Serara and the Wisp were both peering at him, worried. “Is something wrong?”

“The flavor text. It’s not just words.” He stared at the little Wisp, wondering what other secrets his own magic might hide. “It means something.”

“It does?” Serara looked at the Wand of Oak in her off hand, brown eyes wide. “Mighty enough to help an Adventurer setting forth on her first journey defend herself.”

“It did, didn’t it?” Shiroe studied her Wand, trying to sort out what he felt. If magic worked differently than what they knew from the game; if they could make it work differently….
He should feel overwhelmed. Afraid. There was an endless gaping unknown here, and their lives might depend on everything they didn’t know.

But what he felt was the thrill he’d had the first time his character had set foot on the last expansion’s ships, testing magic and wits against pirates and the ocean. Only... vaster. Deeper. Like the moment he’d looked into the sun over the Lyport Channel, and realized they were the first Adventurers who’d truly seen that dawn.

This is our reality.

“We should be playing with this,” Shiroe said, half to himself. “With our magic.”

“Eh?!” Serara’s jaw dropped. “Playing? But - but-!”

“No in the middle of a fight.” Shiroe smiled at her; if anyone had to right to still be worried after Susukino, she did. “But a lot of good teamwork in a party depends on combining subtle effects. If we can change what those are - we may have an advantage.” He looked at the Wisp, apparently quite happy to soak up that shimmer of power rather than just sip his aura. “We’re not in a game anymore. And that makes playing even more important. We can’t just survive. We have to find ways to hope. To have fun.” He laughed softly. “Serara, this is the biggest expansion ever. If we don’t find out how to play it, what kind of gamers are we?”
You don't often have a barn-full of Adventurers.

He’d seen some odd things blown into Arb on the wings of a storm, Fedor mused, but he’d never seen Adventurers blown in before.

Oh, it hadn’t been hard to guess what they were. Dressed like noble mages and warriors, but not a servant or a stitch of common livery between them? Not to mention, politely asking to stay the night in out of the rain. Only Adventurers were that strange.

Odd, though. For supernatural creatures legend said could appear and vanish from thin air, they acted very... human.

Well, except for the gentleman werecat, Fedor chuckled to himself, watching the burly warrior and tiny ninja mock-battle one another for the straw. Obviously playing; and why shouldn’t they? A rainy day was good for rest, to balance long days when the sun was right for hoeing, reaping, and all the myriads of other tasks a farm needed from dawn to dusk. You hoed in the sun, sweat running into your eyes, because Fedor had been a farmer a long time, and he’d seen how crops hoed wet fared poorly. If it wasn’t a wilt, it was pests; and a wise farmer only asked for a crop-blessing when he needed it. If the druids and priests had to spend all the growing season cleaning up careless farmers’ mistakes, and then winter came on with all its worries, with the risk of ratmen plagues if local ruins hadn’t been cleared out enough... well. He’d lived through hard winters like that, when others hadn’t. Better to hoe to the times and seasons, and leave rainy days for rest.

And, perhaps, the time to watch his grandchildren wonder at legends breathing on their own doorstep.

Though these legends were doing more than just breathing. Fedor grinned as the ninja let loose with a war cry piercing as any griffin’s, and sprang onto the startled warrior’s shoulders. He’d seen many odd things over his long life, but a slip of a girl wrestling down a man who could have passed for a friendly giant was a new one.

“My apologies.” The young man who seemed to be their leader was rubbing the back of his head as he watched the fighter yelp something that sounded like Uncle. A rueful smile flitted over his face, and he bent back to setting up Fedor’s log stools for whenever the others calmed down enough to use them.

For his part, Fedor was just as glad he’d stored the stools out here. He’d planned to lend his barn to ordinary travelers on their way to harvest festivals, not stray Adventurers. The thought of having those two rascals loose in his house - well, he was sure they meant well, and if the house had survived the twins’ antics they couldn’t do that much more damage....

Still. Adventurers in his own house? It’d be a bit like inviting a unicorn into your garden. Just - very odd.

“All of us have been on the road for some time,” Shiroe went on, “coming south from Susukino.
We’ve been camping out every night, and... well, I don’t have to tell you what the midges have been like. We’re all looking forward to a chance to sleep under a roof.”

Metal crashed.

“...I think.”

For a leader of living legends, Shiroe’s smile was remarkably sheepish.

Then again, he didn’t look like a legend, Fedor mused. Without that wondrous white-and-gold cloak, or that staff of ominous wisdom, the Adventurer could have passed for any young scholar.

Well, Fedor was old enough to know actions mattered far more than appearances. “All the way from Susukino?” He softened his interest with a smile. “That’s quite impressive.” Mere villagers rarely ventured farther than the nearest major Fair, with good reason. Nobles did their best to protect the common folk, and Adventurers sallied forth to face monsters on heroic quests, but travel wasn’t ever safe. Yet here were five folk who’d come all that way, and all that seemed to worry them were bugs and a little rain. What else could they be but Adventurers?

“A young friend of ours was in trouble.” For a moment, the eyes behind those glasses looked sharp. Dangerous.

Then it passed, and Shiroe was just the sheepish scholar again. “Of course we had to help. What do you think your neighbors have extra of in their kitchen gardens? Nyanta always likes to surprise us with his cooking....”

Not just a scholar, Fedor decided. This is going to be interesting.

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“So you’re going to Akihabara?” Fedor cupped his hands around the excellent apple-peel tea. “A long way. Well, not for folk on their way back from Susukino! But we People of the Land travel little.”

Elbows on the table, the warrior grinned at him. “If you want to hear tales of our travels, we have plenty!”

“I’d love to hear them....” Ah, there were his little rascals. “Don’t just stand there,” he told his grandchildren, “come in. Don’t be afraid.” Because while he’d seen that moment of not harmless on Shiroe’s face, it hadn’t been aimed at anyone here. Not to mention, when Shiroe had looked at the doorway and started, as if he’d seen someone he missed....

Do Adventurers have children?

The warrior certainly acted as if they might; grinning and exclaiming over Mischa and Ivan like any young man introduced to little cousins for the first time. The ninja, though, violet eyes wide as if she faced a forest boar on the rampage... oh dear. “I guess they like her,” Fedor smiled, trying to reassure the young mage. Though if she kept backing up like that, he’d have to step in and rescue her.

The warrior’s grin got even wider. “They’re all kids-”

Flying steel pinned him to the wall.

Sipping his tea, Shiroe hadn’t even blinked. “You asked for that.”
And then they’re not like normal people at all, Fedor reflected. Kind, and apparently without a malicious bone in their bodies; at least, these three. But not normal.

Though he couldn’t complain. It’d been a while since he’d had such a fascinated audience. Why, from the rapt looks on their faces, you’d think the twins’ birth had been a great and heroic quest!

Hmm. Marta over in the next village didn’t tell the tale much at the fairs these days, but a few years back she’d told anyone who’d stand still long enough that an Adventurer had rescued her niece’s kitten from a tree. Maybe she hadn’t been pulling people’s legs, after all.

Which had quite occupied his thoughts until the gentleman werecat had come back with the ingredients for dinner, the cheerful little druid beside him bubbling away about possibilities.

A very young druid, Fedor finally decided, watching the rest of the Adventurers move in to look after her like a much younger sister. Which was odd; the werecat wasn’t even the same race, and all the older Adventurers treated each other like old friends, not blood kin. Though two of them might be more than that eventually, if he’d read some of the ninja’s glances at Shiroe right.

Very odd folk, Fedor concluded the next day, munching a leftover cookie as he watched them head out in the sunlight. Shook his head, and opened the door again to check the damage to the barn. The young druid had said something about cleaning it, but Adventurers were far better known for battle than any homely duties, and given some of Mischa’s first experiments with a scrub brush... well. I wonder if they’ll ever be back....

Fedor looked inside. Blinked. Rubbed his glasses on his shirt collar, and tucked them back on.

The inside of the barn was spotless.

Well if they are, there’ll be room for them!
Got to get away, got to get away-

“Shou!” A voice below, low and quiet; it almost sounded worried. “Hey, kid, ease up. You’ll break the-

Got to get away!

Something crunched, and he was falling.

Twist, bend knees, flex with it-

Shouryuu hit the floor before he could freeze; before he’d realized he should freeze, hit by so much strangeness of not my bed and not my house and not my world....

But level 90 Swashbucklers didn’t freeze when acrobatics were called for. He wasn’t sure he could, anymore.

“Hmm. I think our carpenters need to practice a little more.” That same voice, beside him now, with shadows of ears flicking above it. Hien planted his feet on the floor from the lower bunk, a shielded glow-light in one hand. “Shouryuu. You with us?”

With you. He blinked, and shook himself a little. Hien. The Crescent Moon Alliance. Seldesha. And all four of the oldest players bundled up in Marielle’s bedroom, so the new players everyone had rescued today could stay together in the rest of their improvised bunk-bed arrangements. Henrietta was right, they did need to buy a new guildhall.... “Did I wake up Marielle?”

“I was still up.” Their guildmaster stepped into the little pool of light, face serious for once. “Are you okay?”

“If you’re not, better keep the screaming down.” Hien leaned against what was left of an upright post that had been supporting Shouryuu’s bunk, and glanced toward where Henrietta sprawled snoring in Marielle’s bed. “Unless you want to spawn an Attack of the Kawaii.”

Shouryuu’s ears popped out just thinking about it. Traitors.
Marielle traded a glance with Hien, and stifled a giggle behind her hand.

Shouryuu felt his face burning. Where Marielle could see. Argh.

Though that wasn’t nearly as bad as what had happened the Day of the Apocalypse....

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Shouryuu still wasn’t sure how he’d made it to the Guildhall. The important thing was that he had, and he was busy taking notes as Marielle and Henrietta got everyone together and systematically contacted every player on people’s friend lists to find out what the heck was going on.

Taking notes, and trying not to look out the window at the chaos surging through Akihabara. Which meant he was spending too much time looking at the window... and the faded, shocked reflection staring back.

Gold-embroidered blue wyvern leather armor. Thunder-Claw Wind-Fang swords. Unruly dark blue hair, the same shade as wide eyes. And everything around him was so much bigger than it should be.

\textit{Amida save me. I’m cute.}

A cold chill went down his spine. Shouryuu swallowed, and forced his shaking knees to hold him up. The best thing he could do right now was stay right where he was, and hide in plain sight-

“Ooo, I wanna touch ‘em!” Ashlynn smiled in pure glee, reaching up to rub at foxy ears.

“Me next, me next!” Liliana bounced.

-And let Hien be a lounging, wisecracking distraction.

“Heh. Relax, ladies.” Hien’s tail twitched; the Assassin glanced at it out of the corner of his eye. “They’re not going to rub off.” Catching Shouryuu’s blink at him, the fox-tailed young man smirked.

...Oh, he was \textit{not} going to think about it, Shouryuu decided. Because Henrietta was right there, and he was not going to think about what his character being listed as Wolf Fang Tribe suddenly meant, now that everything seemed to be real, even if he could feel fur twitching against his hair and it was \textit{so weird}.

“Things seem to be similar in Susukino,” Henrietta reported. Took off her glasses to polish them, possibly buying a second to get her thoughts fully in order. “We’ll need to tell Serara to stay calm, and make no sudden moves out of the city zone until we have more information....”

The glasses were back on. And she was looking at him.

\textit{Don’t move. Don’t react. Don’t breathe-}

“Kawaii!”

\textit{NOOOO!}

Level 90 Swashbuckler versus a level 90 Bard. And Henrietta didn’t have to deal with a body suddenly half a foot too short. He never made it to the door.

\textit{Glomp... crushing my soul... can’t move....}
“Didn’t know you were into younger men, Henrietta.”

Shouryuu gasped for air, as Hien mercilessly teased the bard into blushing and denying she did anything of the sort. Shuddered, and did his best to tiptoe away-

Oh god. Marielle. A certain part of Marielle. Or pair of parts. Suddenly at eye level.

Ooo, pretty... so big- no! I didn’t think that! That’s Marielle - I mean the guildmaster!

“Poor Shouryuu.” Marielle’s hug wasn’t nearly as bone-crushing as he expected, even as slender fingers rubbed his ears. “This is scary, huh?”

“No,” Shouryuu stammered. Because it was, it really was, he shouldn’t have anything to rub there - but he was level 90, he was supposed to know what he was doing, and so many in Crescent Moon were just beginner players, and he had to stay strong.

I have to. So - I will.

He took a deep breath, and pushed just a little against her arms.

Still smiling, she let go. “Shouryuu?”

He straightened, and headed back to the board. “Serara says the Gate in Susukino isn’t working. Do we know if the Akiba Gate is?” He glanced back at his guildmaster. Strong; he was going to be strong. And hold it together. Just like she was. “What about the other towns?”

“That’s important, but...” Gold eyes turned serious. “We don’t know how long this will last. It’s already been a few hours. If it’s all night - well, we need to find a place for everyone to stay. I’d feel better if you were all here.”

“We’re going to stay?” Ashlynn ceded her place at Hien’s ears, clapping her hands together. “We can have a sleepover!”

A sleepover? Shouryuu sputtered. “That’s... not....”

“Not a bad idea at all,” Hien slid in before he could say more. “It’s been a while since I’ve done anything like that. How would you do it?”

“Well... I can sew!” The young girl looked thrilled at the thought, pointed ears twitching. “We can get cloth, and make blankets - oo, blanket forts!”

“Camping gear,” Aizel put in, all tall, dark-haired seriousness. “I don’t think anyone’s going to try and leave the city right away. If it helps you camp between towns, it should work for real now.”

