

Reincarnated as the Past of my Kind

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Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind, Volume 1

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♣The Beginning

IT was nighttime. My usual walk back home from work.

I stopped by a convenience store, then made my way to the usual intersection. As I walked down the gentle slope, I pulled out my headphones, although I knew I ought to be more alert when walking outside at night. The idea that some suspicious person might be following me around was frightening.

I turned on my phone and dialed emergency services, so I'd be able to call for help with one push. And to top it all off, I wore a white coat and white backpack —that way, any oncoming cars or bicycles would easily notice me.

This neighborhood was mostly peaceful, but you could never be too careful. You never knew when some pervert might crawl out of the woodwork.

As I walked on thinking such things, I felt something white and cold drop on the tip of my nose.

Snow. I thought it was cold—

Screeeeeeeeeeeeech!

“Huh?”

The moment I stopped and looked up at the night sky, the sound of a braking bicycle squealed behind me.

Wait. When did a bicycle get here...?

I heard someone shouting. I felt something hit me first, then my head bang hard against a telephone pole. A dull sound rang in my ears. The last thing I saw was a bicycle, with its lights off, sliding to the center of the highway.

God, this is the worst... A bicycle with its lights off... Am I going to...?

The world went dark. It was so cold...so **dark**.

No, no, not like this. I...I never even had a boyfriend... I couldn't even repay

Mom... Thank her for everything yet...

Mom... No, I don't want to go... Mom...



“GOOD girl...”

When I came to, a woman was looking down at me. She had blond hair and a crystal embedded into her forehead. I couldn't say why, but somehow...this woman registered as “Mother” in my mind.

I reached out to her. My small, baby hands reached toward Mother. Mother gladly enveloped my hands in hers, happily mouthing the word “Rubia.”

...Rubia. Yes, that's my name.

“Good girl, Rubia. There, there.”

I couldn't speak. Only meaningless “Aaah”s and “Uuu”s left my lips. But Mother simply beamed at me.

I don't understand. What's going on...? Wait. Wasn't I—uhh...? Working at the pub near the station...? Just an ordinary...? Wait...what...? This is weird. Why can't I remember...?

“Cindy.”

“...I know. Rubia is...”

A man's voice called out to Mother and made her raise her hand from my head. The smile was gone from her lips. Her brows furrowed sadly and tears welled up in her blue eyes. The brown-haired, bearded man that approached Mother...that was Father.

“Rubia...my precious daughter... Our country of Jiera is at its end. But you will survive...” said Father.

“May the blood of the Stone of Daybreak...never come to awaken. And may she always be safe...” added Mother.

“Aah... Aaah...”

Father, Mother, what's wrong? What is this box? Why are you putting me inside it...? What's going to happen now?

They placed me in an oval, egg-shaped container of some kind. Father put something on top of me and closed the lid. Mother wiped her tears away. Father bit his lips bitterly.

I had no way of knowing that screams and fire were raging beyond that room's door. And rocked gently, enveloped by darkness, I gradually succumbed to sleep.

That makes sense...I am a baby, after all.

But why were Mother and Father so sad? What did they mean "by the blood of the Stone of Daybreak...?"

"You must live on."

Father's muffled voice reached my ears. And that was the last memory I had of my parents.



HOW much time had passed? I could tell my ark was rocking and jolting, but it was totally dark. When I woke up, I spent some time crying and whining, but I realized no one was around and stopped after a while. Instead, I started listening attentively to what sounded like a river bubbling. I wasn't cold, since I was wrapped in what felt like two or three layers of blankets, but...

Is this ark drifting along a river...? No, that can't be...! What am I, baby Moses?!

I'd already learned, at this point, that crying wasn't going to get me anywhere, so I raised my hands, clenching and opening my fists. I fumbled around, touching my face in an attempt to understand who I was.

"Aaah. Uuu..."

That was the extent of what my voice could utter. I couldn't speak. And that meant...no question, I was now a baby.

Yeah, I figured! I figured that's what this means! But how does this make sense?!

A bicycle ran into me and made me bump my head against a telephone pole. That was the reason. But...!

Wait. So, does this mean I...d-died? Died and got reborn as a baby? Doesn't it all end when you die? It normally does, right? Does reincarnating with my memories intact make any sense?! Wait, hold up. Is this really Japan? No, even if it isn't Japan...am I even still on Earth?! That woman back there...my new mom had a jewel in her forehead! And it wasn't a decoration. It was in her forehead! Was there a tribe like that out there?! Like in the Amazon? One of those Indigenous tribes...?

Wait. Then this river...

Hold up, hold up, a river?! Aren't there, like, crocodiles in the Amazon?! Nooo...!

A crocodile could probably swallow this little ark of mine whole... Aaah! And now I remember some TV show saying giant serpents are breeding in the Amazon! Big snakes that can swallow human children whole... Big, giant snakes... The Amazon's like a breeding ground for dangerous creatures!

Nooooooooo! I just died five minutes ago; I can't die again so soon!

"Aaah..."

I was on the verge of bursting into tears but managed to quiet down. I didn't know how far I'd drifted, but I was probably far from civilization by now. Crying and screeching here would only alert predators to my presence...

Aaaah... Why did this happen to me?!



".....!"

I jolted awake. *How long has it been...?*

What happened... I... Wait, did I fall asleep?! Ugh...I guess it makes sense. I am a baby.

But being a baby just made a whole slew of other problems rise to the surface. Real issues that tormented me in the here and now. Like being hungry...and really, *really* needing to pee. The hunger I could put up with—or rather, it's not like I had much of a choice—but my bladder issues were approaching critical mass!

The fact I'd been a grown adult in my past life not a few hours ago made it absolutely awful to put up with. But worse yet, this little ark I was in was hermetically sealed. Whether I went number one or number two, it'd be a catastrophe, both in terms of smell and, worse yet, my dignity. How could I live it down?!

Still, crying about it would only attract predators that might gulp the whole ark up and put a swift end to my newly gained second life before I even had a chance to properly start it!

I can't die this soon! Someone help meeeeeee!

But then, I thought I heard something.

Huh? Did I imagine that...? Wait, no, I definitely heard it!

I could clearly hear someone wading through the water, approaching me. Someone was here to save me!

"There we go...mm?"

Yeah, I just heard someone's voice!

I opened my eyes just as someone roughly opened the lid to my ark. A dirty, bearded face looked down at me, with the starry sky as its backdrop.

...Er...he totally looks like some kind of villain... B-But wait, no, I shouldn't judge a book by its cover. M-Maybe he's actually really nice?

Given the situation, I had no choice but to rely on this person for help.

Please help me! Don't send me down the river again!

"Tch, a baby?"

With a click of his tongue, the man closed the ark's lid, and I could hear him walking. But this time, it was different from the sloshing water. He was probably carrying me up a hill.

"Hey, what happened?"

"What was inside?"

"Take a look."

I could hear more adults. As I looked up, the ark opened again, except this time, several grimy, bearded faces greeted me, blotting out the starry sky.

...Th-They all look like scumbags. Nooooooo!

“Gaaaah, gaaaaaaaaaaah!” The scumbag face roulette made me bawl.

Th-They stink! Haven’t they heard of a bath before?!

They smelled of iron and the distinctive body odor given off by middle-aged men.

“Aaah, someone shut this pipsqueak up!”

“Hey, is there anything expensive-lookin’ in there? All I see is this dirty rock.”

“Oh, but this silk cloth looks kinda snazzy.”

“Nothin’ else of value in there... *Tch.* Hey, Boss!”

...Boss?

The man that picked me up and a few other men roughly lifted up my ark and started walking. The sound of a bonfire’s crackling and crude laughter reached my ears.

I have a bad feeling about this...

“Yo, boys. What did you find?”

“This silk cloth is the most valuable thing. The only other things in there were this baby and some pebble.”

“Oh, silk sells for a pretty sum. A baby, though... What race is it?”

“She looks human. See, no fur or fluffy ears.”

“No scales or a tail, either... Oh, but check it out; it’s a girl!”

Noooooooooooooooooooo!

They tore my blanket and clothing away, unveiling me for all present (a group of middle-aged men!) to see.

Creeps! Perverts! Sick perverted creeps!

One of them lifted me up by one leg and dangled me upside down in what

was probably the worst possible way to hold a baby. But forget appearances or gentleness. Him holding me like that only made me...

“Gaah!”

...incapable of restraining myself. And it really, honestly wasn’t my fault, but...

Aaah... Just kill me... I thought as shameful relief overtook me.

“Gaaaaah! Gaaaaah!” I cried out.

“Ya little shit!”

“Gahahaha! The baby pissed on ya!”

“Shit, wait, the fire’s goin’ out!”

He flourished me about, still holding me by the leg. This time, I wasn’t screaming just out of embarrassment—it *hurt*.

O-Ow, my leg! What are these guys doing?! Wait, no, did this guy just try to throw me into the fire?! You can’t do that to a baby—Ow! My leg feels like it’s tearing off! Stop it! Let me down! It huuurts!

“A baby, huh...? What do we do with it, Boss?”

“Well, we could probably sell her to a slave merchant in Edesa Kura for some coin. It’s a girl, so we could also keep her around for our pleasure, huh? Or... Here’s a thought. We could teach her how to kill and make her work for us as an assassin! She’ll net us a fortune.”