“Huh.” Hien tugged at a bit of leather. “Not going to be comfortable to sleep in this. Anyone have any ideas how we take armor off?”

...Which was about when Shouryuu’s brain started shutting down in self-defense. They were going to be having a sleepover. With girls. And Hien thought they should take the armor off?

Maybe that fur’s overheating his brain.... Stop that! We’re still us. We just... look different.

“And then what?”

Shouryuu took a breath, and looked up at Aizel’s question. Because it was a good one.
“We talk to people,” Henrietta said firmly, hand skimming across an unseen console. Even though Hien had helped him figure out how to access the control screens, that was still so weird. “Someone has to have some idea of what’s going on...” She drew in a sharp breath.

Marielle bounced up on her toes, gold eyes darting to the bard. “What is it?”

Glasses gleamed. “Shiroe’s online.”

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And Shiroe and Log Horizon had made this whole cascade of events possible, which was why they had rooms packed full of scared new players. A few of those had come out of their shell enough to rub Hien’s ears, but....

Poor kids, Shouryuu thought, ears drooping. First chance they’ve had to eat real food since we got here. We could at least get ingredient items.

Marielle sat down on the floor with him. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Shouryuu hunched his shoulders. “It was silly.”

“You broke the bed.” Hien’s dark-marked eyes narrowed at him. “We’ve got enough toothpicks for the Crescent Moon already from trying to make the stand. And the beds. Doesn’t sound silly.”

“It was... well....” Oh, just get it over with. Because Marielle was looking at him, and she’d worked so hard to keep everyone together. To save people.

“I thought I was exploring a new dungeon,” Shouryuu started. “You know, just poking around in what you think is a pretty safe zone.” He knotted his fingers together, not sure what to do with them. “Only it was small, and I couldn’t find any monsters. Just furniture, and bookcases, and painted walls... but everything looked wrong. You know how it is in a dream. It isn’t anything you can point to, not while you’re in it. It’s just wrong.” He wet his lips. Funny how dry they felt, just thinking about it. “And then I finally found a hidden door, and got outside. And... that’s when I knew... the dungeon was my house.”

“Oh, Shouryuu.” Marielle put a hand over his.

He scrunched his shoulders, shaking his head. “That - it wasn’t all of it. I was there. That was my neighborhood. Those were streets I knew. But nothing looked right. So - so I kept walking, trying to find something I knew, and it was so quiet.” He gulped. “And then... I thought it was wind, at the start. But it was whispers. And I turned around, and... the streets were empty, I knew they were. But now they were all full of people. People I knew. Staring at me. And... no one was saying anything, they were just whispering....”

Hien drew in a slow breath.

Shouryuu shivered. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I don’t know if I was thinking. I just - was turning my back on them, I was going to get out of there before whispers turned into something worse, like some of the fights in Akihabara, and then-”

Say it. Just - get it out.

“There were people behind me, too,” Shouryuu got out. “And... right in front of me, just staring, like everyone... I saw Shousuke.”

A tall young teenager, not quite old enough to think about college yet. Dark hair. Brown eyes. A
face he’d known forever.

My face.

Staring at him. Like a stranger. Worse; like a monster. What else could a Wolf Fang Tribe be, in Japan?

“You saw-?” Marielle swallowed, and reached for him. “Oh, Shouryuu.”

He couldn’t help flinching. That’s not my name.

But it was. Here. With this face. And they’d been like this for weeks, and no one knew if they could ever find a way home....

“I’ve got this, Mari.” Hien stood and stepped between them, crouching to catch him by the shoulder. “Come on. Let’s see if Ashlynn’s blankets survived the wreckage.”

“He’s right.” Shouryuu pulled together a smile for their guildmaster. “You should get some sleep. It was just a bad dream.” A really, really bad dream.

Though maybe not as bad as what Hien seemed to be proposing now. Shouryuu glanced toward Marielle’s bed to be sure she was in it, then glared at the Assassin. “No!”

“Voice down,” Hien murmured, amused, as he sat on the edge of his bunk. “It’s a bed. It’s big enough for both of us. And if you think you can sleep on the floor and still keep up with all those kids tomorrow, I’ll just lie here and laugh.”

“You would.” Reluctantly, Shouryuu sat on the other edge of the bed. He was not going to pout.

Hien gave him a foxy grin. “Come on, didn’t you ever share a bed with your brothers when you were little?”

“...I don’t have any brothers.”

“Oh.” Hien pursed his lips, and leaned back against the post again. “You know what was the first thing I noticed, when we got here?”

Hien had a point. It was just a bed. And it’d been a long day. “Ears, or the tail?” Shouryuu shrugged.

“My knee.” Hien slanted a glance at him. “It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

Huh? “You hurt your knee?”

“Hmm. You could say that.” Hien scratched his nails against the post, not quite hard enough to dent wood. “When I was your age, I had the world all figured out. I was a good student - not the best, but not bad - and I was going to be a soccer star. National champion. Maybe world champion. I was right on track. Had a soccer scholarship, and head coaches already scouting me. I knew exactly what my life was going to be.” He paused, the glowlight casting his dark markings in darker shadow. “Then one rainy day, we went out to practice. I slipped. Ended up with three other guys slipping on top of me.” He shrugged, a little too stiff to match his casual tone. “That was it.”

Shouryuu winced.

“I could tell you more than you ever want to know about all the tendons in your knee. And what doesn’t work to fix them. Oh, I still went to college,” Hien went on, words measured out like dough
dropped in a pan to crisp. “You don’t need good knees to be a salaryman. But I didn’t put a lot into
it. Just bummed around, spending a lot of time online. Mostly playing Elder Tale.” He chuckled.
“And here I am.”

Shouryuu bit his lip. Not too hard; some of his teeth were sharper now. “That sounds....” He didn’t
know what to say. “Really hard.”

“It’s better now,” Hien said thoughtfully. “I didn’t know how much it hurt, until it stopped. I like
my knees. I like having clerics, and healing spells, and knowing that if we get into a stupid
accident, someone like Marielle will patch us up.” He scratched at wood again. “It’s funny, what
really hurts. I thought it would be losing my dream. My big plan. And that hurt. But not as much as
the way people looked at me.”

Shouryuu’s heart seemed to lurch into his throat. “I don’t understand.”

“Yes, you do.” Hien’s voice was quiet, but there was a wry smile on his face. “Sometimes our
hearts are smarter than our heads. I didn’t change. I was still Madoka. I just couldn’t compete on
the field anymore.” The Foxtail’s ears flattened. “But everyone looked at me differently. When
they look at you like that... it changes everything. I didn’t like it.” Tufted ears flicked. “I’m not in a
hurry to go back.”

Um. Yeah, Shouryuu could see that. Nobody liked pain-

“Because if we do go back, everyone’s going to look at us like that,” Hien stated. “All of us.
Human, Foxtail, Wolf Fang; it doesn’t matter. Even if we get back to Tokyo as Humans, we’re
different.”

There was a lump in his throat. Shouryuu didn’t like it. “But... we’re us.”

“We’re Adventurers.” Hien’s eyes gleamed in the light, fox-gold. “We kill dragons, and bring back
wild boar bosses—”

Oh, was he ever going to live that down?

...Though in a way, it was kind of cool. Even if - maybe especially if - the kids at school would
never believe it.

“-and help an Enchanter blackmail a city into making laws.” Hien bumped his shoulder with a
loose fist. “They can’t take that away from us, Shouryuu. Even if we were zapped back to Earth
tomorrow, they couldn’t take away who we are.”

Shouryuu felt his ears flatten; for someone usually so laid back, Hien’s face was fierce. “I guess
so...?”

These were people we wanted to be.”

For the game, Shouryuu wanted to say. But it stuck in his throat. And he didn’t know why.

“Even if we go back, don’t let anyone take that away from you.” Hien picked up a blanket, feeling
the ribbon-edged fringe between his fingers. And gave Shouryuu a speculative look.

Uh-oh.

The Assassin grinned. “It’s too late at night to be this serious.”
“Need to get my level up,” Shouryuu grumbled through a net of blanket, trying to squirm free as Hien tucked the rest of the bedding around and over both of them. “Need to be able to dodge sneaky Assassins.”

“Relax.” Hien nudged in close, chin rubbing his shoulder. “It’s been a long day, and we all wore ourselves out. You’d be surprised how cold you get.”

Hmph.

It was warm under the covers. Which somehow demanded payback all by itself.

Reaching up, Shouryuu rubbed a foxy ear.

Oh. That’s why the girls liked it.

Hien’s fur was soft. And warm. And the Assassin leaned into it, sighing a little, like someone finally getting a knot out of his shoulders; scent less concerned and more just sleepy....

Shouryuu flushed red. I’m an idiot.

Yes, other Foxtails and Wolf Fangs could probably tell tomorrow that they’d been sleeping together. But anyone who could catch their scents that well would also know all they’d been doing was sleeping. His guy virtue was intact.

...Not that he’d ever thought otherwise. This was Hien, and they were friends, and... he was just digging himself in deeper. “Sorry,” Shouryuu got out. “You could rub mine?”

“Hmm.” Hien turned enough to look at him. “Didn’t think you let anyone but Marielle that close... on purpose.”

Shouryuu stiffened. Well, fine. It wasn’t like he’d asked Hien to do it. Exactly.

“Ah, now I’m the one who should be sorry.” Hien shrugged against the blankets. “One full-strength glomp from Henrietta, and I’d be skittish, too. Akatsuki is a truly dedicated ninja.” A smile flashed in the shadows. “Still friends?”

And that question just wanted to take all Shouryuu’s nerves and tangle them in knots. Here he was, sharing blankets with a guy he’d never met in real life-

Except this was real life now. Had been for weeks. And it didn’t look like that was going to change anytime soon. He’d fought monsters with Hien. Caught wild boar, alive. And rescued a whole bunch of scared players from something even worse than a monster.

“Yeah,” Shouryuu said softly. “Always.”

...Oh. Maybe he should ask Hien to do this more often. It was nice. All the little aches from trying to keep his ears still, instead of popping out where Henrietta or a stranger might see, rubbing away with callused fingers. “Wonder if the People of the Land have mixed packs,” he murmured.

Oh, I did not just say that. I’m human!

Only human wasn’t Human. And in this world he wasn’t Human. He was Wolf Fang Tribe.

“Maybe we’ll start a trend.” Hien rubbed his chin along Shouryuu’s shoulder. “If they ask, we can
tell them my parents adopted you. Or the guild adopted both of us.”

Shouryuu’s stomach seemed to give a little flip. “...You want to say we’re family?”

“Does it bother you?” Hien’s questioning sniff blew warmth through his hair. “I thought you liked making up backstory.”

He did, and he had. A lot of it. Stuff he’d never told the rest of the guild about. After all, it wasn’t as if he’d ever planned to meet them for real.

A Wolf Fang Swashbuckler with a Foxtail older brother. It was the kind of background he’d wanted for his character. Especially since...

Shouryuu fingered the jade necklace at his throat, remembering how he’d felt first reading its legend of a wolf who cared for abandoned children. I wanted to be like that. I wanted to help, the way Marielle helped me.

I wanted to be part of a pack.

Carefully, he reached out to rub Hien’s ears again. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“I don’t like being lonely, either.” Hien nudged in closer, and lowered his voice to a bone-felt murmur. “Don’t look. We’re being watched.”

Watched? What?

“Aw....” Henrietta’s voice was a whisper, but wolf ears picked it out easily. “They’re so cute! Like a pile of puppies.”

Oh, no.

“They’re not cute,” Marielle said firmly. “They’re adorable.” Sheets rustled. “Go back to sleep!”

“Maybe we can hide under the blankets?” Shouryuu muttered, mortified. Cute. Argh.

Hien was chuckling against him. “Just remember. In the long run... cute and fuzzy wins.”
Lundhaz

Chapter Summary

Lundhaz doesn’t know how it happened, or why it happened. All he knows is that on the Day of the Apocalypse, every Adventurer suddenly went nuts.

...He’s kind of getting used to it.

There was a story his mother had read him once, before things had gone so wrong in his family. Or at least before he’d known they were so wrong. A story about a young human scholar-mage who’d courted the Half-Alv daughter of a merchant family, only to be refused her hand on the very day he had to leave to further his mystical studies. Dejected, the young mage had trudged toward the ferry dock....

“Wait!” His beloved had run toward him; dark hair unbound, dressed in traveling gear. “It’s all right! I can come with you!”

Delighted, the mage had married her in the next Cathedral. They’d spent two years in study and apprenticeship at the academy; for like most Half-Alvs, his young wife had a gift for magic, though she’d never studied it before. They’d learned so quickly, the mage’s mentor had urged them to visit their home village, to spread word of how well the academy taught. The scholar had offered to see her parents first, given he still suspected they hadn’t given her permission to join him without reservations....

“What do you mean, your wife?” his father-in-law had thundered. “The day you left she fell into a terrible swoon. Now she only eats what is set before her, walks when someone leads her, and barely speaks-”

At that very moment, Lundhaz’s mother had said, the mage-wife had appeared at her husband’s side, and the silent daughter rose up laughing to hug her. A bright light shone... and the doppelganger a Half-Alv’s desperate magic had created was no more, soul and body whole once again.

Lundhaz wasn’t a Kannagi. He’d never had the magic needed to touch an Adventurer’s soul. And he’d dealt with Adventurers before the Apocalypse. Granted, mostly at a distance, but they were far from the helpless girl in the fairytale! And yet....

If only part of them were here with us before; if part of their soul had been left behind in some distant land, trapped away from the magic in Seldesha-

It would fit. It’d explain why Isuzu acted real now. Like one of the People, with all their hopes and fears.