“Oh, I like it! And if we have her to keep us company, we won’t have to kidnap any village girls anymore either!”

“Nah, there’s that extra-special something about bedding girls you kidnapped yourself...”

“I guess...”

“Sides, stealing’s our job! If we don’t taste the spoils every now and then, we’ll lose our touch!”

“Ahahaha! Ya ain’t wrong!”

Wh-What are these people saying...?! Are these guys... No, they’re definitely

thieves! No way... Why did I get picked up by them, of all people...? They're going to make me a slave...or an assassin...? To hell with that! If I stay with these people, they'll kill me sooner or later!

Someone! Anyone! Heeeeelp!

"Gaaaaah! Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" I bellowed out.

"Zip it, pipsqueak!"

"Gaaaaaaaaah! Aaaaaaaaaah!"

"Forget it, Boss, let's just flay this tyke. You really think we can raise a kid?"

"Well, I guess you're not wrong there... Though we could just abduct some girl from a village and have her raise the kid for us... Huh?"

Help! Somebody! Anybody! I don't want to die here and I don't want these creeps to take advantage of me or make me a slave! Please! Help, please!

The only thing I could do was wail and cry out helplessly. I squeezed my eyes shut and cried out as hard as I could, so I didn't even have the leisure of appreciating the starry sky.

But before long, the bandits started fighting something. Apparently, my crying had summoned something they hadn't expected. I could hear gurgling and screams and the ominous sound of something snapping. By the time I'd grown too tired to cry any longer, the sound of an animal's growling had reached my little ears—a distinct gurgling sound.

W-Wait... Wait up... I just imagined that, right...? Th-This isn't happening...

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr...!"

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" I cried out in fear.

A-Animals!

A pack of animals, crimson blood dripping from their jaws, was circling me! And while I couldn't see it, I could clearly hear the sound of crunching and smashing.

"U-Ugh... B-Boss... H-Help... Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The thief then fell silent, as if the agonized howl he'd let out clogged his

throat. I could hear the men screaming and moaning, calling out for help and begging the animals to stop. But little by little, their voices were replaced with the sound of something being torn off and eventually followed by silence.

The only thing I could see was the back of one animal. But I heard the growling of several more.

I silently accepted that my life was over. It was short and its end came all too quickly. My only way of surviving this was for the animals to not notice me and leave, but my ark was wide open, and my gaze was locked with one of theirs.

What was that red, blood-like fluid dripping from its mouth? I was afraid to ask and didn't really want to know. So, I closed my eyes.

Just hurry up and end this... What is this even? A nightmare? I'm probably not gonna wake up in a hospital after being hit by that bike, am I...?

When that thief dangled me in the air from my legs, it really did hurt, after all...

The animals sniffed my scent curiously.

Is this gonna be one of those cases where they decide to raise me as one of their young or something...?

“Gaaaah!”

“You mustn’t harm her.” A mysterious voice echoed out.

The voice seemed to echo at first, but it gradually became clear. Was that a man’s voice? Maybe one of the bandits...? Whatever it was, it made the animal bolt away from me with a yelp. And the next moment, a mysterious young man with hair as black as night peered down at me. He was dressed oddly and clearly wasn’t there with the bandits.

“...You didn’t have to kill them... You lot have taken it too far...”

“Humans, burn, territory.”

“Burn, kill.”

“Our kind, many, dead.”

“Humans, unforgivable. More! Kill!”

Those voices spoke not so much in words as utterances... But those sounds they produced were thick with anger and rage.

Wait...the animals are talking? Is this some kind of baby power?

"I know. But revenge will not bring back your lost kinsmen or restore your land. Even I can do nothing about those who have died."

The voices simply returned a wordless growl.

"You should migrate to the Mythical Continent. Go east from here. If you see humans along the way, you mustn't attack or devour them. Do so, and they will hunt you down. And they far outnumber you. Once you reach the eastern tip of this land, ask the water dragon Lenne to help you cross the sea. Mention my name and he will ferry you. You wish to protect your clan, yes? Then restrain yourselves for now and make your way east."

"...Under, stood. Will do, as you say. Clan, I protect."

"That's a good boy."

...Did he just talk to those animals...?

Baby superpowers are amazing, I thought to myself. I always heard stories about babies being able to understand what animals say, but...

The animals' presence grew further away, and the man peered down at me again. He was a beautiful young man... He felt like he'd come from another world altogether compared to those filthy, smelly men from earlier. He had black hair and dark eyes, just like a Japanese person...

And that figure! He's like a model or an idol or something...! I only ever saw people that pretty on TV!

But the gaze in his eyes was so sad...

Did he come here to save me? Did he tell the animals to come here? Who is he...?

"I went ahead and did it, didn't I...? What am I going to do? I can't raise a baby..."

Wait, whaaaaaaat?!

The young man dropped his shoulders in a spectacular show of regret. He then crossed his arms and brought a finger to his lips in contemplation, after which he cradled his head in both arms...

This guy's totally regretting this!

"Leaving the baby to those beasts is... Yes, I couldn't do that. They've got their hands full just staying alive, and besides, I can't leave a pack of demon wolves with a baby and expect them to raise it... But I can't do this either! What am I supposed to do?!"

Well, I don't know what I'm supposed to do, either, mister! But, uhh, thanks for saving me! Really! From the bottom of my heart!

If I'd have stayed with those thugs, I'd have lost either my sanity or my life. This man effectively saved my life.

"Aah..." I cooed as I reached my hands out toward him.

I wanted to at least show him my gratitude. At hearing my voice, the young man looked at me with a pale face, his eyes full of anxiety...

This guy... He's a nice person.

He wouldn't be this worried and anxious if he wasn't. Those bandits earlier weren't occupied with actually raising me—they just wanted to take advantage of me, to use me. And the way they handled me was awful.

But by comparison, this man was pale with concern over the question of what to do with me. Only a kind, good-hearted person would make that kind of face. But still...I couldn't bring myself to ask someone who was this afraid of the idea of caring for a baby to raise me...though, that said, I couldn't speak to begin with!

And since he'd saved me, I wanted to return the favor, somehow. But even that was out of my reach, since I was a baby. All I could do was coo and babble while I tried to withstand my empty stomach...

You'll have to forgive me when it comes to going to the bathroom, though. My body can't help that. I mean, I am a baby! I really don't have many options in the way of repaying favors!

"...For today, I'll just take you to my place. And tomorrow, we'll check along the human highways. Maybe we'll find a traveler kind enough to take care of you... Not anyone like those people from earlier, though. *Hmm...*"

The man bent over and picked up my ark. The ark rocked ever so slightly—he'd picked me up rather carefully. And with his face so close to mine, his handsome features became all the clearer.

...This guy really is a pretty boy. Like, wow.

But he did have an odd pattern on his forehead... *Like a tattoo. Is he from some Amazonian tribe?* Except he wasn't going around half-naked...and looked more Japanese to me than tribal.

"Aaah, aaaaaah." I cooed.

Who are you? And, erm, thanks for saving me.

I couldn't convey anything meaningful to him, but I had to at least try. He *did* save my life.

"Hm? What is it...? You're such a strange baby. Are all human babies this smart? You don't have to thank me. I just saved you without thinking of the consequences, and I can't raise you. Forgive me."



"Aaah! Aaaaaah!"

Oh, not at all! I understand...! Wait, are you reading my thoughts? C-Can you tell me your name?

But all I got was silence.

Okay, wow, I just got totally ignored! Or I guess you can't actually hear me...

"This is my house. Or...so I call this little cave... We'll go looking for someone to take care of you tomorrow, so hang tight until then, all right? Oh, you must be hungry. I've got some Kalupa milk. You want some?"

"Aaaah!"

I'll have some! Please! I don't know what a "Kalupa" is, but if it's milk, it's probably the best thing! You have no idea how hungry I am! I'll never forget this, mister! You're a lifesaver!

I flapped my little hands, begging for milk. Very baby-like of me, as it were.

"...B-But how do I feed you... Should it be cold? Or maybe I should heat it up, or... Wait, where did I put it again... *Aaaah...!*"

...I don't know what's going to happen next, but, erm... This guy's really clumsy.



THE next day, the man disappeared after sunrise. In his place, some giant monster peered down into my ark. As I looked back with wide eyes, the beast spoke with the nice man's voice, saying, "I'll try rocking you a little..."

...No...way...

"Aaaah?!"

This black monster that makes the demon wolves from yesterday look tiny by comparison is supposed to be that handsome guy?! Who is this person?!

The fact was, though, he saved me. The monster closed its jaws around the handle of my ark and started walking. From my point of view, all I could see were its upper jaw fangs and cute whiskers.

The morning glow was just barely visible in the sky. We were off to look for someone who'd adopt me...which made sense. I was a baby, so I needed an adult to take care of me. I could only hope we'd find someone nice...

However, I still held on to a strong resistance to all this. I mean, I still recalled most of my past life, so I had my pride as an adult. And I felt it all too keenly here.

Think this through, damn it! Be realistic! I was a baby—a defenseless infant who couldn't walk or talk on her own. I needed to throw my pride aside and choose life as a baby. After all, my alternative was to die a helpless baby...

"Uuu, aah..."

"What is it? You need to pee? Poo?"

The black monster noticed I'd gotten louder and carefully placed me down on the ground. Its big black nose sniffed my lower half carefully. The shame made me wish the ground would just swallow me up.

The nice man took off the cloth that served as my makeshift diaper yesterday, then tied a new one in its place, but...having that region sniffed was *still* embarrassing!

"...What *is* this stone, by the way? I've never seen anything like it. Is it some kind of pact stone?"

"Aah?"

"Oh, I mean the stone inside your room... Well, I guess you don't understand."

Can you really call this cradle my room? It feels kind of...off... But I guess this is my room, in a way... Also, what's a pact stone?

Indeed, I'd no idea what any of this meant. But someday, I might need to know, so I begged him to explain.

"Aaah! Aaaah!"

"You want to know?"

"Aaah!"

"Pact stones are produced when some kind of contract or pact is sealed, as

proof of the agreement. They hold no meaning for anyone except for those bound in the pact. To that end, I doubt this stone belongs to you. You're far too little."

Given what he'd told me, I doubted this was mine, too. I couldn't recall anything that grand happening to me.

"But since you have it, it must mean your parents gave it to you with some kind of wish in mind... Perhaps the fact your voice reached my ears wasn't a coincidence."

...Really? Well, either way, you chose to come to my aid, and I'm grateful for that! I'll repay you for this debt someday, I promise!

"Anyway, here we are. We should wait for someone to pass by. If you get hungry or need to go to the bathroom, let me know."

"Aaah!"

Roger that, sir!

I really couldn't express how grateful I was to this person. Normally, I'd at least go to the bathroom on my own if I could... And if I wasn't a baby, I could at least work to earn my own meals!

Are there any jobs in the Amazon forest, though...?

"Aaaaah..."

Incidentally, all I could really do was look up, and my view was just the monster's face and a lot of thick, green foliage. Which begged the question: just where exactly was I?

Isn't this kind of weird, actually?

I ended up sort of just rolling with it, but the idea of this monster actually being the nice mister who helped me yesterday was odd...

Is he a man who can turn into a monster? Mm? Or a monster that can turn into a man? Huh? Which is it? Can people in the Amazon do that? Is this some kind of hunting technique? I mean, it doesn't look like a disguise...

I looked at my small hands as they waved forward. I couldn't exactly fool

myself into thinking I was anything but a baby at this point. But even if I could accept this weird turn of events, there were plenty of other things that made no sense.

Like...where was I? What corner of the world was I in? Why did my parents leave me? And, practically speaking, sending a baby down a river was pretty much tantamount to killing them, right? *Was I thrown away? But my mother and father looked so kind...*

Mother had jewels on her. So she probably wasn't hurting for money, but... maybe there was a famine? I mean, undeveloped regions don't exactly have convenience stores or supermarkets... So maybe they sent me down the river, hoping someone in a city might pick me up?

But does the Amazon river even connect with any cities...?

I never visited the Amazon or felt really driven to look into the place... *But apparently, there are telephone poles near the Egyptian pyramids and the Sphinx, so for all I know, there could be surprisingly modernized cities even in places like this.*

Aah...

It was odd. I had so much to think about, but the breeze was pleasant, and the scent of the foliage made me oddly sleepy...

Well, sleeping is part of a baby's job description...

Sorry, mister...I'm...tapping out...



WHEN I woke up, I found myself looking up at an unfamiliar ceiling.

“Ah, she’s awake!”

“Ooooh!”

And this time, old men covered in bandages look down at me.

Uhh, mister, who did you leave me with?! I guess...they don't look like bandits, but...

They were all injured, and some of them were wearing armor... I had no idea

what group of folks I was left with.

"Stop gawking at the baby, you guys. You'll scare it."

"Sure, sure... Are you really gonna raise it, though, vice-captain?"

"Your wife and kid ran off on you, right? Ya sure you're up for this? Maybe it'd be better off in De Marl's Orphanage..."

"Nah, I'll raise her. A Mythical Beast saved this kid. Something weird might happen if I leave her in De Marl."

"Y-Yeah... At this point, Mythicals are pretty much more a legend on this continent..."

"I guess there's still a few left..."

...Mythical Beasts? Legendary creatures? Like, the kind that shapeshifts between human and animal form... Wait, so that nice man wasn't human, but a Mythical Beast?

All those questions were certainly on my mind, but more importantly, it seemed that the bearded man was going to raise me. They called him vice-captain, but I had no idea what group he was part of. All the people I could see were bandaged, so maybe it was a mercenary group?

Huuuuuh?! Mercenaries?! What country is this?!

"...Gotta come up with a name for the kid first, though. What do we call it?"

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"A girl. Mm... A girl... A girl's name..."

My name...

If nothing else, it looked like these bandaged people had their priorities straight, unlike those bandits from earlier... Albeit, they were still injured, so that was concerning.

Who are they?

Everyone seemed lost in thought as they tried to think of a name, which was a pretty funny scene, but...

"I know! How about Tinaris?" The bearded man suggested.

"Huh...?" One of the injured men groaned. "V-Vice-captain, you just added a letter to Tiaris' name. You know, that dancer everyone likes from De Marl..."

"Agreed."

"Yeah, sounds good."

"Tia's the best."

The group seemed to be in agreement.

"Huuuh...?" The man who argued with the bearded man eyed them with surprise.

Huuuuuuh?!

"All right, it's decided! Starting today, you're Tinaris!"

"*Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!*" I broke into tears.

"Ah, she started bawling!"

"See! She doesn't want you to name her after a dancer!"

"But it's not the same name! It's just inspired by it... *Aah*, okay, okay, just stop crying, okay?! H-Hey, how do you soothe a baby?!"

"Huh?! Forget having a kid, I'm not even married! How am I supposed to know?!"

"Maybe she wants milk? Or, *uhh*, maybe she needs to take a piss?"

"S-Stop the carriage!!!"

♣The Day I Became a Foster Father

MY name is Marcus. I'm a knight of De Marl, a country located on the northeast corner of the human continent. De Marl isn't ruled over by a king or emperor. Sixteen senators handle legislation, three priests oversee the justice system, and four knight captains govern military affairs. It's what's called a democratic country.

De Marl was allied with the demi-human continent to protect their rights from an empire called Edesa Kura, which claims mankind is the superior species. Edesa Kura is an empire to the southwest that's vassalized quite a few smaller countries.

They seek to unify the human continent and threaten to attack the western demi-human continent under the banner of human supremacy. They're radicals, plain and simple.

My kingdom of De Marl is a land of peace and has allied with some of the demi-human tribes that are relatively friendly towards mankind. As such, we've been resisting Edesa Kura's radical expansion alongside them.

We were far from the only country to do so. Edesa Kura did seek to "unify" the human continent. So, we resisted them by banding together and forming a united front with other countries. In so doing, we hoped to stop their ambitions.

Drawn by De Marl's peaceful ideals, I became a knight of the kingdom. During my enrollment in the knight academy, I met a beautiful girl called Kelt in town. We went on to marry and have a child, while I graduated as the highest-ranking knight.

I became a successful knight, and advanced rapidly through the ranks...I sailed through life without a hitch in my twenties. But as I turned thirty, the fighting grew more intense, and I was sent on campaigns more often. When I came home, my wife and daughter would gaze at me with cold eyes, and we'd hardly

talk.

I didn't know how to converse with them anymore. I couldn't talk to them about the bloodshed I'd seen, and the dirty jokes my unit's knights told weren't going to amuse them. And if I were to ask them about how things were going in town, none of it made much sense to me. What would I know about a town I was mostly absent from?

We started talking less and less often. My wife and daughter would just wordlessly put meals on the table and shut themselves off in their respective rooms. I wanted to find some kind of answer. To do **something** for them. But before I could figure out a solution, I was sent out on my next campaign.

And when I came back from that campaign, I was informed my achievements earned me a promotion to the rank of vice-captain! *This will surely make my wife and daughter change their minds about me*, I thought. I was a vice-captain, after all! A vice-captain! Four knight captains govern over the military affairs of De Marl, and I was now a direct subordinate to one of them! I was one of the highest-ranking people in this country! Saying that I moved up in the world would be an understatement!

You two get it, right?! I fought hard, risking life and limb, and now I've finally climbed up to this rank!

"Kelt! Nakona! I'm home! Listen, I've got something to tell you, I..."

But when I came back home, I found a dark residence with its lights out. On the table were two pieces of paper. One was a letter that curtly said, "I'm going back home to my family. Goodbye." The other was a divorce form.

Aaah, Gods of De Marl... Where did I go wrong...?



"**VICE-CAPTAIN** Marcus!"

The voice of Gildias, my subordinate, yanked me out of absentminded troubles. A sword swung down at me. This was a blow I normally would have dodged. But now, I didn't even know what I was fighting for. For my country? No...I fought for the country where my wife and daughter were. But they had cast me aside and left me behind.

So what do I have left to fight for...?

And as I wavered, the enemy's blade knocked my shield aside, and the second blow swung down at my sword arm...severing it below the elbow.

It's all over...

My career as a knight ended at that moment. But for whatever reason...part of me felt relieved. No longer would I have to fight. I'd grown tired...so, so tired...

"Vice-captain!"

Gildias slew the opponent that maimed me. The other knights carried me off while I simply lingered, dazed from the pain of my lost arm and my relief at never having to fight again.