But - every Adventurer? That would take so much magic! And we didn’t see any doppelgangers, or shadow-clones, or - anything!

And yet. There was one thing that kept Lundhaz from tossing out the whole ridiculous idea as the product of too many heroic daydreams.
For a span of time that morning, before the Adventurers went crazy... we didn’t see anything. At all.

He’d had to be very, very careful asking questions. If Adventurers were confused, he had to look confused as well; and he’d never exactly been accused of being subtle. But what he’d been able to ask confirmed his own experience. One moment he’d been rousing from his sleeping roll in the golden light of dawn, getting ready for a new day of adventures. The next-

The sun had shone down from a clear blue sky, and all around him, Adventurers were panicking.

What kind of enchantment can rob an hour from the whole city?

Lundhaz couldn’t think of one. Possibly one of the lost Alv spells of legend might have that much power. But the idea that anyone could cast such a spell? Here? Now?

Yet something had happened. So if one mystical impossibility had affected Akihabara - why not two?

If all this time their souls were split, if they were walking in the sick daughter’s misty dream-life - they must be so afraid.

Though the very idea seemed silly. Why would Adventurers be afraid? This was still Seldesha. The land still gave them all an Adventurer’s awesome powers and unquenchable lives. There were still monsters to be slain, and People of the Land to protect.

Though this Person’s going to protect himself, thanks. “Miss Isuzu,” Lundhaz said impulsively. What the heck, he could only die once, right? “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

The braided Bard looked up from their campfire, a sudden smile chasing worry off her face. “You silly! Sorcerers are squishy.” She leaned over, just enough to bump a fist off his cloaked shoulder. “You zap the monsters. I’ll protect you.”

If he was right, neither half of her soul seemed to have been raised with courtly manners. Which was just weird. “Ah. Thanks?”

“We’ll figure something out,” Isuzu said, half to herself. “We’ll find a way to get home.”

Now there was a chilling thought. Monsters spawned every day. Without Adventurers to winnow them down to reasonable numbers, Akihabara - all of Seldesha! - would be in terrible danger.

I can’t let that happen!

Right. And exactly how was he going to stop the force of nature that was an Adventurer if someone like Isuzu decided to run for it?

But Isuzu’s a good person. Most Adventurers are. They don’t leave people in trouble. They help.

Surely some of them would see the danger. Yes, they might be afraid now. Everyone knew legendary magics shook the spirit. But he’d seen Isuzu’s eyes light up as she wondered what the wilds outside Akihabara really looked like.

You love this land as much as I do. You just have to remember.

Until she did, he’d help Isuzu. Even if he didn’t understand half of what she said.

Squishy!??
Touya

Chapter Notes

Set during episode 10.

It was funny, but looking at Log Horizon’s guildhouse, Touya thought he finally got why Minori had been so scared.

*They could say no. They could say no. Please don’t let them say no....*

His twin had always been the strong older sister for him. He was her brother, he was supposed to be the one looking after her... but there was only so much he could do, stuck in a wheelchair. So he kept a smile on and joked about the hospital visits, and she buckled down to make sure they both got their homework done; teaching him how to squeeze the most work into the smallest amount of time, so that when he didn’t hurt, he could use some of that time for himself.

*Elder Tale* had looked like fun for both of them. A place where he could play just as hard as anyone, and Minori... she wouldn’t have to look out for him. She could just play, and maybe even find a few adventures of her own.

*If only the Apocalypse had happened a few weeks later!* Touya clenched his jaw. *If we’d had just a little more time with Shiroe, so he could show us more of how things worked....*

As it was, he was beginning to figure out that he’d known just enough to get them into trouble. Sure, he’d heard a few things about PKing in games. He’d never expected it to really happen. Not when things had suddenly turned real.

Dying had... well. Dying had *sucked*.

But one of the worst parts of it had been hearing Minori scream behind him, and knowing once the PKers had taken out the tank, the healer - *his sister* - wasn’t going to be far behind....

He’d been so, so glad when Minori revived. Maybe too glad. They were both alive, they were both together - he was sure they’d figure something out.

But they weren’t both okay. And after Hamelin found them.... Minori was too used to putting up with less than she wanted, to make sure he was okay.

And he was too used to there being nothing he could do, since the accident. He tried, and the doctors tried, and his parents tried, but his legs just didn’t work. And when he’d seen Shiroe in the street, and wanted to call out to him....

It was like the real world had frozen up his legs all over again. He’d wanted Shiroe to save him, just like he’d wanted some doctor to say, *aha! This is what we missed!*

But doctors couldn’t do anything. And part of him had thought Shiroe couldn’t do anything, either. If he could, wouldn’t he have done it already?

Which made Touya feel a little guilty now. Because he’d asked Shouryuu about the whole escape
plan, after all the new players had calmed down enough to start believing they were safe. The Crescent Moon Swashbuckler seemed to know what he was doing, after all, and he’d said Shiroe had sent him.

Why? Touya had wanted to demand. If he cares about us, why did he send someone else?

But he didn’t. It was just a little too scary. So - he’d asked about the plan, instead.

Which had made him feel even worse when Shouryuu told him.

“He wanted to rescue you himself,” Shouryuu had said earnestly, escorting both twins around Crescent Moon’s array of mismatched tables, all full of food that actually smelled and tasted like food. “But the timing was too tight. He had to surprise the other guilds to pull off the Roundtable Conference. No one could know he had the guildhall zone under his control. He had to trust us to rescue you, while he pinned the major guilds down and made them see sense.” The Swashbuckler had grinned, almost as perky as his foxy partner’s ears. “We were honored to be a part of his plan.”

Well, yeah, Touya had thought then, trying not to duck his head sheepishly, Shiroe’s plans are awesome-

“What was the rest of the plan?” Minori’s brows were creased in a surprising frown; the kind Touya hadn’t seen even on their worst days in Hamelin. “What conference? What did Shiroe do to the other guilds?”

“Well....”

Even now, thinking over the details made Touya gulp. Shiroe had blackmailed other guilds? Even major combat guilds? Threatened to cut them off from the bank, and the guildhall, if they didn’t shape up and get some laws going in Akihabara?

On the one hand - awesome. Like Shiroe had told them, when the fight got serious, timing was everything. On the other hand... the fact that Shiroe could come up with a plan like that was scary.

Though what was really scary was the way Minori had just lit up as Shouryuu explained the details. How they’d earned seed money with the Crescent Moon stand, how Marielle had fought paperwork for three days straight, how she and Henrietta had bluffed and leveraged the rest of the gold out of three crafting guilds, and how the Crescent Moon Alliance had finally revealed their crucial discovery of actual, hands-on crafting to the entire Roundtable.

“The trick is, that there is no trick.”

Touya didn’t know why that had made Minori smile. But she’d soaked up those words like... he didn’t know how to describe it. But he’d bet he must have looked like that, when they’d realized the world had shifted and he suddenly had legs that worked again.

Running around was awesome. Even if it did look like he might spend a bunch of his time running from monsters. But join a crafting guild? No way. Boring. He hadn’t started playing Elder Tale to be bored!

Though, people were saying, “this world is not the Elder Tale we knew”. What was up with that? Where else could they be?

Eh, didn’t really matter where they were, Touya thought, shifting from foot to glorious, working foot as Minori glanced at him and bit her lip. Shiroe had formed a guild. And they were going into that guildhouse to join it!
Any minute now. Really.

“Meow.”

Back to back with his sister, Touya looked up. And up.

...And up a bit more.

Wow. The werecat was really tall.

One gray ear flicked. “Touya and Minori?”

“Y-yes?” Minori dared.

“How’d you know?” Touya challenged him. Sure, they’d seen this guy bringing in the food at Crescent Moon that first day, and Shouryu had said he was in Shiroe’s guild, but - well!

“Shiroe’chi spoke of you. And Shouryu did as well.” Green eyes blinked lazily. “Did you come to see our guildmaster?”

“Um....” Minori swallowed.

“Yes!” Touya said fiercely. “We’re going in. Right now!”

A lazy cat’s smile. “Then I shall escort you.”

*Oh boy.*

But they were heading in, and darn it, he was a *Samurai*. He could do this.

Minori’s fingers found his.

...And Samurai or not, he’d never have gotten past Schreider if she hadn’t summoned every protective magic she had.

*We can do this.*

Hand in hers, Touya marched inside.
Throw the Book

Chapter Summary

Beware of wizard fanboys.

Chapter Notes

This takes place before the Round Table delegation gets to the Palace of Eternal Ice (Episode 11).

Walking into Loremaster Re-gan’s library, Duke Sergiatte Cowen thought, making his way between shelves and piles of books, was rather like walking down a dragon’s gullet.

Oh, a friendly dragon, no doubt. One might even call it a Bookwyrm.

One might, the gray-haired duke thought dryly, approaching the Elf where he was sculpting tiny illusions of Adventurers. If one had no shred of self-preservation. “What do you have to show me that the other members of the League can’t see?”

“It’s not that they can’t see it,” the young Elf sage said thoughtfully, eyeing three illusory figures; a Guardian in heavy armor with an impossible ax, a blonde Elf Cleric with a smile bright as a sunflower, and a dark-haired Enchanter in a cloak of white and gold. “It’s that they lack the subtlety.” Re-gan glanced over his shoulder, gaze deceptively sleepy. “You recognize them, of course.”

From the League spies’ descriptions and sketches, certainly. Though Re-gan’s illusions were far more lifelike....

Hmm. But why these three? “Crusty, guildmaster of the fighting guild D.D.D.,” Duke Cowen nodded at the first. Whatever a guildmaster might actually be to Adventurers; it certainly didn’t fit the Masters of guilds People of the Land knew. The Guardian and his second in command were the leaders of the delegation sent by the Round Table Conference. Oh, certainly there were supposed to be representatives of the Adventurers’ merchants and small guilds as well - but everyone knew where the real power lay.

Or everyone thinks they do. Duke Cowen considered the second figure. “Marielle, guildmistress of the Crescent Moon Alliance.” The Adventuress whose smiles had spread a soothing balm on the chaos of Akihabara. A powerful Cleric who’d midwifed calm and laughter with a sandwich stand, of all things. No, it most certainly would not do to underestimate her.

Now the duke let his gaze fall openly on the Enchanter. “And Shiroe, guildmaster of Log Horizon.” He hmphed, wondering if the man’s presence in the Round Table delegation was the Adventurers’ idea of a subtle jab. “A very small guild. Only the most recent reports make it clear it’s not another division of the Crescent Moon.”
“Ah, yes.” Re-gan tapped his fingers together like a toddler gazing on shelves of sweets, or his dear Lenessia at flannel pajamas. “The Enchanter Shiroe. He always has preferred working from the shadows, while brighter lights like Crusty and Marielle shine.”

Hah. There was the first gleam of the dragon’s teeth. “He always has?” Duke Cowen inquired.

“The flow of magic in Akihabara makes scrying at a distance unreliable,” Re-gan shrugged, “but I would guess that Guildmaster Shiroe called the Round Table Conference.”

The organization of Adventurer guilds that had finally brought an end to the chaos in Akihabara. More than that; they’d laid down laws meant to protect the People of the Land, as well. Which was the first sign of sanity he’d seen out of that city since what the Adventurers called the Apocalypse.

Though it was a very strange sign of sanity. If his spies were to be believed, in Akihabara, a Person of the Land had the exact same rights as an Adventurer. Exactly.

Which made no sense. Adventurers were immortal beings, with power and magic to rival the Ancients themselves. Why in the world would they bind themselves to give the same legal rights to the People in their own city?

Whatever the reason, peace in Akihabara was infinitely preferable to war with Adventurers. And if this Enchanter was the reason the peace was holding, he was certainly worth closer observation. “Their reply listed him as one of the representatives of the smaller guilds,” Duke Cowen said thoughtfully. “Deliberate deception?”

“I think not,” Re-gan murmured. “If he is the Shiroe of our tales, it’s more likely the habit of the strategist that keeps him to the shadows.”

For the reserved Elf Loremaster, that was positively giddy. Duke Cowen’s eyes narrowed. “The Shiroe of our tales? He’s an Adventurer. Of course there are tales.”

“Oh, of course,” Re-gan murmured. “But even in the greatest of our legends, not many Adventurers have tales going back almost a century.”

Almost a-

A century. An Enchanter who was a legendary strategist.

The duke straightened his shoulders, and tried not to feel a bit faint. “Shiroe the Archmage?”

Re-gan smiled like the cat who’d gotten into the cream. “Indeed, it is he.”

Was that... a giggle?

The Elf’s face was almost straight, but Re-gan’s fingertips were definitely dancing.

Duke Cowen wanted very badly to sit down. Shiroe the Archmage. Debauchery Tea Party Shiroe; the legendary strategist who’d raided the Fields of Death, out-riddled an ancient dragon, and brought the Land of Ice’s midnight sun to an Eastal meadow. Among many, many other incredible feats.

Duke Cowen shook himself. “Debauchery Tea Party vanished.” Even a quarter-century later, that adventuring band’s farewell party was the stuff of bards’ tales.

“They did indeed; and none know where or why,” Re-gan affirmed. “But from the tales I have
gathered, Shiroe the Archmage remained within our world. He simply traveled more quietly.”

“Traveled to Eastal.” The duke let himself lean on one of the sturdier shelves, thinking hard. “...I’m not ready to have legends walking these halls, Sage.”

“Are any of us?” Re-gan met his gaze, utterly serious. “But they are here, my lord. And we must think on why, and what it will mean to the League... and to Seldesha.” Now the sage did bow his head. “But my lord, please heed me in this. The Archmage is swift to think, and slow to anger. He may appear the villain, if it serves his strategy. He is not.”