Charging forward was a mistake. And even as I was overcome with guilt for failing the captain, the battle ended in a narrow victory for us. I wasn't there for the victory, of course. The captain entered the first-aid tent and told me two simple words.

"We won."

I could only muster a simple reply.

"Right..." I said.

After that, Captain Dirbleu directed an expressionless gaze at me.

"Your family runs an inn at the foot of Mount Rofola, right? I'll handle the paperwork. Go back home and spend the rest of your days in peace."

His tone was detached. That was probably his idea of saying goodbye and repaying me for all my efforts so far. But there was a hint of bitterness in there, too... There were a lot of emotions behind that gesture.

"Thank you, Dir. I'm sorry it has to end this way..."

"Don't worry about it, Marcus. But I'll see to it you get medals and a prize. And retirement money, too. Once you've healed, come to De Marl. Rent a big carriage... Your retirement money should be more than enough for you and your family to live on for a good while without any trouble."

"Heh. Half of it is gonna get wasted on my doctor's fees, though..." I muttered bitterly,

"Don't be stupid," Dir chided me. "We'll pay for that, too. When you find a doctor, tell him to claim the payment from De Marl. Even if the country won't pay for it, I'll do it out of my own pocket."

"You idiot, I can't depend on you that much..."

"Truth be told, some part of me wants to tell you to stay in the army and move to clerical work..."

"Nah, that's not gonna happen... It was my dominant hand."

Dir pinched his brows bitterly. He really was sad to see me leave his command. Given his position, he had plenty of political opponents, and people like me who shared his ideals and aspirations were hard to come by. Losing an ally like me was a painful blow for him.

The war with Edesa Kura was nearing its conclusion, but it likely wouldn't be long before De Marl locked blades with them again. De Marl's internal affairs would surely turn stormy with the aftermath of the war... I truly, honestly felt bad for him.

"Forgive me, Dirbleu... But I want you to know that, even if I'm far away, I'll always think of you as a friend. That much I can promise. If there's anything I can do to help you, you can count on me."

"...You idiot...! How can you say that when you just lost your arm..?!"

I could only pray this was the last person I'd ever have to lose... And with that prayer at heart, I left the battlefield behind me. Those like me, injured to the extent where they could never fight again, were put on a carriage and sent back to De Marl.

Farewell, Dirbleu. My one and only brother-in-arms. Fighting by your side was an irreplaceable experience for me. I hope you can tell that these are my true feelings...

"Vice-captain, does it hurt? Do you need some water, or...?"

"The painkiller's working, I'm fine. But Gildias, I'm not your vice-captain

anymore. Just go back to calling me Marcus.”

“No. You haven’t officially retired yet! And you’re the only one I acknowledge as my vice-captain!”

“Gildias...”

Having a young, talented knight speak to me like that didn’t feel too bad. I probably should have been grateful, but looking at that frank gaze of his pained me... I’m a man who drove his own wife and daughter away and lost a battle in a way that essentially betrayed an unrivaled comrade. I wasn’t worthy of being called a knight. *Where did the loyalty I once made an oath to uphold disappear to?*

I’m pathetic...

“Gildias, I live at a lakeside inn at the foot of Mount Rofola. That’s where I’m getting off. They did tell you that, yeah?”

“Yes, they said that’s where your family lives... Are you going to make a living there after you leave the brigade?”

“That’s the plan. My folks are too old to keep running the place. Gotta repay them for everything somehow... Well, with the way my arm is, the most I can manage is maybe plowing a field or fishing, though. And maybe I can handle cleaning, too...? I could probably hold a broom with my left hand...”

“Sounds like you won’t be short on work there, then. Why not come to De Marl and ask a specialist to make you a prosthetic arm?”

“A prosthetic... Yeah. I suppose I shouldn’t expect much, but it ought to be better than nothing.”

The thought of showing up at my parents’ place scared me. I wrote them letters regularly, but I couldn’t imagine the faces they’d make when they saw me. Mother might cry... If I still had my wife and daughter by my side, maybe taking over my parents’ business would be a fun experience. And with that impossible dream on my mind, I cast a wistful gaze out the carriage’s window.

The carriage was full of moans, and the scenery outside was somewhat obscured by the carriage ahead of us. My only consolation was the chirping

birds.

My life passed by too quickly, didn't it...?

"Whoa!"

"What?!"

Thud!

The carriage shook hard and the horses neighed in complaint. Gildias wordlessly hopped outside the carriage. I thought to reach for my sword but then jolted with a start.

Right... My right hand's already...

"What happened?" I shouted to Gildias.

"There's a beast! A huge one!"

"What? A monster?!" someone shouted.

"Gildias, gather the guards!" I barked orders. "Stop all the carriages and gather anyone who can move! If it's a beast monster, there should be more than one!"

...But even without my hand, I can still do something!

Gildias gathered people who could fight and headed for the front carriage. If it really was a monster, this was trouble! Monsters were much more dangerous than normal animals. It was said that long ago, an evil dragon tainted humans and animals with its wicked mana, and their descendants are monsters.

There is no power in the world capable of reversing this affliction, and slaying those monsters scatters a miasma called Kathra into the air. Anyone who comes in contact with Kathra also becomes polluted and turns into a monster. Worse yet, monsters attack other living creatures on sight... The only way to repel them is to weaken them and force them to flee.

"...Is that it?!"

"I-It's huge!"

A black animal stood in front of the front carriage. It was bigger than we'd imagined and had three tails. All three of them seemed to swerve and waver on

their own as it gazed at us silently, its eyes narrowed.

This... This isn't a monster...

"What do we, vice-captain?! Should we have our mages attack—"

"No, that's not a monster... Though it's not a normal animal, either. If it was a monster, it'd have attacked by now."

"Th-Then you're saying that's a...?"

"I dunno. It's the first time I'm seeing anything like it, too... Couldn't be a Mythical Beast, could it...?"

"A Mythical Beast...? It can't be..."

Mythical Beasts... To the west was the demi-human continent, where races like the beastmen, elves, dwarves, kobolds, and lizardmen lived. But opposite of it, to the far east, was the mythical continent. There lived races of mythical creatures like dragons, pegasi, and griffins. It was their natural habitat, and only the bravest or most reckless of adventurers would brave that land.

Edesa Kura apparently had plans to capture territory in the mythical continent, but how would they fight off dragons?

But anyway, this creature looked fundamentally different from a normal wolf. It was **that** much larger, and there was a glint of intelligence to its eyes as it gazed at us, as if it was trying to decipher our next move.

Judging by the fact it wasn't running...implied it wanted something.

"You guys stay where you are! There might be more of them, so stay vigilant!" I ordered the men.

"What are you going to do, vice-captain?" Gildias asked me.

"If it's a Mythical, it should be able to understand human speech," I replied.

"That's too dangerous!"

"Just let me do it...!" I insisted, a hint of desperate urgency in my voice.
"Listen, supporting Dir is gonna fall to you guys now, so... Please!"

"Vice-captain...?" Gildias looked at me, confused.

I took a step closer. Then another. Moving cautiously, as if trying to discern how close it would let me approach, I sheathed my sword to show I had no desire to fight. *A Mythical should understand. They're said to be even more intelligent than humans.*

"Aaaah, I'm, uhh, I'm called Marcus," I tried calling out to it. "A former knight. See, lost my arm... A washed-up old man who can't do his job anymore. Uh... Could you tell me your name? I figure you're a Mythical."

All right... Is it gonna answer?

The beast wordlessly nudged its jaw to the right, its gaze fixed on me.

I-It answered! It really is a Mythical! A real Mythical! I just met a living legend...!

"Ah?!"

It then jumped a few feet ahead, and upon landing, fixed its gaze on me again. It then nudged its head in the same direction again and then sat down on the spot...

Is it signaling for me to follow it? This is unbelievable!

"...Gildias, it's telling me to follow it. Keep an eye on the carriages, will you?"

"I'll come with you, vice-captain! I can't let you go alone!"

"No, that's a Mythical. No doubt about it... It understands what we're saying. If we provoke it too much, it might attack."

"Ugh..."

The mythical creatures were the apex species of this world. Dragons were the clearest example, but mythical creatures were all more powerful than even the monsters. Challenging something like that to a battle when 90% of the people here were injured was effectively suicide. We'd probably lose before we even knew it.

I approached the creature, which broke into a light sprint once I crossed a certain distance, pausing after a while to let me catch up.

It's definitely leading me somewhere. What is it trying to get me to do...? Does

it want to eat me? But no, I've never heard of Mythicals eating other species...

“Mm?”

The black animal stopped under a large tree. Sitting beneath it was a small, cream-colored oval box. The animal nudged toward it with its nose and then turned to look at me...before taking a few steps back.

Is there something in there...?

I gingerly approached the box, picked it up, and peered inside.

Wh-Wh-What?!

“A-A baby?!”



The animal howled in response.

“Ah!”

And with that howl, the animal disappeared into thin air. At that moment, I realized why they call these creatures *mythical*. The way they appear and disappear resembles the phantoms people whisper legends about. The only things left in the wake of its disappearance were the gentle breeze, the sound of fluttering wings, the baby sitting in the small box...

...And me, who'd lost my right arm and everything I held dear to me all at once.

For whatever reason, my knees buckled. Placing my hands on the box, I could see its contents clearly. A little baby—without a single strand of hair or any teeth—slept serenely inside it.

Did that Mythical lead me here so I'd take this baby? What was that beast... What is this baby?

“An abandoned baby...?”

I poked the baby's cheeks gently out of curiosity. It was surprisingly soft, warm, and tender. I took the baby out of the box and held it in my arms, shivering. I touched the baby's cheeks again. Then its fingers. It then gripped my finger tightly.

It gripped me...!

I was speechless. That was all the baby did, but what was it? This feeling? Something overflowed within me... Tears ran down my cheeks before I knew it. She wasn't just warm... There was something strong about the baby. Teeming with life. It was like this little baby had everything I lost. Both its arms. A future. Potential...

But at the same time, it was just like me. We had one thing in common. Neither of us had a family. Of course, the fact a Mythical simply decided to save a human child was shocking by itself, but...

“Are you all alone...? That's no good...”

Aaah, aaah, aaah...! Gods of De Marl! Did you send that beast as a messenger

to me? Why would you leave this child with me? I can't leave this helpless little life here to die, but I've never so much as held my own daughter before. I'm a terrible, good-for-nothing father...

Is this why you sent her to me? To someone like me...who has absolutely nothing to his name?! To me, when I was foolish enough to lose my family, my knight's honor, even my own arm...!

You would grant me another chance...?

Would you be my family, you little angel?

Aah, Gods of De Marl, thank you...! Thank you for showing mercy on this pathetic man who had lost all hope... For bringing me this baby—teeming with life and hope...!

♣Me, Age Four

THIS world, Wisty Air, consists of 50% humans, 40% demi-humans (beastmen, elves, dwarves, and other races), and 10% Mythical creatures, like dragons and fairies. It's divided into three continents. The biggest and central one is populated by mankind. To the east is the Mythicals' homeland, while to the west is the demi-humans'.

As such, each continent is colloquially named after the race that populates it. Of course, the continents have their native names, but unfortunately, I've never heard anyone actually use those.

Among the humans and demi-humans, only heroic adventurers dare brave the Mythical continent. There was once a peace treaty between the human and demi-human continents, which enabled prosperous trade between the two lands.

But that all ended a few years ago when a country within the human continent adopted radical, human supremacist ideas. They professed to everyone—the demi-human continent included—that mankind was the superior, chosen species, and began an armed conflict to uphold their skewed ideals.

It goes without saying that this pretty much screwed everything up for everyone involved. Of course, being a child, I didn't quite understand things fully... But I did wish everyone could just get along.

"Tina, can you go get me some *poteitos* from the field?" Dad called out to me from the kitchen.

"Okay!" I replied.

I threw the dust cloth I used to wipe the window into a nearby bucket, which I then carried and placed next to the counter. I worked in a bar during my past life. I'd also worked part-time in a barbecue restaurant, so I was used to scrubbing windows whenever customer traffic was slim. So long as I had a chair

to stand on, this kind of work was easy-peasy for my “current” self.

Putting the bucket in its place, I stood on my tiptoes and turned the front door’s knob with my fingertips. Then I leaned against the siderail, climbing down each step carefully, and hopped down the last one!

Our field was diagonally right of our “house.” It was surrounded by a fence to keep out animals. I opened the gate, which I could do even with my meager strength, and went to the back left of the fields to pull up some *poteitos*—a vegetable similar to potatoes.

Looking around the field, I spotted some *ciarorots*, *oniuns*, and cabbages (all the same as I remembered them), and also *letapods* (lettuce-like vegetables), *totomos* (which were like corn), and *timates* (basically tomatoes), among other vegetables.

I was used to vegetables growing according to the seasons in my world, but things were different here. Here, there were seeds you could plant, and they’d grow fully in a matter of days. I thought it was pretty strange, honestly.

“Ah, I forgot to ask how many he needed...” I muttered to myself.

Thinking back, I recalled our guests for today were a group of four adventurers. Two men and two women... *And if both men eat about five poteitoes, I should probably take ten to make sure there's enough and head back home.*

Deciding to do that, I jumped and caught a small basket hanging on the fence and placed some newly harvested poteitos. It was a bit heavy, but pulling it along was half the fun!

“A-one, two... One, two...”

I carried the basket into the house and placed it in the kitchen. This was a lot of physical labor for a four-year-old girl, but I was surprisingly strong. So this much was fine.

“Dad!”

“Aah, thank you, Tina. Ooh, you sure picked a lot.” Dad said, lifting the basket up with his left hand.

This was my adoptive father, Marcus. Apparently, he was a pretty amazing person who once climbed up to the rank of vice-captain in the knights of De Marl. The era I lived in during my past life didn't have knights, so I couldn't quite compare it to anything I knew, but I could understand he was a really impressive man.

Dad picked up a poteito and gazed at it with satisfaction in his eyes, before gripping it with the fingers of his other...prosthetic hand.

"Yeah! There are a lot of guests today, so I figured I'd get a bunch of them so they have enough to eat!" I exclaimed.

"Good on you, Tina. Thanks for helping me out."

Oh, no, don't mention it! This is nothing! I mean, you're giving me food and shelter here!

But that said, there was a party of four adventurers staying today, but our inn—the Rofola Lodge—had six guest rooms. They were all built as little cottages, with four rooms for four, one room for five, and another for six. And today's guests split up into two groups of one man and one woman, taking up two of our rooms for four.

In other words...we had vacancies.

And I had to wonder why. The road from De Marl to the port country of Fei Lu was a straight path forward, and we were one of the few inns located along that highway. *Even if one traveled by carriage, the Rofola Lodge has a stable, and it's an excellent locale to stop for a night's rest in... The view's nice, and the food's great...!*

Probably... I think...

Behind our inn was Mount Rofola, and the cottages looked out on Lake Rhiode. Our area's natural features blessed us with a bountiful supply of fresh food from both the lake and the mountain. And we cultivated vegetables in our field. So, food wasn't the problem here...right? In which case, why weren't we getting customers?

"Dad, can I go to the study?"

"Again...? I don't mind, but..."

"Then I'll be reading in the study! Tell me when it's time for dinner, okay?!"

"Ah, just don't touch the magic books, got it?!"

"I know!"

Had I been a typical four-year-old, I probably would've spent more time playing without a care in the world. I'd talk back to my parents and throw tantrums until I had my way. I'd get so absorbed in my playtime that I'd neglect my chores until my parents explicitly told me to do them. I'd probably be more...well, more of a kid.

But I still recalled my past life... And I clearly remembered this life since I'd been a newborn. And so, I couldn't and *wouldn't* act like a four-year-old.

I hopped up the steps to the second floor and opened the second door to the left. There I found a room full of piled-up books—my father's study. I reached for a book I could reach at my height and pulled it out of the bookshelf.

I had to find out—I had to know what the "Mother" and "Father" who likely gave birth to me four years ago were trying to tell me.

Just what *was* the Stone of Daybreak?

The book I opened was full of names. Apparently, this wasn't so much a book as it was a record of this inn's history—of the many people who were patrons of this establishment.

Technically, this inn belonged to Dad's parents. Last year, Grandma died... So while we were a family of four until then, we're now a family of three.

Dad and Grandpa put their heads together to run this place, so I thought it'd be natural to repay that debt by doing my part around here! I couldn't repay my mother from my past life for everything she had done for me, so now was my chance to fix that! The fact he wasn't my *biological* father did bother me ever so slightly... But he still saved my life.

And that's what I had to know. My real parents...and the Stone of Daybreak they mentioned. What did it all mean? *What will become of me when it awakens?*

I have to know...

If that power ended up being something bad, it could hurt Dad and Grandpa. And I hated the thought of that so much! I'd left my past life without repaying my mother for all she gave me, and that wasn't the kind of person I wanted to be!

But even so, after another day spent in the study, I once again walked away with zero findings. *Maybe I should ask Dad?*

But it's not normal for someone to remember things from when they were a baby, is it...?

In fact, the somewhat dubious statistic was that ten out of ten guests would raise their voice in surprise upon seeing me: "What, your four-year-old daughter is helping out with the inn? That's amazing!" If I started acting even more suspiciously, it would end up hurting the inn's reputation! I mean, if I saw a four-year-old help run an inn in my past life, my only reaction would be "Wow!" too.

But I was a grown woman on the inside, so I didn't remember what being four was like. In fact, I couldn't remember my name or how I looked before being reincarnated. Oddly enough, I could remember facts about my jobs and about Mom... I probably couldn't forget due to those lingering regrets.

Out of my desire to repay Mom for everything, I decided to forgo college and instead looked for work. But I ended up overexerting myself and falling sick from exhaustion, only troubling her even more...

I then decided to change my attitude and moved out on my own, to not burden Mom anymore... But it ended the same way. I couldn't handle multiple jobs, and the doctor ordered me to stop. So, I went back to Mom's place, cut down my jobs to just two, and then...that bike crash happened.

It's not fair! Who gave you permission to ride around with your lights off, you jerk?! I had a white coat on so I'd stand out at night, so how did you not notice that and crash into me?! What, were you on the phone or something?!

I was livid. Not only did that person ride around with their lights off, but they also weren't watching where they were going! To hell with them! They got

someone—namely me—killed!

I demand that bicycle licenses become mandatory from this day forward!

And, well, I got reincarnated with my memories intact, but... Why'd I have to end up in another world?!