The duke nodded, taking that warning to heart. If a man has you at his mercy, old tales said, pray he is an evil man.

But did the Archmage have them at his mercy?

Or do we have him at ours?

Well. They’d find out soon enough. “Tell me, Loremaster,” Duke Cowen sighed, “do any of your tales state how to host an Archmage?”

Re-gan stared at him.

“He is listed as one of the representatives of the smaller guilds,” the duke said wryly. “According to the Round Table’s reply, Log Horizon Shiroe will serve as their envoy in our negotiations.”

Library door shut safely behind him, the duke chugged a healing potion, and hoped his ears would stop ringing before dawn.

Sergiatte Cowen shook his head, and winced. No, it’d need more time to kick in. There were still echoes, bouncing from wall to hard stone wall.

...They sounded suspiciously like Squeeee!

Chapter End Notes

“Pray he is an evil man” - Terry Pratchett rules!
Chapter Summary

Your eyes can fool you....

Chapter Notes

A/N: I’ve seen no less than four, count ‘em, _four_ different ways of transliterating Re-gan. I’m officially throwing up my hands in despair and using the one that sounds the most like what I hear characters say in the anime. As for other character names, I don’t yet read Japanese, so I’m pretty much going to go with the subtitle spellings used on Crunchyroll. Or the lack of ear-to-eye consistency will drive my bunnies on a mad killer rampage. Rabid plotbunnies are bad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Running water. Shiroe splashed the last bit of soapy water off his face, then swept up one more cool, clean handful just for the pure bliss of water tugging on every-magic-not-water. Anything left behind was just him, for better or for worse; and it was good to be back where they could trust the water again.

Add that to the list of things to bring up to the Round Table: investigate Akihabara’s water and sanitation systems, Shiroe thought, patting his face dry with a clean towel. So far everything here seems to be working fine. We want it to stay that way. I don’t know if Adventurers can get sick, but plague debuffs exist. We have to assume something else out there might be able to make us sick. Besides, even if we can’t get sick, People of the Land can, and they’re our neighbors....

“Oh, what a beautiful morn-arglegargleargle-ing!”

Shiroe sighed ruefully, as the pitcher of hot water Naotsugu had just brought in started steaming up the rightmost mirror. Why did I think sharing bathrooms would be fun, again?

Well, not exactly fun. More a matter of practicality. Eventually they’d have a working bathroom on every floor of the guildhouse. But as Michitaka had said, they were still working out how to price things and there were a lot of people who suddenly wanted their own place outside the Guildhall. As it stood, Log Horizon had three: one for the girls, one for the older male players, and one Touya had loudly claimed as younger player territory to cover the fact that - once you got past the bold speeches and the sparkles - Rundelhaus Code was still a bit intimidated by how his life had suddenly changed.

Brave kid. Shiroe dodged an enthusiastic elbow as Naotsugu frothed up some soap and water to a lather. I need to ask him about killing those Dire Wolves. Did he know he could blast them directly by getting that close? Or did he not know he couldn’t?

A spell-blast like that wouldn’t have worked when Elder Tale had been just a game. First, you couldn’t control your avatar that precisely. Second - MP was MP, and if you didn’t have enough to
cast a standard spell you were pretty much toast.

Maybe I’m not the only one who came up with a new magic. Shiroe smirked at his fogging mirror. That should help his morale when it comes to dealing with the rest of us. Though we’re going to have to find a more controlled way to experiment with it-

“Oh!” A shaving brush was brandished in his general direction. “No evil smirking this early in the morning!”

Shiroe blinked. “What?”

“Smirking like that means thinking! Before breakfast!” Naotsugu threw a ward-off sign. “No!”

“I just like our plumbing better than the castle’s,” Shiroe said honestly.

Lather on his face, Naotsugu rolled his eyes. “Cold water from the well, lukewarm from the roof tank, hot has to come off the stove....”

“It’s a lot harder to make a safe water heater than a risky steam engine,” Shiroe said frankly. “I’m sure Michitaka or one of our other-

“Mad scientists,” Naotsugu snickered.

“-Inventors, will figure something out by winter,” Shiroe finished. “And if they don’t, there’s always the West Wind Brigade’s baths.”

“Huh.” Razor in hand, Naotsugu started scraping off stubble. “Planning for winter, huh?”

“We’d better start,” Shiroe admitted; settling his glasses and swiping fog off the mirror to make sure he was presentable enough for breakfast. Hair, glasses, clothes - check. “We’ve been here most of the summer already, and I’m still not sure where to start looking to get us back to Earth.”

“That Elf sage.” Naotsugu went after his cheek a careful swipe at a time. “Re-gan.”

“He gave me some information on past World Fraction spells.” Shiroe frowned. “So far, there’s nothing on how to undo any of them.”

“Heh. Figured.”

Shiroe started. “You did?”

“Hey, if it was easy to fix something like this, they’d wipe the goblins out- ow!” Dabbing at his chin, Naotsugu gave him a dirty look. “So it doesn’t bleed. It still stings.”

“No thinking before breakfast?” Shiroe teased.

“Ha! You’re just jealous that you can’t sport that manly afternoon stubble when you’ve got cute Assassins sneaking around your desk!”

Shiroe gave him an amused raised brow. “If I’d wanted to look like an unkempt Dwarf every afternoon, I’d-

I’d have made myself a Human.

Fumbling out the bathroom door, he fled.
At least their roof was quiet and empty. For now.

Standing near the eastern edge, Shiroe took a deep breath. Even with sixteen thousand Adventurers and more People of the Land, everything in Akihabara still smelled so green.

But for how long?

He’d made a mistake. He’d made a whole series of mistakes, and he wasn’t sure where to start unraveling the snarl before it led to horrific outcomes. He wasn’t even sure he could-

“What’d I say about thinking before breakfast?”

Shiroe glanced back toward the roof door. One persistent Guardian, carrying two trays with steaming bowls. “Naotsugu-”

“I told the shrimp she didn’t need to come kill anything to make you feel better. And I told the Chief I’d make sure you ate. You’d better. I caught him asking our Assassin about how she’d slip sleeping poisons into enemy stewpots, and you know he’s worried if he’d do that to food.” Naotsugu put both trays down on the wooden table, and gestured toward one of the stump-stools. “Come on. Everything looks better after one of the Chief’s breakfasts.”

Shiroe sighed, and sat down. Miso soup, rice, pickles; a simple breakfast, but it’d been made with all Nyanta’s practiced skill. It’d be mouth-watering. Normally. “...How long have you known?”

“Since we went to Susukino,” Naotsugu shrugged, starting in on his own bowl. “Six days on the trail, there and back? Some things get obvious. Like a guy who keeps forgetting to shave because he doesn’t have to.” He waved at Shiroe’s bowl. “You’re letting it get cold. Stop thinking so hard. Just for a few minutes. I need to do some yelling, and I’m not doing that to a guy who hasn’t even had breakfast.”

Oh. Okay then. Shiroe heaved a sigh, and worked his way through the soup and rice. Sometimes he forgot, but taking care of people was what good tanks did. Even back on Earth, Naotsugu had often been the one to point out to Kanami that great quest or not, some people had to get up in the morning. Too much fun was almost as bad as no fun at all.

“Heh. Beginning to think I can pick out the guys who were shut-ins by how high up they climb,” Naotsugu mused. “You and Crusty on rooftops, and have you seen Shouryuu on flagpoles?” He drained the last drops of soup, elbows hitting the table.

“Here it comes.”

“You’re an Adventurer. We’re all weird here.” Naotsugu looked more sober than angry, tapping a finger on polished wood. “Why do you think being Half-Alv makes you any different?”

“Because I am,” Shiroe blurted out, surprised. “I made a mistake. Re-gan knows what I am. And if he knows... he’s advising Duke Cowen, how many of the League already know? And who knows what they think about the Roundtable Conference already given the envoy saw our meeting room-”

Naotsugu was waving his hands; slow down, rewind, explain! “Back up. What does the Roundtable room have to do with anything?”

Shiroe hesitated, adding mental addenda to his train of logic. “Re-gan’s scrolls on the World Fractions included illustrations. The statues over the doorways - those are one of Seldesha’s traditional depictions of the Six Twisted Princesses.”
The last six princesses of the Alvs. The ones who’d created the first World Fraction - and doomed Seldesha to a never-ending war.

“...Oh, hell,” Naotsugu managed. “But when you had the Guildhall make that room, you didn’t know.”

“No! There were eight different designs for a meeting hall, I just picked one that seemed right - but how do they know that?” Shiroe’s fists clenched. Deliberately, he pried them open again. “This is a feudal society. Symbols mean something to these people. They have to. Everything that isn’t created by magic, they build from scratch. Just as we do if we want something to come out right. They don’t create statues by accident. If one of Eastal’s lords built that conference hall, the League would tear itself apart!”

“Because honoring the ladies who let loose the demi-human plagues on everybody would kind of put you on the bad guy side,” Naotsugu concluded. “Ouch. But Shiroe. You didn’t pick that on purpose-”

“How do they know that?” Shiroe swallowed, throat dry. “How do I know that? We don’t know what the Alv Empire was like, or why the other three races chose to destroy it. But when I heard Re-gan’s tale of how the Alvs were enslaved and... bred... I feel so angry.”

“Of course you do.” Naotsugu rolled his eyes. “So do I. Even Rundelhaus would get angry, and Rudy doesn’t get angry at anybody.”

Caught off-guard, Shiroe stared at him.

“It was stupid.” Naotsugu emphasized each word with a gentle thump on the table. “Say the Alv Empire was evil. Say all the Alvs were horrible, man-eating, demon-summoning who-knows-whats, and deserved to be locked up at hard labor forever. That was them. Not their kids. You start raping your enemies and using their kids to build up your magic-users? Forget the sliding scale of evil. That’s jumping right off the slippery slope.” Another thump, and he pointed right at the Enchanter. “If you heard that story and didn’t get mad, you wouldn’t be Shirogane Kei.”

Shiroe’s face felt hot. Weeks since he’d heard that name.... “How do you know I am?”

“Because I know you,” Naotsugu said wryly. “What, you see something strange in the mirror before you bolted out of there?”

“No,” Shiroe said, almost too quiet to hear. “I didn’t see anything strange.” He lifted his gaze to Naotsugu’s; half a challenge, half a plea. “I didn’t see anything strange. At all.”

Naotsugu opened his mouth to toss off a flippant comment. Sighed instead, and shook his head. “Talk to me.”

*It’s Naotsugu. You know him. He’ll believe you.*

But it was hard to talk. It always had been, when people were *right there*, with no computer screen to keep a safe distance.

*I may never have a computer screen to hide behind again.*

That was a chilling thought. One that made him want to flee into his slowly growing library and never come out.

*But I can’t. The Roundtable Conference has just found its feet. Our alliance with the League is*
being patched together by Crusty the Blood Knight, Princess Lenessia the Closet Neet, and a
gaggle of Lander merchants who don’t like each other. Duke Cowen wants to be our ally, but if his
fellow League members think the Cowen family is trying to cut a deal with Adventurers on their
own-

“Akatsuki’s right. You do get that wrinkle between your eyebrows.” Naotsugu leaned back against
the table, hands linked behind his head. “Stop thinking about the Roundtable. And Akihabara. And the
whole world. Right now I’m just worried about you.”

“There isn’t anything wrong with me....” Shiroe let a breath sigh out. “You’ve met me. You know
what I look like.” Normal, dull hair. Forgettable eyes. Almost ten centimeters shorter than
Naotsugu. That was the face Shirogane Kei was supposed to have.

“Yeah?”

Shiroe nudged up his glasses, giving his friend a deliberately cranky look. “I looked in the mirror,
and I saw....” Wordless, he gestured at himself. Taller. Thinner. Black hair, and eyes a gunmetal
black that made even veteran players treat him warily. Not Shirogane Kei.

Naotsugu shrugged. “Yeah? So?”

There was no way even the Panty Warrior was that thick. “I looked in the mirror, and I didn’t see
anything wrong.” Shiroe got out. “I just saw....”

Patient, the Guardian waited.

“Me,” Shiroe whispered, trying not to shiver. “All I saw was - my face.”

“Yeah.” Naotsugu unlinked his fingers, brought his hands back around to fold his arms over his
green-edged tunic. “That’s been hitting a lot of people lately.”

“It - it has?” Shiroe felt as if he’d stumbled over a step. And they hadn’t even gone anywhere.
“But... you, Akatsuki, Nyanta....”

“I made my avatar a pretty close fit,” Naotsugu said casually. “Our little Assassin ended up a guy,
remember? She wouldn’t care if she were green, as long as she was still a girl. And the Chief had
to figure out pretty quick he wasn’t human, or he wouldn’t have been able to walk. And then who
would have been the daring Swashbuckler to rescue Serara?” He gave the Enchanter a searching
look. “You ended up a lot like Marielle and her kids. You could ignore it. Most of the time. So it
kind of snuck up on you.”

Shiroe shook his head. It didn’t make sense. It shouldn’t make sense. “Snuck up on-?”

“Getting used to things,” Naotsugu nodded. “Getting used to you.”

Shiroe winced. “But this isn’t me. I don’t-” Words failed him; he tried again. “Naotsugu. I
blackmailed the whole town!”

“Ha!” One fist went up, pumped air. “I knew it wasn’t the Half-Alv getting to you.”

“Wasn’t the- would you make sense?” Shiroe sputtered. “I turned Akihabara upside down and
shook it, I helped Michitaka and Crusty threaten Landers whose only problem is they’re scared to
death of us, I helped plan a small war....”

Naotsugu was grinning at him.
Argh. “I’m an engineer! Not even that - I’m a grad student! Nobody should be trusting me with - with-” He waved a hand out toward Akihabara. “All this!”

“I do.” Naotsugu’s smile sobered a little; warm, not manic. “Shiroe. You’re good at this. You spent eight years learning to be good at this.”

“Back when it was a game,” Shiroe insisted. “When anybody could just walk away.”

“You never ragequit anything in your life.” Naotsugu arched a brow at him. “Okay, one? You’re not running all of Akihabara. I’d make the chibi sit on you if you tried.”

Akatsuki? Sitting on- Shiroe went bright red. “Naotsugu!”

The Guardian grinned. “Two? Anybody who doesn’t like Akihabara can leave.” He waved out over the city. “I don’t see people leaving.”

Not since the Silver Swords had walked out of the first Roundtable meeting, no. But-

“And as for that whole Alv mess,” Naotsugu held up a finger at a time. “You didn’t know about the Alvs. That means it’s not in the game lore, and that means there’s not a player out there who could have known. Anybody even brings it up, Adventurers are going to go, ‘Huh?’” Another finger. “Re-gan told you the story. That means he was pretty sure you didn’t know it already. Think about that. This whole mess about the Twisted Princesses of the Alv, and he’s sure Shiroe the Archmage didn’t know.”


“Yeah, probably. But,” a third finger went up, “Castle of Eternal Ice. If Cowen thought everything left over from the Alvs was evil, that place wouldn’t still be standing.”

Shiroe grimaced. “It wouldn’t be strategically wise to tear it down.”

“So? You think he’s a good guy. So does Crusty, and even Michitaka; and he really didn’t want to go.” Naotsugu gave him a weighing look. “If everybody who met him thinks Cowen’s one of the good guys, even if he’s being a careful good guy so the League doesn’t fly apart - I bet he’s done a couple things that weren’t strategically wise.” Naotsugu’s grin went just a little wicked, and he yanked his stump nearer, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Like, oh, running into Choushi to pull off a miracle.”

Shiroe tried not to groan. Hunched his shoulders, feeling the summer sun suddenly chill. “Naotsugu. What I did that night changed this world.”

“Yeah.” Naotsugu dragged his stump a bit closer. “And it was made of awesome.”

“Uh, he wouldn’t dare-

Still grinning, Naotsugu ruffled his hair. “Ack!” Shiroe tried to bat his hand off. “Worse than Henrietta....”

“You’re right,” his friend agreed. “Marielle’s cooler.”

“Erk!”

Fortunately, Naotsugu was a lot more careful than Marielle. His ribs were in no danger. Shiroe
grumbled at the hug, and sighed. “Do I want to know why?”

“You worry enough.”

Tilting his head away from Naotsugu’s shoulder, Shiroe raised an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t that be, you worry too much?”

“Nah. Somebody’s got to.” Naotsugu let go, and winked. “But you’re a guildmaster now. How’s Minori going to learn to be the best if she thinks she can’t ever make a mistake? Not ever? Like the bridge-”

Shiroe started. “That wasn’t a mistake!”

Naotsugu tried to give him a good hardboiled detective stare. But his eyes were laughing too much. “Yeah? Why not?”

“One Dire Wolf would have been an opponent for an entire party their level.” Shiroe nudged his glasses, reviewing everything he’d learned from the younger players about what had led to Rundelhaus’ death and revival. “They had two, and hobgoblins. If they’d had another DPS or tank to take some of the pressure off Touya, or enough spare MP to root the second Dire Wolf - then, maybe. As it was, if Rundelhaus hadn’t....”

He could see that moment in the rain. As Minori must have seen it, knowing that Touya was seconds from dying and all of them would be hard on his heels. And while four of them were Adventurers, Rudy - and all of Choushi unprotected behind them - were People of the Land.

*She must have been so scared.*

Naotsugu nodded. “You should tell them that. Teacher.”

That still sent shivers down his spine. Sure, he’d used the mentoring system before, but- *Teacher? Me?* “I don’t know if I can do this. It’s not like a raid....”

“Nope,” Naotsugu agreed. “No walkthroughs. No forums. No save and reset. Like you said; this is our reality.” He clapped a hand on Shiroe’s shoulder. “Welcome to growing up.”

The world seemed oddly faint and distant. He couldn’t get a deep enough breath. *Oh... boy.*

“It’s okay to faint now,” Naotsugu smirked, giving him a double thumbs-up. “Or - I know! We could talk about more grownup things! Like pan-”

*Smash.*

Akatsuki reappeared in a blur of pink. “My lord, I kneed this perverted idiot in the face.” She brandished a spiral-bound notebook with stickers. “Also, I confiscated these notes.” Purple eyes narrowed at Naotsugu. “You do not want to read these notes, my lord.”

“Ah... probably not,” Shiroe agreed, blushing. “How did you... how long have you-?”

“Oh!” Naotsugu sat up, rubbing his nose. “Give that back, shrimp!”

Akatsuki stood straight with a *hmph*. “You tried to inflict these perverted writings on my lord.”

“He’s a grown man! He can be as perverted as he likes!”

There were thunderclouds gathering over their Assassin’s head. *Roll d6 for morale check, Shiroe*
thought numbly. *One to two, hold position. Three to four, orderly retreat. Five to six - rout. Rolling....*

The little die in his mind spun, and stopped.

_Three._

“I’m going to go help the Chief with the dishes,” Shiroe said hastily, fleeing toward the door.

“Oi, Kei!”

Hand on the doorknob, he froze. Naotsugu? Using his real name? In the game, he’d almost never....

_This isn’t a game anymore._

“World’s tough enough to handle a few mistakes, Shiroe.” Naotsugu grinned, holding up his notebook with a dangling Assassin attached. “So are we. But if you end up with another Dish Monster, I want in on the boss fight!”

Chapter End Notes

It’s canon that Naotsugu has a “Panty Notebook.”
According to the Elf Sage, Alv heritage is erratic, and usually shows up in the offspring of two seemingly completely human parents. Which means that most of the time Half-Alvs would be raised human. So yes, Shiroe’s panic over being Half-Alv should be... more than a little misplaced. He has a lot to freak out about. People tend to focus their anxiety on tiny side issues to avoid facing the really scary ones before they’re ready.
...As for the canon detail about Half-Alvs and tongues, I freely admit here and now I am ignoring that completely. The reason being, I am an Honorverse fan. And that image plus the canon mention of slavery brings up the Audubon Ballroom. We do not need the Audubon Ballroom in LH. Nope.
Though turning Shiroe loose on the Mesan Alignment would be so awesomely broken....
Ahem. Like I said. Not going there. *Whistles innocently.* Though, if anyone else wants this plotbunny... free to good home!
(And thanks to Kryal, I now have headcanon that Naotsugu has refined the Panty Warrior into a unique special ability: _Summon Akatsuki!_ That, or Akatsuki has _Panty Reference Radar._ The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive....)


Phoenix Pinfeathers

Chapter Summary

It's the oddest place, with the oddest people, but it just might be home.

Chapter Notes

I’m inventing an OC mentor for Rundelhaus. If Seldesha existed prior to the Adventurers dropping in, he must have had one. (Note “if”. I’m not sure we ever find out for sure....) This ficbit would come the evening after “Silverglass”.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The hot sandwiches at the summer camp had been good, Rudy reflected, as Touya and Naotsugu scarfed down seconds while Miss Isuzu and the rest of Log Horizon were still on their first. But Chief Nyanta’s sandwiches, made here in the guildhouse, were better.

*Here in my guildhouse.* Rudy smiled at the fire dancing in the courtyard; summer nights weren’t as warm here as they were farther south, and the flames were comforting.

*Like the fire that night. Only that was - well, bigger.*

He still couldn’t nail down in words what it had felt like, touching that pen to Shiroe’s contract. Most of what he remembered of those zombie-minutes was sorrow for his friends, and a sober joy they’d saved Choushi after all... and an odd sense of *hurt*, that he had to be aware while his party lost him all over again-

*“That’s not nearly enough.”*

Miss Minori thought her mentor was kind and brave and wonderful, and Rundelhaus had no intention of arguing any of those points. But he might point out that Guildmaster Shiroe was just a bit scary, too.

It was weird, but that chilling gleam of glasses had gotten him moving. For a moment he hadn’t seen Shiroe, but Master Reamonn, the old Sorcerer who’d tutored him years before. Who’d lectured and scolded and pushed him, whenever he feared his pursuit of magic was just another bit of noble frippery.

*Rundelhaus Code, I know you’re stronger than this!*

Memory, and Shiroe’s stare, and Miss Isuzu’s pleading eyes. They hadn’t let him give up. They *wouldn’t* let him slide into the darkness alone.

So he’d grit his teeth and fought his failing body, cold fingers in Isuzu’s warm ones, and signed-

It’d felt like falling into light.
I died, Rudy thought now, finishing off his sandwich. And I came back, by the power of the gods and the land.

...So why don’t I have any more answers?

Isuzu bumped his shoulder. “You’re being quiet. What’s wrong?”

What isn’t? But that wasn’t true. He was here, and alive, and an Adventurer. All of those were good things. Even if they were strange. “Is this really a mission?” Rudy blurted out.

“Of course it is!” Touya grinned at him, waving another sandwich. “Our first mission was eating curry with everyone. This totally counts.”

“Oh.” Rudy screwed up his courage, and gave their guildmaster a confident smile. It was a little easier when Shiroe was in that loose sweater, without that rare white and gold cloak. “When you said there were risks, this wasn’t what I was thinking of.”

...Why did he make Isuzu giggle so much?

But the older Adventurers seemed to take his confidence in stride. Shiroe even smiled a little, as he wiped his hands on a towel. “I’m sure you have questions, Rundelhaus Code.” A slight shrug. “There are some things we can’t tell you. Partly because we don’t know-”

“Questions?” Rudy felt his cheeks burn, as glasses gave him a level look. “I’ve... never really been good with questions, Guildmaster Shiroe.”

The Enchanter started; then ducked his head as Nyanta chuckled. “Chief!”

“You’ll get used to it, Shiroe’chi.” A green cat eye winked. “But you do have one, don’t you, young Sorcerer. Every magic-user has at least one, when a magic he’s never seen touches him.”

“It’s not the magic,” Rudy admitted. Though that had been breathtaking. “Magic is - well - I can study that later. What’s important to me, to the companions who tried to rescue me....” He searched for words.

“Who did rescue you.” Shiroe gave him a level look. “They kept your body alive long enough for me to reach you. Without a physical form to link your mind to, my contract wouldn’t have succeeded.”

“Shiroe told us what to do,” Minori nodded. “We healed your body as much as we could, and kept alternating revive spells to keep it alive.” She smiled at the Bard. “Isuzu kept our MP up so we could keep trying.”

“And then your guildmaster got there and moved all our MP around so you had some too,” Isuzu finished. “You know everything else.”

“But I don’t,” Rudy admitted. “I don’t know what’s really important. Why were Miss Isuzu and Miss Minori so upset? People die in battle. Everyone knows that.” His gaze fell; determined, he dragged it back up again to meet dangerous black. “If I don’t know why they were angry, how can I know I won’t do it again?”

“Rudy no baka!” He could almost see the steam puffing from Isuzu’s ears. “That’s a stupid question!”

“No,” Shiroe said thoughtfully. “It’s a very intelligent question.”
Rudy blinked, and shook his head. He couldn’t have heard that right. Master Reamonn had said he was a gifted Sorcerer, but there were reasons he wasn’t a Summoner. He was a little too... straightforward. “It is?”

“Yes.” Shiroe’s glasses gleamed. “It gets right to the heart of who we are. What we are. And why we were so distracted the goblins crowned a king in the first place.”

“Adventurers weren’t always the way you are now?” Rudy guessed. “There was a story I heard a long time ago, about a mage-wife....”

He almost couldn’t go on. But they were listening, alert and eager.

_They want answers, too._

He wound down as the story ended, taking another sip of black rose tea to wet his throat. He’d never had it before the Crescent Moon stand opened. It was still good.

“Missing an hour,” Shiroe said, half to himself. “Are you sure?”

“About an hour?” Rudy answered, uncertain. “It might have been almost two. Is that important?”

“It could be.” Shiroe stared past the flames, gaze intent on an invisible quarry. “If the World Fraction two hundred and forty years ago was at the same time as the beta of _Elder Tale_, if... other events Re-gan mentioned correlate - then there’s a twelve to one time ratio. The last thing I remember is waiting for the update. But if we’re missing five to ten minutes, then that means we had time to log on.”

“And that’s when it got us. Whatever it was.” Naotsugu frowned, and looked at the deadly little Assassin. “What do you think?”

“It seems possible.” Purple brows drew down. “But why can’t we remember?”

“Five minutes’ worth of experience points, nyan.”

Rudy’s younger companions started. “Mr. Nyanta?” Minori said, uncertain.

“Young Rundelhaus has knowledge of this world’s magic that we do not.” The Werecat gestured grandly at him. “If he believes a magic of this extent had a price - where better to extract it, than from those moments we might need to undo the effect?”

_Update? Beta? Logon?_ “I don’t understand,” Rudy admitted. “You - you think someone did this to you? Someone was trying to hurt you?” He looked around firelit faces, bewildered. “But who could hurt Adventurers? You’re sent by the gods... or that’s what the stories say.” He had to swallow, though he’d suspected this for weeks. “But you’re not, are you? Or if you are, you don’t know it. You’re people. Very strange people, but...” Oh, he was just digging himself in deeper.