“Ahh...” I sighed.

If I'm in another world... I...I can't repay Mom for anything...

Mom...

“Tinaris,” a voice suddenly talked to me from behind.

“Ah!” I jolted and turned around.

Standing there was Grandpa. His hairline was clearly receding, but what was left of it was gray, as was his beard. He was, well, what you'd expect a grandpa to look like. Dad's father...and the ex-proprietor of this inn. As of late, he'd always stayed on the second floor and hadn't gone down to the inn. I think losing Grandma made him age that much faster and left him sad and spent.

Sadly, not being blood-related made it hard for me to innocently love him as my grandpa and happily play with him. I kept thinking to myself that had I been a normal four-year-old, maybe that wouldn't be the case... Maybe I'd pay his sadness no mind and play with him blindly, pulling him out of his rut a little with my cheerfulness.

But I couldn't act that way...or rather, I'd try doing it, but it just felt off! And Dad noticed I wasn't being my usual self. “Don't push yourself too hard,” he said, with concern in his eyes.

But it frustrated me. I wanted to repay Grandpa for everything, too, but I just couldn't. What could I do to make him happy?

And as I grappled with that question and remained silent despite him calling for me, Grandpa simply squatted down to look at me at eye-level. My eyes locked with his kind gaze, leaving me confused.

He looked at me with affectionate eyes and patted me on the head. It felt awkward for me, and I didn't know what to do, when...

"Tina! Dinner's ready!" Dad called out to me from downstairs.

Grandpa turned his gaze downstairs and rose to his feet.

"Ah, G-Grandpa... Erm, do you want me to...bring you dinner?"

"Please do."

He beamed at me, but I could only answer with an awkward, stiff smile. I headed in the direction of the stairs, but when I turned around to look at him again...

"G-Grandpa!"

I found him kneeling near the door, clutching his chest in pain!

"Grandpa! Hang on!"

"T-Tina... Kuh..."

"I'll call Dad up! Daaaad! Come quick, Grandpa's...!"

I could hear something falling downstairs, and Dad hurried up in a panic.

"Pops!"

Oh no... What do I do...?!

He'd been depressed ever since Grandma died, but... He was sick, too?! *Why didn't I notice when I'm living in the same house as him! How stupid could I be?!*

"M-My chest..."

"Why didn't you say something sooner, you stubborn oaf...?!" Dad complained, helping Grandpa to his room and leading me downstairs so Grandpa could rest. "I'll call a doctor over. Tina, keep an eye on Pops, will you? And tell the customers we're sorry, but we need them to check out as early as tomorrow."

"All right!"

But even the closest country was days away by horse. De Marl was to the northeast, but the countries of Uru Ki and De Rurua were closer. Fei Lu was another big country to the west and was about the same distance from us as De Rurua. But on the other hand, Fei Lu was that much larger... Or so I'd heard...

"Dad, which country are you going to head for?"

"Fei Lu. A doctor there took care of me once. I'll be back...in five days at the soonest. Can you manage on your own until then?"

I fell silent. After swiftly gearing up for the journey, Dad kneeled down to look at me. I'd probably look very cool and dependable if I could just say, "Sure, I'll handle it just fine!" But...could a four-year-old like me really nurse an ailing old man? Cook for him, help him with the toilet...? I didn't even know what his illness was.

It occurred to me that rather than waiting for the doctor to get here, maybe taking Grandpa to the doctor instead would be wiser... But we didn't have a means of transporting Grandpa, did we...?

"...Right. Wait a minute," Dad said.

"Hm?"

I wasn't sure how Dad interpreted my pensive silence, but he got to his feet and went outside the house. After I stood there for a few moments in perplexed silence, I heard a few sets of footsteps climbing up the steps outside.

What? Guests at a time like this?!

"Tina," Dad said.

"Um..."

"It's fine. The guests said they'll help."

"H-Huh?!" I exclaimed in surprise.

"Hello," a voice greeted behind Dad.

The adventurer party that was staying at the inn today walked inside. Two men, two women. Their leader was a young man. The other male was a wise-looking, middle-aged man. One of the women was a girl carrying a staff who looked adept at magic, while the other was a muscular, bulky lady who carried a large ax. Incidentally, the two of them had the same hair and eye color. Their facial features were different, but the air they gave off was similar. Maybe they were sisters?

They entered the inn's reception room, which doubled as its dining room—and kindly smiled at us.

"Hi, I'm Gina," the muscular woman said. "I hear you're in trouble? We'll stay with you for the time being, so don't worry!"

"I'm Mina," the other girl said. "A magician's...apprentice, b-but I can handle magic. *Erm*, you know, stuff like starting fires. I can...manage that. I think...I hope..."

They did look like sisters, but...the younger one was apparently a magician? I honestly felt pretty anxious about her...

"A-Ahem!" The older sister, Gina, cleared her throat. "It's fine. Mina's just a bit awkward with her magic... Actually, her physical attacks are probably stronger, but she'll learn how to do it properly soon..."

You're not helping her case here!

"But all you need is someone to help you take care of the place, right?" the young leader ventured. "Don't worry, we'll do it! I'm Aaron, by the way!"

R-Right, but that's a bit too easygoing, mister! Grandpa's sick...

"We'll handle the food, okay?" Gina offered.

"O-Oh, sure, you can use the kitchen. Take care of Pops and my little girl, all right? Y-You can cook, right?" Dad sounded as apprehensive as I felt.

"Yes!" Gina nodded resolutely.

"Y-Yeah... Gina can cook," Mina said meekly.

"*Bfwah!*" As optimistic as he looked earlier, Aaron blanched at the sound of the (apprentice) magician's words.

I guess that says it all, doesn't it...!

The older sister, Gina, scratched her cheek with a bitter smirk.

"Well, my daughter's got a good head on her shoulders, so I think you'll be fine... But, uh, look after her. And if any customers show up, just explain the situation and refuse. I ought to be back in five days."

"Got it! Leave it to us!" Aaron said on behalf of his party.

"By the way! Are you gonna pay us for this?" Mina asked.

"Pay you...? Oh, well, let's make it so your lodging and meal fees are on me, all right? And you can borrow our fishing rods for free, so fish as much as you want at the lake out back."

"Oooh!" Aaron and Mina's eyes shined with excitement.

I guess this arrangement works? They shouldn't have to take care of a child and an old man for free, so not making them pay for anything is the best solution for everyone.

I'll have to be careful to not trouble them... After all, with Dad gone, I'm the only member of the household who can work!

Cleaning. Laundry. Taking care of Grandpa. Cooking...I decided I'd do anything I could. And also, washing dishes and collecting vegetables from the field... I couldn't go hunt in the mountains for meat though.

Also, I'd need to clean the cottages and take care of the *Ukokes* (this world's version of chickens) and *Gigiyas* (basically goats)!

"Everything will be all right, little lady," the middle-aged man suddenly spoke up.

I jumped.

"Aaron and Mina are... Well, they're as *utterly* useless as they look, but Gina and I can cook at least," he finished.

"What the hell, Sirius?!" Mina and Aaron snapped at the middle-aged man.

Gina, meanwhile, cradled her head. Still, it was a festive party, if nothing else. After thinking things through for a moment, I looked up at them.

"All right, thank you," I told the four and regarded Dad next. "I'll be fine. Get a doctor to see Grandpa as quickly as you can... Please, be safe!"

"...Tina..." Dad frowned. "I'm sorry. I'll be back before you know it!"

"Right!"



AND so began my uneasy time watching over the house. Me, Tinaris,

watching over the house by herself for the first time at four years old...!
Granted, I wasn't all alone.

It's at this point that it'd probably be best to officially introduce the party members. Like I've said before, there were four of them—two men and two women.

Aaron was a swordsman. He had unkempt black hair and wasn't incredibly handsome. My first impression of him was that he was something of a frivolous optimist. His housework skills were weaker than level 1. I couldn't rely on him for anything.

Then there was the middle-aged man with grizzled, graying hair who carried a spear. His gestures were elegant and dignified, but in contrast, his gear was old and worn out from overuse. Honestly, he came across as a bit different from the other three...

His name was Sirius. He was very fit, and apparently, he was a former knight, just like Dad? But something struck me as oddly off about him...

Then there was the muscular woman, Gina. She carried a large ax on her back, had clearly defined abs and tanned skin. She gave off the distinct impression and feel of an older sister and puffed up her chest proudly when she said to leave the chores to her. I was relieved to know I could at least rely on her.

Last was the girl dressed in a cute robe—Mina. She held a staff, but I concluded she wasn't actually any good with magic based on their conversation. Gina mentioned something about her physical attacks actually being stronger than her magic. Maybe she just took after her older sister, Gina, in that regard. Like Aaron, she was no good with chores...

Either way, I decided I'd be a good girl and make sure I didn't trouble anyone while Dad was out. I wasn't old enough to live independently quite yet, and if I was kicked out of this house, I'd have nowhere left to go. To that end, I figured I'd be better off learning some magic, if only for my future's sake.

That was why I'd dug through Dad's study for a book that taught magic, but... Dad had hidden them away, saying, "Ahaha, magic? No, that's too dangerous, you can't do that...!"

"Alrighty! So, where do we start?" Aaron asked.

"W-Well...Grandpa hasn't had dinner yet..." I answered anxiously.