Isuzu smiled at him, uncertain. “But we’re at least good people, right?”

“Of course!” Rudy gave her his best noble look. “Who else would defend the helpless, with nothing to gain, but the most valiant souls?”

Brown eyes glinted, dangerously scary. “Ooo, I’ll give you _valiant_ if you ever scare me like that again!”

“Isuzu.” Shiroe’s voice was quiet, but firm. “Settle back. This could be hard to hear.” He waved a
hand, almost as if opening a scroll between them. “Imagine a world in which there are no monsters.”

...He couldn’t possibly be serious.

“Just try,” Shiroe said wryly. “No monsters. No demi-humans. None of the Beastmen Tribes, or even Elves or Dwarves. A whole world of just animals, plants, and Humans.”

Rudy had to rub his head. That was just weird. “Okay....”

“A world without magic.”

Now the Enchanter really sounded crazy. Rudy gave him the darkest scowl he could manage. “Seriously?”

“There’s technology, like the Ocyptide, and some of that could almost look like magic,” Shiroe went on. “But no one can cast a Fireball, or an Ice Spear, or even a Magic Light. People learn to make and use pieces of technology in school, and there’s a lot of school.”

The very thought made Rudy want to wilt. Certainly, he’d sat through the lessons every noble was expected to have, and learned sorcery on top of that. But learning was a pale shadow of doing, and....

Wait a minute.

“So if there would be no monsters, and only this technology everyone learns to use,” Rudy said, trying to put the idea together, “then what would people do? All you would have would be farmers, and artisans, and nobles. And merchants,” he added hastily, thinking of the Crescent Moon stand.

“More or less, yes,” Shiroe nodded.

Rudy tried to picture it again, and rubbed his aching head. “It doesn’t seem as though such a place could be real.”

Touya scowled, and the girls sat up straight. Probably to point out that of course their guildmaster was telling the truth, no matter how insane it sounded-

“That,” Nyanta’s rich tones rolled over any objection, “is precisely what was wrong with it, young man.”

Naotsugu nodded, wiping crumbs off his fingers. “It’s like being a farmer. Or a shoemaker, or a clerk. You go to school to get a job. And then you do the same things all day, every day, year after year. And it doesn’t even matter if you do them. There’s always someone else who can do what you do. If you disappeared tomorrow, the world probably wouldn’t even blink.”

“Some people still care.” Akatsuki looked into the flames, as if they were an enemy she could smite. “But they only care because they’re family, or your job makes their job easier. There are no lords to serve. No one to defend, or to defend you.” Her voice dropped. “And you can’t save anyone.”

Rudy felt queasy, and knew it couldn’t be Nyanta’s cooking. That all of them were telling parts of the same tale, and Minori and Touya and even Isuzu were nodding, as if they knew this already.... “There is such a world? It sounds horrible!”

Touya looked down, and shuffled his feet. “Tell that to those farmers in Choushi. At least farmers
on Earth don’t have to fight goblins!”

Rudy frowned. That wasn’t the bold Samurai he knew. “Nor should the Choushi farmers have had to. That is the Choushi nobles’ fault. Not yours.”

Minori bit her lip. “But if we, if the Adventurers had hunted down the Goblin King—”

“Miss Minori, I, Rundelhaus Code, will not allow you to take the blame that should never rest on such valiant shoulders,” the Sorcerer declared, on his feet. “Everyone knows that every two summers, the goblins will try to crown a king. And the histories tell us the last time they succeeded, there was a terrible war. It is a noble’s duty to study the records other People of the Land have no time for, and to ready themselves and their people for such wars! It is true,” he flipped the worry away with a hand, “I did not see it until we were already under attack. But I am not the lord of a city! They should have known. They knew Akihabara was in disarray. If they wished to be sure the goblin army did not rise, they should have sent someone to scout the hordes.”

Wide brown eyes blinked at him, as the Bard tried to hide a sniffle. “You don’t blame us?”

“Miss Isuzu, how could I?” Rudy said, startled. “I was in Akihabara on the Day of the Apocalypse. I saw everyone; confused, frightened, I didn’t understand why then - but if I had appeared in the world you paint for me with your words, I would have been terrified. I wish we could have stopped the goblins before they attacked anyone. But when we knew there was a danger, we went to fight it! Who could ask more?”

Her smile lit her freckles like sunlight.

Why doesn’t she think she’s pretty? She’s not a court beauty. But why would anyone want a girl who only thinks of gowns and gossip when there are monsters to slay?

Shiroe’s brows climbed above his glasses. “So you believe we’re from another world?”

“It sounds like something out of a fable,” Rudy said honestly. “But all the strange things I’ve seen since the Apocalypse - the food, the steam engine, the cosplayers....” He had to shudder. “It might make more sense if you were from another world.” He hesitated. “But I know the Adventurers were here. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Ah. But you don’t know the whole story, yet.” Nyanta smiled. “Shiroe’chi?”

The Enchanter nodded. “The world we were in - well. Many people in that world are happy. It’s peaceful, mostly. There isn’t much fighting, and we’ve cured a lot of diseases. People have long, safe lives. Most people only die of accidents, or old age. I think our average lifespan is... somewhere between seventy and eighty, at least.”

Rudy’s jaw dropped. That long? For Humans, that was incredible.

“It’s not as good as you think.” Touya stomped the ground again, as if reassuring himself that he could. “Here if a cleric heals you, you’re all better. There... some things, doctors can fix. Some they just can’t.” His glance was almost shy. “Back there - there was an accident, a few years back. I couldn’t walk.”

Rudy tried not to flinch, as his guildmates started. On the one hand, he’d heard of injuries that awful, and the fact that Touya had survived that in a world without magic seemed miraculous. On the other - if you did live through something that bad, there was always the hope of hiring a powerful healer to fix the damage. It wasn’t cheap, but it was possible.
Yet Shiroe hadn’t started like the rest. His head had only dipped. As if something had just made perfect sense. “You knew?” Rudy blurted out. And instantly regretted it; the hurt look on Touya’s face.

“No. I didn’t know,” Shiroe said firmly. Looked at both of the twins, holding Minori’s gaze just as long as Touya’s. “But when I spoke to your parents over chat, back when I first became your mentor, I could hear how relieved they were.” He paused, as if unsure how to phrase his thoughts delicately. “When I was your age, my parents were always trying to get me off the computer to go play outside. Yours were grateful that you’d found a way to play at all. The obvious conclusion was that you couldn’t go outside.”

“Obvious, he says.” Naotsugu rolled his eyes at Touya. “Just so you know, he used to be as close to a hikikomori as you could get and still go to college. It’s fun, watching you both out in the sunlight.”

Shiroe stiffened. “I wasn’t that bad!”

“Yeah? I’d bet the Chief’s curry that the first thing you thought on the Apocalypse wasn’t, where am I? It was, how’d I get outside?”

The Enchanter was suspiciously silent.

“Hah! I knew it!”

“Anyway,” Touya stepped in, a loyal tank drawing aggro, as Minori put it, “that’s why Minori and me started playing Elder Tale. We could do it together, and... I could pretend I could walk again.”

Rudy nodded slowly. That explained a lot about the boisterous young Samurai. To be suddenly able to fight again, and defend those he cared about - it must be as if a massive weight had lifted from his soul.

“So it wasn’t all bad there,” Touya shrugged. “But this is better.”

“That world has its moments,” Shiroe agreed. “There are books everywhere, and wild places if you want to visit them, and almost no one has to go armed. Most of us... I think all of us, here... had never seen someone die by violence.” He paused. “Until Choushi.”

Rudy blinked. And blinked again, taking in Isuzu’s sudden stifled sob. To never see a death by violent means, to assume you never would.... “Oh,” he said faintly. “Miss Isuzu. I am sorry. I didn’t mean to do that to you.”

“Of course you didn’t, you baka! You didn’t think!” She scrubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand. “Don’t you ever go after something that big again without us!”

“I’ll try,” he promised. And shook his head, trying not to let on how dazed he was. “That is a very strange world, Guildmaster Shiroe.”

“Strange,” Shiroe mused. “I suppose so. It’s not a bad world. And we tried to live as good citizens in it. But most of the time, we never felt needed. Sometimes... everything felt so empty.”

Akatsuki’s hand brushed his knee.

Shiroe glanced at her, and smiled a little. “But in that world there was a game. Elder Tale. Where you could make an avatar you pretended was you; a kind of puppet, that you told what to do and say. With those avatars, we could pretend to be people who mattered. We all started weak, but with
time and practice, we could grow to become the game’s greatest warriors. Puppet warriors,” he admitted, “but it was fun. The rest of our world was dull and ordinary, but for a few hours we mattered. Even if it was only to other misfits in the game.”

“Misfits?” Rudy blurted out. No way, as Touya would say. That was too uncanny a coincidence.

“Huh.” Giving him a slow look up and down, Naotsugu leaned back and waved two fingers Shiroe’s general direction. “You may not have noticed, between the spells and the pointy kunai - but a lot of Adventurers are shy.”

Rudy blinked. And shook his head until his hair flew, a dozen odd observations falling into place. Misfits. They didn’t fit in their world. And... I didn’t want to fit into my family’s. I wanted to be someone who mattered. Who saved people. An Adventurer....

“The point of a puppet is to hide the puppeteer,” Shiroe shot a wry glance Naotsugu’s way. “So you can pretend to be someone else. Someone who doesn’t have to fit in. Just for a little while. You can live for years that way; spend most of your life in the world with everyone else who fits in so much better, all the time wishing you had more hours for the game.”

Silence. Rudy sat up straight, heart racing as the Enchanter braced himself.

“Then one day you open your eyes, and it’s not a puppet anymore. It’s you.” Black eyes met bright blue. “And you trip because you’re too tall, or you have wolf ears, or there are runes scrawled on your skin you’ve never seen in your life. You’re carrying weapons your body knows, but your mind has only seen in a museum. You have spells jostling around in your head - and you don’t even know that’s what they are, because you’ve never felt that sparkle in your spirit in your life. And you’re standing there, in the sun, in a world that can’t be real.”

Rudy swallowed, throat dry, trying to wrap his mind around even a fraction of what Shiroe was describing. If he’d woken up as Wolf Fang Tribe one startling morning-

I’d have panicked. I’d have thought I was cursed. I might have run screaming... though hopefully, with style.

“And you have no idea how it happened,” Shiroe finished. “Or why you’re there.”

Rudy took stock of himself; lightheaded, short of breath, and dazed. And believing.

...I think I’ll sit down.

“So when you say we’re people, you’re right.” Shiroe spread empty hands. “Adventurers aren’t divine warriors. So far as we know, we never were. We’re just normal people, who were playing a game... until suddenly, everything was real.”

He wasn’t the only one staring, Rudy realized. “So far as we know, my lord?” Akatsuki crossed her arms. If he didn’t know how deadly she was, Rudy would have sworn the Assassin was hugging herself.

Naotsugu tugged at the collar of his tunic. “Oi, Shiroe....”

Nyanta raised a gray-furred finger. “Listen.” He slipped Rudy a wink. “Youngsters can be so impatient, nyan?”

Rudy made himself keep breathing. And wondered if Touya would mind if he huddled a little closer. Strictly in the name of good party formation, letting the tank take the defense, of course.
A half-smile touched Shiroe’s face. “Here’s where things get a little tricky.”

Rudy couldn’t help but groan. Isuzu grabbed him by the shoulder, as if she thought he might vanish out from under her hand. “Are you okay?”

“For now,” he sighed. “But when Master Reamonn said that, my head always hurt for hours.”

Was it his imagination, or did the powerful Enchanter look just a little sheepish?

“I’ll try not to make anyone’s head hurt,” Shiroe said wryly. “It really is simple. It’s the implications that get complicated.” He paused, adjusting his glasses. “Seldesha is very like the world in the game of Elder Tale. But it isn’t the same. We’ve seen creatures that weren’t present in the game we knew. We can do things our avatars couldn’t then, as you proved with the Dire Wolves.”

Why did he suddenly want to hide? “I wasn’t... entirely sure that would work,” Rudy admitted.

“Heh!” Touya clapped him on the shoulder. “We’ll figure it out.”

“I would like your help investigating that use of magic,” Shiroe stated. “Though we’d start with much weaker opponents. It’s hard to test a theory when you have to dodge flying bodies.” He coughed. “Anyway. We made avatars in the game. But I don’t know if those avatars were the Adventurers you knew before the Apocalypse, or if they were only linked to them.”

Rudy frowned, trying to think that through. “Like... the fables of poppets? You think our tales might be true. That the gods and spirits of the land did create Adventurers to fight the hordes, and tied it to your game?”

“You do?” Naotsugu’s jaw dropped.

“I can’t rule it out,” Shiroe said practically. “Something brought us here. And it had to be incredibly powerful.” He glanced at the flames. “The Sage of Miral Lake, Loremaster Re-gan, has a theory. It reminds me of your story of the mage-wife. He believes that the spirit, the memory, all that we think of as us, is made up of two energies. The anima that moves the body, or HP, and the psyche that animates the mind; MP.”

“That’s what we were doing!” Minori clapped her hands, delighted. “The healing spells for his HP, and you moved mana for his MP...” She paled, one hand covering her mouth. “Oh.”

“Yes,” the Enchanter nodded, grim. “Exactly.”

Rudy found himself trading confused looks with the rest of his guild. “Shiroe!” Touya made a fist. “Say it again, with more words!”

“Our bodies know how to fight, Touya.” Minori was still pale. “That means our anima is from here. The Adventurer.”

“But our psyche is from Earth,” Shiroe stated. “Or it was. Now, both energies are here. In these bodies.” Black eyes pinned Rudy. “What happened to the doppleganger in your story, Rudy?”

“It dispersed,” Rudy said, almost hating the words. “For once, he thought he knew what Minori was thinking. “It wasn’t needed anymore... you think your original bodies are - gone?”

“I can’t rule it out,” the Enchanter said bleakly. “The power had to come from somewhere.” He straightened. “But there’s a more important consequence. While we were on Earth, our anima was
that of our human bodies. We learned from the game, but all our memories were made there. Now, we’re here. It’s not a case of, this body knows how to fight. These are our memories now.”

“That will be odd,” Rudy said, half to himself. He flung up his hands at Isuzu’s sudden scowl. “Miss Isuzu, I’ve seen Adventurers learn new skills. It’s not like the People of the Land learning. Somehow, you just know.”

“But you didn’t.” Shiroe’s brow went up, intrigued. “We didn’t on Earth, either.... You must have had to learn spells. Do you have a spellbook?”

He was not going to die of embarrassment right here, Rudy told himself. Even if both Minori and Isuzu were looking at him like a slice of double-chocolate cake. Already he could see the feathers of his pillow flying. “Err.....”

Naotsugu swept his gaze across the guild, and raised his hands in a halt. “Guys. Ladies. Down!”

“But a spellbook.” Shiroe’s tone had the longing edge Rudy had last heard when a rogue spotted a whole chest of gold. “If we could learn how magic works in this world, instead of just knowing how to use some spells without thinking....”

“Think of what else we could do!” Minori was almost bouncing. “We could make new spells, ones that aren’t restricted to levels, or maybe even classes! We could-”


Half his guild seemed to wilt. “Aw....”

“Live with it,” Naotsugu said cheerfully. “I’ve got Mini-Ninja backing me up on this, right?”

“I am not a mini anything.” Akatsuki raised her head with a toss of violet hair. “But a true ninja should protect her lord from dishonor, as well as danger.” She narrowed her eyes at Shiroe.

The Enchanter sighed, and inclined his head. “You’re right.” He looked at Rudy, smile just a little rueful. “But if you were willing to let us study it, or if you knew someone we could contact to acquire spellbooks of our own, it might to be to everyone’s advantage. Michitaka and the crafters were able to build the Ocypete by doing it the hard way. I’ve experimented a little with moving magic, but I haven’t had written spells that I could study. If I did....” He ducked his head. “I’d like to try, if you were willing.”

Let someone else read his spellbook. An Adventurer. Rudy glanced away, uncertain. Should I tell them about the notes I’ve taken so far? Master Reamonn did say I should try to uncover magic of my own. I don’t think this is what he imagined, but - new spells! If we could create even one-

The Enchanter cleared his throat. “Though, that wasn’t quite what I meant about the effects of an Adventurer’s anima. The key point of Re-gan’s Spirit Theory is that memories are made up of the anima and the psyche. Which means our memories - everything we knew from Earth - are now tied to our HP and MP.” He fixed Rudy with a look. “I told you, the contract has risks. In the game, when our avatars died, they lost experience. Our psyches were on Earth, protected by distance. Only the avatar was weakened. Now they’re not. When an Adventurer dies, we lose memories.”

Rudy froze. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his party members pale. They didn’t know? And Touya didn’t say much about Hamelin, but I know he and Minori died at least once.

“Crusty, guildmaster of D.D.D., confirmed it,” Shiroe said quietly. “He’s died at least twice since the Apocalypse, and he’s forgotten... details of something personal to him. A higher-level player
used to lose more EXP when they died. It’s possible that lower-level Adventurers lose less memories. We don’t know.” His gaze flicked to Isuzu. “As of now, this knowledge is confined to the Roundtable Conference, Log Horizon, and you. We’re planning to spread rumors soon, so everyone is warned that death has consequences. But you deserved to know. You risked a great deal to help save your friend. Only when I thought about it later, did I realize you - and I, and Rudy - may have risked more than we know.”

“Risked?” Isuzu said, uncertain.

He wasn’t the most clever of spellcasters out there. Rudy knew that. But he had a lifetime of tales to remember - and if Isuzu came from a magicless world, she didn’t. “Miss Isuzu. You helped me sign Guildmaster Shiroe’s contract.” He met those dark eyes, determined not to shiver. “And... I was always from this world. There was no other body to sacrifice for this magic.”

Shiroe nodded, sharp and certain. “Whatever forces we invoked to make you an Adventurer, Rundelhaus Code, we may all be in their debt.” He paused. “That worries me.”

As well it should. Rudy braced himself. “If I am a danger to Miss Isuzu and my companions-”

Shiroe knifed a hand across; no. “I am your guildmaster. And apparently an Archmage. If there ends up being trouble, we’ll handle it... what?”

Rudy had to work his jaw a few times before any words would come out. “You are... Shiroe the Archmage?”

Naotsugu snickered.

“And Miss Minori is your apprentice!” Rudy leaned back, relieved. Finally, something he was sure he understood. “No wonder our party’s tactics were so skillfully crafted. How could they be otherwise, from a student of the legendary Strategist?”

Minori blushed. Isuzu perked up, a Bard’s fingers twitching with the impulse to strum a new song. “Legendary? You mean you know stories about Shiroe?”

The Enchanter blinked like an owl caught in daylight, as Nyanta chuckled and Naotsugu and Touya broke out laughing. “...I’m doomed.”

Minori giggled. Even Akatsuki smiled.

Leaning back, Isuzu winked at Rudy.

The Sorcerer grinned back at her, swept with a sudden, giddy relief. He didn’t know all of what a guild was yet, or what being an Adventurer might bring. But he was here, and alive, and surrounded by friends.

It’s a very strange place, with even stranger people. But....

I think I’m home.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently Shiroe also had a Summoner character, prior to the Apocalypse. So I think
he would be interested in poking other forms of magic.

Hikikomori - Basically a shut-in; a specific named phenomenon in Japanese culture for at least the past 2 decades. As I understand it, it's people who are so overwhelmed by social obligations they just refuse to come out of the house.
On Little Cat Feet

Chapter Summary

...Nyan.

Chapter Notes

Set in LH eps 1 to 3. (A little dialogue used from 3.) Also, I’m going by the LN in that most monsters do leave bodies behind; though demi-humans like goblins still disperse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Well. Nyanta felt an ear twitch as he balanced on the slope of a townhouse roof. I doubt this was supposed to be in the update.

In the theater one always had to be ready to improvise. A broken prop, a missed cue; an actor suddenly too ill to go on. And part of that improvisation, as he tried to teach his students, was to take a moment to read the audience. Did they want humor? Horror? Heroics? All of the above, and then some?

Currently, it seemed, he had an audience of one.

Ah, good. Then I may test my improvisation, before I attempt it in front of an upset crowd.

Judging from the shouts and screams drifting up from the streets below, it’d be a tough crowd, indeed.

Nyanta mentally bowed to himself, and took his first careful step.

Hmm. Not unlike performing a kitsune. Up on the balls of the feet and step lightly, lightly. He flexed his toes, feeling how they gripped on tiles. Not quite the same as he was accustomed to in bare feet. Which was only to be expected, given his feet were not, in fact, bare, but covered with fur and Cat Fairy Boots.

It seemed like the most bizarre dream. Especially since nothing hurt anymore.

Dance is a lovely mistress, but a harsh one.

He’d always told the youngsters in Debauchery Tea Party that he was an old man; and in truth, he was. Not old as most of the world would think, but dance used the body hard. He had aches and pains many in their seventies would wince at. He could still dance well enough to teach, and oh it was a joy to see youngsters learn to turn fumbling bodies into practiced grace. But he paid for it. Always.

Yet here and now, in a Swashbuckler’s fur and elegance, nothing hurt.

Hmm.
Warmth on one side of his whiskered face, where morning sun brushed away the shadows of night. A slight chill to most of his body, where the roof-shadow fell across it. A *hhhooo* of doves fluttering away from a chimney to search for scattered crumbs in the streets.

If this was a dream - and it seemed at once too strange and too *ordinary* to be a dream - it was a remarkably persistent one.

Gingerly, he essayed another step. So far, this was working-

Tile slipped.

The next painful minute answered the age-old question: do cats always land on their feet?

....*I meant to do that.*

---

A few bumps and twinges later, Nyanta was back on another rooftop, checking the displays an ungraceful swipe of his hand had opened. Items, abilities... friends list.

*Hmm.* *Pity I logged into Susukino, instead of Akihabara.*

Well - yes and no. True, there were four others from Debauchery Tea Party in Akihabara, and it would be pleasant to have those he trusted at his back in such an unusual situation. On the other hand, there were more players in Akihabara in general, most days; and he had no doubt Shiroe and Naotsugu had their hands full. Shiroe, especially. The famous Strategist would be up to his glasses in trying to untangle this snarl of events, and likely half out of his mind with worry.

*Naotsugu will find him. Those two work well together.*

Nazuna, he wasn’t worried about at all. She would find her guildmaster, Nyanta was certain of it; and Soujirou was probably dancing for joy at this very moment. The young Samurai would carry the West Wind Brigade on an unstoppable wave of optimism, no matter what strangeness this new world threw at them.

*He’d better, Nyanta thought pragmatically.* *Nazuna is a Foxtail, and if that avatar has similar effects to a Werecat - a certain amount of panic would be quite understandable.*

Foxtails, after all, had at least one tail - though they could hide even that with magic, if they put effort into it. He could only imagine what Nazuna felt like. The disorientation from having a Werecat’s slit-pupiled vision was quite enough to deal with.

*At least Werecats can see colors.*

He was fairly certain all the colors of the rainbow were there, though perhaps the leaves were a bit greener than they should be. Or perhaps that was just Seldesha. This world seemed far more *alive* than Tokyo.

Colors or not, light did seem brighter now. Daylight made him blink a bit, and noon had been purely uncomfortable. He was certain he could still fight, but he’d want to choose his position. Staring into the sun would be very unpleasant.

*Hmm. And if I should have to fight....* Nyanta reached for his rapiers, testing his grip. Gloved fingers seemed more than capable, though the hard sense of claws at his fingertips was unsettling. It wasn’t at all like wearing false nails for a role on-stage. With those, there was always a sense of separation between flesh, bone, and the hard layer of art.
Here and now, he pressed a thumb against a hilt, deliberately putting pressure the wrong direction. Ah, yes. These were definitely rooted in flesh and bone. Ow-

Nyanta stood still on the rooftop, surprise overriding any mere twinge. Yes; that had been his ears flattening. Most unsettling.

What is, is. Let’s see if this can be turned to any advantage, shall we?

Odd. When he tilted his ears just so, he thought he heard... crying.

Whiskers bristled, as Nyanta shifted his shoulders. Furred or not, he was a Swashbuckler and a gentleman. And no true man walked away from a lady’s tears.

Griefers. Despicable.

Nyanta peered through the night, fur ruffled and unhappy. The youngster had lost the players taunting her for the moment, ducking into an alley when a few People of the Land had had their carts crash together; a nervous horse had shied away from a brandished ax at just the wrong time, and by accident or quick thinking the little redhead had managed to slip through the gray-cloaked Sorcerer’s blind spot.

Why is a high-level magic-user going after a child?

From the look of her equipment, the young girl couldn’t have been more than level 20. And from the simple way she sobbed, tears just flowing, scrubbed away by her sleeve, she was at least as young as her avatar appeared. So he hadn’t introduced himself yet. He didn’t want to frighten her; and from the words she got out between tears, the little Druidess was chatting to someone she trusted. Perhaps all would be well.

Marielle? His ears pricked at the name. Could she mean the guildmaster of Crescent Moon?

If so, then she was a young player, and he should introduce himself after all. The Crescent Moon Alliance was a guild for new players to have fun while learning the game. But now this was no game, and all the youngsters might be in over their heads.

Aren’t we all. Well, time to neaten up a bit before I present myself to the lady-

“She’s over there!”

No fool, the Druidess squeaked and ran.

How did they find her? Nyanta wondered, pacing the girl across the rooftops as he picked out her pursuers; at least three, and none of them low-level. She wasn’t in line of sight, and none of them looks like a Tracker.

How would have to wait. He and the ruffians were still moving easily, not in the least fatigued by their mad dash. But the young Druidess was panting, one hand going to her side in a way that made Nyanta wince in sympathy. She was young, and stubborn, but she wasn’t likely to be able to run much longer.

Time to even the odds.

He leapt into the alley in one long bound, sweeping the surprised girl up in his arms with a quick, “Eeek!” Took one running step, and jumped-
Alley floor to just below the roof crest, in one bound. As Soujiro would say, awesome.

“My apologies for not introducing myself,” Nyanta said cheerfully, dashing off over the dark rooftops as a bolt of magic missed them. “I beg your indulgence. Allow me to put a bit more distance between us and those miscreants, first.”

“Um... okay?”

A middle-schooler’s voice. Poor girl. “A few more blocks should suffice, I believe....”

Two minutes later, and he set her down on an unoccupied balcony, stepping back to give her a courtly bow in the moonlight. “I am Nyanta, a Swashbuckler of no current affiliation. May I have the honor of knowing the fair damsel’s name?”

“Um... ah... Serara, Druidess of the Crescent Moon Alliance!” Her bow was quick and heartfelt, as she blushed. “Thank you so much, Nyanta! I was... really, really scared.”