"Hmm. So those dishes over there are for us?"

"Yes, Dad said he made you food since you paid for the meal plan. Mine and Grandpa's dishes are in the kitchen..."

"Then we just gotta carry those, right?! Leave it to me!" Mina exclaimed and briskly walked off.

"Ah! Wait, Mina, don't just open it...!" Gina tried to stop her.

Mina crossed behind the counter without permission and went into the door on the left.

Ah, wait, over there is...!

"...Um, that's not the kitchen... It's the toilet and bathroom..." I pointed out wearily.

"O-Oh, whoops!" Mina apologized with a smile. "Then, it's over here!"

It so happened that each of our cottages had its own private bathrooms. In other words, the bathroom behind the counter was for me, Dad, and Grandpa. There was a half bath on the second floor too, but the bathroom down here was the only full bath.

"So, where's your Grandpa's room?" Mina asked.

"Up the stairs, first door on the right," I replied. "Ah, I'll show you."

"...You're one dependable little girl." She smiled at me. "How old are you again?"

"I'm four years old this year," I answered.

"Four years old?!" Mina's eyes widened. "Wow, you've really got a good head on your shoulders!"

"Aaron could take a page out of your book," Sirius remarked, crossing his arms.

"Definitely!" Gina nodded.

"Wow, mean!" Aaron raised his voice in protest.

Apparently, that was this party's power balance.

"Then let's start by getting your grandpa some dinner. We'll ask him if he can eat on his own. Is he still in pain?"

"I'll go check!"

"Healing magic can't cure diseases..." Mina said pensively. "Healing items do no good for it, either."

"...It's not like you can cast any healing magic anyway, Mina," Aaron pointed out.

"Zip it or I'll wring your neck like a ukoke's."

"ULP...!"

M-Mina!? That creepy, evil voice just now was her?!

"Mm, little lady, can you bring Mina and me to your grandfather?" Sirius asked.

"Y-Yes." I nodded.

"Anything we can do for the time being, Sirius?" Aaron asked.

"I don't think so, but for now, we'll check on him." Sirius shook his head.
"Hopefully, it was only a momentary seizure."

"Then, Gina and I will have dinner before you're back! Wouldn't want it to go cold, right?"

"...I guess eating sooner means you'll be ready to work sooner..." Gina said, eyeing Aaron like he was some kind of pathetic creature.

...Having another pair of hands on deck is important. I can't be picky right now! Anyway, let's get Grandpa his dinner!

"Sirius, can you diagnose his disease?"

"Not at all. I'm an archaeologist, you know? How would I know anything about diseases! Ahaha!"

"Cut that out, you geezer... A-Ahem."

After we entered Grandpa's room, Sirius kneeled down and checked his pulse. He took off his gloves and did it so naturally, even I started expecting he might know what he was doing... He just looked the part of a doctor.

Sirius is an archaeologist, huh?

He did seem more intellectually inclined than the other three, so I was actually impressed. I didn't know how this party came together, but some part of me wanted to ask. Anyway, Grandpa had his eyes open despite being in pain, so Mina cleared her throat.

"Are you okay, sir?"

"Ngh... Y-Yes... I just ran out of my medicine..."

"Medicine?"

I've never seen him take any medicine... I cocked my head.

Grandpa coughed dryly and started rubbing his chest. I doubted it was actually helping him in any way, though...

"Is it Severed Breath Syndrome?" Sirius asked him grimly.

"...I'm surprised you can tell..." Grandpa muttered. "Yes, I used to live in a country that was occupied by Edesa Kura... The research they conducted there made me develop this illness. And so my wife and I moved here to Rofola. I hoped the clean air would help."

"Sirius, what's Severed Breath Syndrome?" Mina asked.

"About fifty years ago, Edesa Kura exploited and forced the lands they occupied to develop a supposed medicine of some kind," Sirius explained. "They used that drug without knowing what it might do, and it cost many lives. Those who didn't die developed the same kind of illness as this gentleman. Severed Breath Syndrome is a rare disease that stops at a certain stage. Once one is afflicted with it, there's no cure. There's only one antidote available that can alleviate its symptoms. A core of Solemayu fruit boiled in dried Solan flower leaves."

"Ah! So if we have that antidote, we can cure Grandpa?!" I asked expectantly.

"I'm afraid it'll only relieve the symptoms temporarily, little lady." Sirius shook

his head. “A definite cure for Severed Breath Syndrome hasn’t been discovered. Solan flowers have been used in antidotes since ancient times and are mildly effective against respiratory diseases.”

So it won’t completely heal him...

Grandpa sunk back into bed, clutching his chest. He looked like he was in so much pain...

“...There should be Solan flowers and Solemayu fruits on the mountain! I’ll go look for them!” I said.

“Do it tomorrow, little lady.” Sirius stopped me. “It’s too late to go out today.”

“But...!”

“And besides, the Solan leaves need to be dried properly. That’s not something you can do within a day or two unless you’re good with alchemy.”

“Aah...”

A-Alchemy...

Alchemy was an art similar to magic. It used mana to transmute materials, fusing them together to create and refine matter. It was said that advanced users of the art could mix together materials to create something completely unlike the original ingredients.

Alchemy was created by humans, but only a select few people could use it in the larger nations. Ordinary people could use it to a very basic extent, but only experts in the craft had the advanced skills to actually create medicine. Demi-humans and beastmen were skilled with magic, so they hardly ever tried using alchemy.

...Wait, but it’s fine if I can just use alchemy, right?

“I think there were alchemy manuals in Dad’s study!” I exclaimed, hopping to my feet.

“Hm? N-No...Little lady, I don’t think you can learn alchemy just by looking at books and imitating what they say to do...”

“I want to do anything I can!”

Dad found and raised me, and this man is his father. Not only did he not object to Dad raising me, he even helped him! And now, after Grandma fell ill and died, Grandpa might die too!

I haven't repaid him for everything he did for me! I can't let him just die!

I knew alchemy was a difficult art to learn, but humans were better at alchemy than magic. *And there should be a few elementary alchemy books in Dad's study.* I actively avoided those books until now. Some part of me always thought that if this world had magic, I was better off learning that than trying to pick up something as complicated as alchemy...

If I don't open these books now, then when will I?!



“THERE, I found them!”

I rushed into Dad's study and then looked at the far right side of the third shelf from the top, where I found the alchemy manuals. Above them were books for beginner and intermediate magic.

So that's where he hid them... Yeah, with my height, I wouldn't normally be able to reach that high... Nngh...

But I was lucky. Dad being a former knight meant he had access to these kinds of books. He'd said that ever since he lost his arm, he was learning various arts in order to lead an ordinary life.

As improper as it was, I used the lower shelves as footholds to climb up and pulled out an alchemy manual for beginners. I hopped back down and squatted on the floor to open the book called *Elementary Alchemy*. It started with the very basics, such as the way the world was made up.

“O-Ooh...”

Wait, how the world is made up?! That's where you start?! That's going into some pretty deep territory, isn't it?!

I chose to skim over that part.

Firstly, all living things are born with mana in their bodies. However, compared to demi-humans or Mythical Beasts, humans have a smaller capacity

for mana. As such, humans have created the art of alchemy. Alchemy is capable of producing feats that rival magic while requiring significantly less mana to perform. By mixing ingredients together, one can produce entirely unique substances. This is most commonly used during cooking.

“Wait, cooking? Really...?”

Describing cooking as “mixing ingredients together” wasn’t wrong... The book claimed that alchemy was similar to cooking on a basic level. And that made me feel a bit stupid for being so taken aback by the prospect of doing it. *I mean, if it’s like cooking, there’s no reason I shouldn’t be able to do it. Right?*

The book recommended a simple healing potion as an elementary alchemy exercise. It required mixing water with one of three flowers—the Lilith, Duana, and Solan.

Oh, I think we have some Duana growing in the backyard!

“Ah! Where did the girl go?!” A voice snapped the thread of my concentration.

It was Gina’s voice. I picked up the book and hurried down the staircase, pretending to have not heard her shout. I headed outside and picked a couple of Duana flowers. I then went out to prepare the ingredients...

The book said to use 300cc of water and a Duana flower to create a simple tonic. I also needed a pot, a wooden spoon to stir the concoction with, and small bottles so I could preserve and carry the tonic with me. I got those by washing some empty potion bottles adventurers often threw away at the inn.

We had a habit of rinsing and drying those bottles, then selling them off to passing caravans for a bit of extra coin. Those empty bottles would later be sold to alchemy associations across the different nations, who’d refill them with new potions.

“A pot? What, are you going to start doing *alchemy*?” Aaron looked down at me with eyes that were clearly joking.

Still, I had to try. And it wasn’t like I was trying to make the cure for Grandpa right now; this was just practice! For tonight, at least. Tomorrow I’d head for the mountain and pick the Solan flowers and Solemayu fruit. Apparently, drying

ingredients was considered basic prep work for alchemy. If I could successfully make the healing potion, then drying ingredients shouldn't be too difficult either.

Of course, the book did mention that "...drying should be done while having a good grasp of the ingredients you're working with. One must work while adjusting to match the ingredient, or the alchemy process may result in something different than what was intended."

This'll take some experimenting before I really get the hang of it. I better collect a lot of Solan flowers then!