She still was, by that tremble where her fingers gripped her wand. And who was he to blame her? “Ordinarily, I would advise a young lady being harassed to contact a GM,” Nyanta observed. “However-”

“I did!” Her shoulders straightened, like a kitten fluffed out at a strange dog. “I mean, I did before... all this. That Demikas bully and his gang - they were being mean to a level 8 Sorcerer. Who does that? So I told them to quit that, and I told her to just go through the transport gate to Akihabara and find Guildmaster Marielle, and she did, and I was just going to explain everything to the GM before I went through the gate, and....” She trailed off, swallowing what threatened to be another bout of tears.

“Indeed,” Nyanta nodded. “And.” He rested his hands near his rapiers, arms akimbo. “Well. For now it seems our adventures will be a bit more present than usual....”

His ears twitched.

“This way!”

“How annoyingly persistent.” Nyanta strode across the balcony to peer into the night. A magic light was bobbing their direction, showing the way for those who lacked night-sighted eyes. “Miss Serara. It seems they have some way of tracking you.” He could think of a few possibilities, but the most likely was also the most twisted. “Do you know if anyone in the Brigandia guild has friend-listed you?”

“That’s why I wanted to talk to a GM!” Small hands were twisting on her wand again. “Demikas said- he said I couldn’t get away from him, that I was on his list....”

As he’d thought; and despicable indeed. Once someone was on your friend list, you could find them anywhere. Outside a city that generally only gave you a rough location, but if both parties were in the same city zone?

They have a map right to her, whenever they wish.

“Not to worry, Miss Serara.” Nyanta smiled, and held up a finger. “This problem, we may solve.”

Ah. A kitchen, a chef’s tools, and fresh ingredients. The tea ceremony might be one way of practicing Zen, but for soothing rattled nerves, cooking was far better.
“You... you bought this place?”

Nyanta smoothed his whiskers, seeing Serara’s wide eyes and embarrassed hunch of shoulders. “What is the worth of mere gold, if it cannot be used to lighten the burdens of a young lady? Besides. If we do not know how long this will last, it is only sensible to have a haven from an uncertain world, nyan.”

Serara ventured another step into the elegant kitchen, breathing in the scent of fresh bread and tomatoes. “And they really can’t find me here?”

“It is an advantage of owning a zone,” Nyanta nodded, slicing the ingredients for a simple pair of sandwiches. He might not be physically tired, but it’d been a stressful day for both of them. “It’s likely they will guess you are still in Susukino, but they won’t know where.” He assembled one sandwich, and smiled at her as he handed over the plate. “Perhaps you’d like to tell Guildmaster Marielle you’re all right?”

“Oh - yes! Thank you!” Her blush went even pinker. “Thank you so much, Nyanta!”

One less problem, then. Nyanta put together his own sandwich, trying not to think too hard as he traced a neat spiral with mustard on one side of the bread. They were fed, warm, and - for the moment - safe. Or as safe as anyone could be in this world. Theoretically, the permissions he set determined who, and what, were or were not allowed to enter this zone.

In the game. Now? I’d rather not find out firsthand if a giant would be held back by a mere threshold.

Thought, gamers being gamers, it was quite likely someone had already tried.

Hah. Nyanta smiled, putting away the condiments before he bit into his creation. Then the next step, tomorrow, is to visit the marketplace. And listen to tales of what has been done, and not done, and why.

Though there was always the chance that waking up tomorrow, none of this would have happened.

We’ll see. He dabbed at his whiskers. Tomorrow.

“So, Susukino is still safe from the monsters, but the monsters are still out there?” Frowning in concentration, Serara poured noon tea for both of them.

“So it would seem.” Nyanta sipped his cup, thinking about the fear he’d felt breathing in Susukino’s streets. “I wonder if there are more monsters. There are certainly more People of the Land about than there were in Elder Tale.” Enough that the city actually felt crowded. Oh, nothing like a modern city like Tokyo. But for every Adventurer he saw, there were at least eight People of the Land at work and in the streets. There had never been so many when Seldesha was a game.

Heads-up displays or not, this is no game.

“Ooo!”

Nyanta set out the confections with a smile. “I might try to make these myself later, but it will be a bit tedious to get it right. We don’t have a candy thermometer... what is it?”

Serara had broken off a piece of peanut brittle to chew, and was now looking bewildered at the rest of it. “Nyanta? It doesn’t taste like anything.”
He raised bewhiskered brows. “It doesn’t taste like peanuts?”

“No.” Serara chewed, and swallowed, and looked even more confused. “It doesn’t taste like anything. It’s like... limp rice crackers.”

That didn’t make sense. Nyanta could hear it crunch between her teeth. “Hmm.”

Breaking off a shard, he tried it.

*Pfaugh! What in the worlds?*

It looked like peanut brittle. It crunched like peanut brittle. But the taste?

*The young lady is absolutely correct. Limp rice crackers. Bland crackers, at that.*

“At least getting in is easier than getting out.

Up a tree, across the upper level of a ruin; scurry quietly up and down and through a small maze of crystals that led almost to the city wall—

*Aha. Just where I thought they’d be.*

Three Brigandia troublemakers; two DPS and a mage, it looked like. Loitering mostly in the wall’s shadow, watching for any players who might take it into their heads to leave the city.

*Ah, if only I had an Assassin with me.*

Pity. It would have been a perfect setup. Still, he had his own resources to fall back on, and those were nothing to sneeze at.

Studying their positions, Nyanta permitted himself a small grin. The Brigandia players might be high-level, but he doubted they’d truly immersed themselves in the game. Their formation was meant to catch an ordinary party. And why not, given at level 90 it would take most players at least even odds to win?
He’d played *Elder Tale* for a very long time, exploring the nooks and crannies of that fantastic realm on his own, with guilds, and with Debauchery Tea Party. Find the right quests, the odd little chains of events that most power-gamers blew right past, and there were much more interesting things to gain than levels.

*I am Nyanta the Fog-Silent.*

He waited for a cloud to cover the moon, and leapt.

The Title-given ability wasn’t the same as a Silent Move. He had to physically cross the space, and he could still be seen if someone happened to be looking. But unless a player was high-level, and concentrating... all they’d see was a patch of fog.

“Chilly up here tonight....”

Nyanta dropped down into Susukino’s streets, waiting for more shadows before he set out back to Serera.

*The situation isn’t desperate. Yet.*

Not yet. But Susukino had certainly reached the level of *difficult*. A solo player’s chances of getting from here to Akihabara without dying were vanishingly small. Serara was a low-level healer, but together they probably could do it - if Brigandia hadn’t been poised to leap on them both the moment Serara set foot outside his door.

Nyanta puffed out his whiskers, frustrated. One on one, he had no doubt he could defeat Demikas. But even for such a dashing Swashbuckler as himself, all of Brigandia was a bit much.

*If only gryphon whistles worked inside town!*

Truth to tell, it was possible they might. He hadn’t had the opportunity to try. Gryphons were fast and impressive... and *visible targets*. Take enough damage in *Elder Tale*, and a rider would be automatically dismounted. He didn’t know if that would still happen in this world, but atop a gryphon in midair was the last place he wanted to find out.

*Even if it doesn’t happen - if the NPCs are alive, the gryphons likely are as well. If they’re alive, they can be hurt. And if Brigandia would threaten a girl, they will slay a monster.*

So. Unless he could gain at least two minutes for his gryphon to land, be mounted, take off again, and get out of spellcasting range, all he would succeed in doing would be to deliver Serara gift-wrapped into Demikas’ hands.

*All this fuss because one griefer couldn’t find something more important to do in a whole new world than torment a young girl. Hmph.*

At least he and Serara had found far more interesting things to do with their time. He thought he’d about identified the problem with the peanut brittle. If he had, then this world was very strange indeed-

Oh dear. That smelled like something burning.
“I’m sorry, Nyanta....”

“No, no; don’t be sorry, Miss Serara.” Nyanta tipped the bubbling purple goo off the plate, into a pot to clean out later. “Every experiment brings us closer to the truth.” He had to shudder, nonetheless. “That was supposed to be toast?”

Serara fluttered her hands, as if uncertain whether to tend to the remaining bread or the plate first. “I don’t know what I did!”

“Young lady, I can’t think of anything you could have done that would create that from bread and a warm fire,” Nyanta said frankly. “In some ways, this world is far more realistic than the Elder Tale we knew. In others... I can only say it’s very strange.” He straightened, as if hideous purple slime were merely a minor inconvenience, of no consequence to a true lady or gentleman. “So! What have we learned?”

“Um... I can’t cook?”

“And that, in itself, is unusual,” Nyanta declared. “On Earth, I am certain your toast would have been-”

“Burnt,” Serara mumbled, shoulders slumped.

“Perhaps singed,” Nyanta allowed. False flattery would only make the girl feel worse. “Still, this would not have happened. So, it would seem it is not that you can’t cook; it is that something quite odd happens when you try. You can still make food from the menu?”

Serara sighed, and trudged down the kitchen to a bowl of apparently perfect porridge, dusted with brown sugar. “It just tastes like sugary mush. It doesn’t even taste like brown sugar!”

“Very curious.” Nyanta picked up the purple-stained plate, and held out his free hand. “May I borrow your washcloth?”

That earned him a stubborn frown. “If I made a mess, I’ll clean it up!”

“I have no doubt that you would,” Nyanta said courteously. “What I wish to determine is if I can.” Cloth in hand, he essayed a firm scrub.

The plate crumbled.

Nyanta blinked at the fragment of white ceramic still in his grasp, now cracking into dried electric-blue clay. “...Nyan.”

A few more experiments produced mixed results, and no small degree of headache. Ingredients had taste; food recipes made from the menu or bought at the market, did not. For him, cleaning anywhere outside the kitchen or the dining table was an unmitigated disaster. For Serara, trying to cook food had equally abysmal results. Yet she could scrub and peel vegetables, or start the oven warming; while on his part, so long as he was washing things he intended to cook with, nothing would go wrong.

It almost seemed to be as much mindset as action. So long as he was acting as a Chef, food and dishes behaved as they should. But Chefs did not, as a rule, polish floors; the results were nerve-wrenching when he tried. Likewise, if what Serara did fit the duties of a Maid, all was well. She could clean, polish, and mend to her heart’s content. And she could prepare ingredients to be cooked. But so much as mix milk and eggs together in a bowl for an omelet, and purple goo would
be everywhere.

_When I find whatever changed the very laws of physics in this world, I’m going to give it a very stern talk._ Nyanta rubbed at the base of one ear, and smirked. _Better; I’ll let Shiroe do it._

Amusing as that image might be, if he were right, the implications could be catastrophic. The People of the Land he’d observed could turn their hands to anything they needed to, to survive. Adventurers couldn’t.

_We will either have to cooperate with each other to a greater extent than players ever have,_ Nyanta thought wryly, _or we’ll need to make alliances with the People of the Land._

Both options that had their own risks. And both of which were swiftly becoming untenable in Susukino, thanks to Brigandia.

_I thought I rescued Serara that night. I may, to a great extent, have rescued myself._

The average person had no idea how much one’s mood could be brightened by a neat, clean abode; or how much it could be corroded by a disordered one. He would be willing to bet a significant portion of the despair in Susukino came from how helpless the players found themselves. Certainly, they could slay goblins and terrorize innocent shopkeepers. But at the end of the day, how were their lives better?

_When Serara cleans and mends to keep herself occupied, she knows she is doing something truly helpful to us both. Something I, with all my levels, cannot._ Nyanta straightened, regarding the curled peel on his knife, swirls of mouthwatering red and near-white flesh. “This house is so clean. I’m sure you’ll be a great wife someday.”

Sitting down, the Druidess fidgeted in her chair. “Th-that isn’t true... really.”

Ah, to be that young again, in the first blush of sorting out what made one’s heart sing. “How are those people who are coming for you doing?” Nyanta wondered, dropping the curves of peel into a waiting pot.

“Oh, yeah.” Serara sat up straight. “Marielle, our guildmaster, contacted me. She said they’ll probably arrive tomorrow, before noon.”

“So soon?” He blinked as he held up the teapot, calculating distance and dates. Less than four days, to cover a distance horses would only manage in two weeks, _and_ cross the Lyport Channel. So far as he knew, in this world so like _Elder Tale_, the only way to do that would be....

Nyanta smiled. “That’s pretty impressive,” he mused, pouring hot water over the peel to shred it into a delicately flavored warm drink. “I wonder what these people who are coming for you are like.”

He waited until she was occupied with a small scroll he’d managed to find at a bookseller’s stall, then opened his friends list.

The only way to travel that fast would be gryphons. And the only way to summon gryphons, was to have the whistle from the Hades Breath raid. There were thousands of level 90 players in Akihabara, who knew how many of them might have gryphon whistles....

_But I know four who definitely do._

Nazuna and Soujiro were still in Akihabara. Shiroe and Naotsugu-
They’re just across the Channel. Most likely, in the Depths of Palm.

Shiroe and Naotsugu were coming to Susukino. With a third player Shiroe must trust; most likely either a healer or a DPS.

Meaning at about noon tomorrow, Demikas was going to get a very nasty surprise.

Nyanta’s smile gleamed in green eyes, as he contemplated just how much he was going to enjoy handing Brigandia their collective heads.

This is going to be so much fun!

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I’m improvising some backstory for Nyanta, based on our few canon clues. Chief among them the fact that Nyanta calls himself an old man, while Shiroe thinks he’s middle-aged. There are some careers that take a heavy toll on the body, even in modern life. Put that together with Nyanta’s studied gallantry, his gentle treatment of Serara’s obvious crush, and the simple fact that he manages to be graceful walking on his tiptoes. Yes, his body, like any Adventurer’s, knows how to move. But he’s used to trusting his body to know what to do - which is not a common skill at all. So, dance instructor seemed like a possible fit.

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