"Oh, is that an alchemy book?" Aaron asked, glancing at the book in my hand. "You've got some strange things lying around. Wait... You're *really* trying to perform alchemy?"

"Yes!" I nodded. "I...I might not be able to cure Grandpa, but if I can at least make it so he doesn't suffer as much, I want to do it! I have to repay him for all the kindness he showed me!"

"Repay him...?" Aaron cocked his head quizzically.

"Ah, shorry, I need to concentrate. Can you *keeps* it down?" I asked him.

"O-Oh. Sorry?"

Perhaps because of being so small, I ended up lisping words every so often. Anyway, the book said to put the ingredients into the pot and transmit my mana into it little by little.

What does that mean? Mana?

That didn't exist in my past life, of course. But I had to try anyway. I had nothing to lose, after all! This was just practice, anyway. I held my hand over the pot. I concentrated on pouring a bit of mana inside it...

I started churning the contents of the pot, as the book instructed. Slowly, gently. It said the pot should light up after a while, after which I was supposed to stop pouring in mana. The rest was just stirring the concoction until it had thoroughly mixed.

"Wait, for real?" Aaron gaped.

"You can actually do it?" Gina asked.

"Be quiet, please."

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

I poured in more mana and swirled the stick, stirring the concoction. I sent mana in, little by little, and indeed, a light began to shine.

"No way!"

"R-Really?!"

Aaron and Gina exclaimed in shock. All that was left was to stir the mix until it was ready.

Please, work...!



"Ah!"

Poof!

The contents of the pot lit up like a camera flash.

Ah, I can't see... Did it work?!

"I-I can't believe it..." Gina whispered, her face stern.

A light-pink liquid had formed inside the pot.

W-Wait, I did it? It worked? A success?

"...This is the same color as our low-grade tonics... She seriously made a tonic..."

"Th-That's amazing! You can use alchemy?!"

"I-Is it actually ready...?" I wondered aloud.

"...Is this really your first time doing this?"

"Y-Yes, it's the first I've made something with alchemy," I admitted. "So I'm not sure if this tonic actually works..."

"Let me see."

To my surprise, Gina took a small knife and nicked her own finger.

Aaaah! What are you doing?!

As I panicked, she took a spoon and dipped it into the pot, scooping up a bit of the tonic I made and applying it to the wound. The cut zipped shut immediately. It had healed her. In other words...

"It's a success! You're amazing, girlie! A genius!"

"W-Wow! But I thought alchemy tends to fail if you don't know how to handle mana properly!"

"You're definitely a genius! You just whacked that magic in there!"

"Yeah, like boom! Poof!"

"Yep!"

"...R-Really...?" I asked, bothered by their odd choice of words.

For whatever reason, despite being praised, the feeling that “Wow, I’m amazing” didn’t really register for me.

Whacked mana in there...? Boom, poof...? What does that mean...?

But either way, I did create the tonic. So with that in mind, I tried to dry the other Duana flower. The end result would probably be like a dried flower, but I needed practice for drying the Solan flowers tomorrow.

Before I did that, I put the contents of the pot into a few little bottles. As I did, I was surprised by the amount I produced. It looked like there was enough for three or four bottles in there, and indeed, there was just enough for three.

I guess it makes sense; these were bottles for the same kind of potion.

“Hey, little miss, just an idea,” Aaron spoke up. “Could you sell us these tonics?”

“What?”

“We just saw how effective they are. If you could sell them to us, it’d be a huge help. We’d understand if you wanna keep them for the inn, but... What do you say? Two hundred colts a bottle!”

“H-Huh?! That much?!”

Two hundred colts... Colts were this world’s primary currency. One colt was worth about one yen. Dad taught me how to calculate money, and apparently, there were four kinds of colt coins. Gold, silver, bronze, and iron. Each kind was respectively less valuable.

Iron doubled the value by one. In other words, one iron colt was worth one yen. Bronze coins doubled the value by ten, silver coins doubled it by a hundred, and gold coins by a thousand. There were apparently even higher value colt coins than that, but Dad hadn’t taught me about them yet. What metal would be more valuable than gold, though? Platinum? I doubted I’d find out the answer to that question anytime soon.

But all that was inconsequential compared to the reality before me. What was a little kid like me supposed to do with two hundred colts?!

“A tonic’s market value is two hundred colts. I don’t think it’s particularly

cheap or expensive. What do you say?"

"E-Erm... B-But I just made it for the first time..." I stammered awkwardly. "I'll, hm... You can have it for a hundred colts..."

"Ahahaha! That's a bargain for us!" Gina smirked. "But really, no jokes... If that's the case, give us some kind of work to do in return. It won't feel right otherwise."

"Oh no, I..." I was about to politely refuse when something occurred to me. "Actually, um, there is something..."

If they insisted on it that much, some part of me felt that maybe I should just take them up on that offer of two hundred colts, but Dad always told me to never go back on something I said. That was part of his credo as a former knight, apparently. But then he said, "Not like it's convincing, coming from me! *Ahaha!*" which only just made it feel all the more convincing. With that man as my father, I couldn't go back and change the price now.

Gina's expression was so serious, so I decided to make my request.

"Then, could you go to the mountain tomorrow and collect some Solan flowers with me? There are wild animals living out there, so I can't really go on my own."

"Sure thing! That's simple enough for us. Right, Aaron?"

"Yeah! Three hundred colts for three tonics is a great deal, and we even get to stay here for free! Wouldn't make sense for us to not work for it!"

"Thank you very much!" I bowed my head.

All right! I've got bodyguards now! Now I can collect ingredients from the mountain safely!

"Then I'll go practice drying," I said.

"Drying?"

"Yes, there's a medicine that can help with Grandpa's disease. It needs a mixture of dried Solan flower leaves and Solemayu fruit cores. That's what I want to make."

"So that's why you're doing this, huh?" Gina wiped a tear. "Good on you... You're a good girl...!"

Y-You're exaggerating...

"Isn't drying complicated, though?"

"Apparently not. The degree of dryness influences the mixture in the end, but the book said the process of drying itself is simple."

"Really?"

Aaron peeked over my shoulder at the book as I flipped through it. The pages that dealt with drying said the process required a pot, a wooden spoon, and a cloth for absorbing the moisture. The method involved wrapping the ingredient with the cloth and placing it inside the pot, sending in mana like before, and then tapping it gently with the spoon over and over. Once the ingredient lit up, the process should be complete.

It felt simple enough for me after I'd managed to create a tonic. My only question was: how would I know how dry the ingredient ended up becoming? It was covered in a cloth, so I couldn't see it.

Does the amount of mana I send in change the degree of dryness...? Mm... I guess it is elementary alchemy and still not quite for beginners...

"Uuu... Such a...g-good girl..." As I was pondering the process, Gina had been reduced to sobs.

"I'll, er, go get a cloth..." I murmured, desperate to get out of her line of sight.

Is she drunk or something? Or just emotional and quick to cry?

The book said I'd need a thin cloth...and I quickly found something that fit the bill. A shirt that had blood stains on it, thrown away by some adventurers. I doubted anyone would mind me taking some old shirt that was going to be burned anyway.

I tried to cut out the dirty parts of the cloth, but my hands were too small to handle the scissors, so I asked Aaron and Gina for help.

"Aaron, Gina, can you help me with something? I want to use this part of the cloth. Can you cut it out for me?"

"Wait, what is this?!" they exclaimed at once upon seeing the bloodied shirt.

"Some adventurers who stayed here before threw it away. It'd just be burned with the rest of the trash either way, so don't worry and cut it up!"

"Then, *uhh*, let me do it," Aaron said.

He cut off the clean parts of the shirt. I took the cloth scraps and wrapped them around the last Duana flower left. I cleaned up the pot and placed the bundle on the bottom. I then poured in some mana and started tapping it with my wooden spoon.

Is it working...? If I open it, will the drying process fail? Wait, I didn't read what happens if it fails! What if it explodes?! But is it okay for me to just stop halfway through?! No, enough! No more negative thoughts! Focus, focus! This is practice, so if I have to fail at some point, it should be now!

I kept tapping the bundle and spilling more mana into it, time and again. As I did, Gina and Aaron watched me work with quiet seriousness. And then, the cloth bundle lit up.

Prod, prod. Mana. Prod, prod. Mana.

"Ah!"

A light flashed from the pot. It was done... Hoping it would be nice and dried out, I opened the bundle of cloth. However...

"Oh, it's..."

"Ugh. It looks rotten."

"...It looks like I failed..." I hung my head.

Oh, well...I guess I can't make everything work on the first go.

"It says, 'Use a clean cloth' here," Aaron suggested, flipping through the book.
"Maybe that's why it failed?"

"Ah...You're right..." I said, checking the page.

"Yeah, scraps from a bloodied shirt probably didn't fit the bill," Gina pointed out.

"R-Right..."

The book gave a hint: “Make sure to use a clean cloth. Using a cotton handkerchief or a gauze is advised.”

A gauze...like the one they use for first aid? Ugh, but I'm out of ingredients...

I'd already picked everything that grew around the inn.

“Oh, you guys are still awake?” Mina walked down the stairs, carrying a plate.

“How's Grandpa doing, Mina?” I asked.

I looked at the plate, only to find the food was mostly untouched. Apparently, he didn't eat anything...

“He said he can't eat. Swallowing makes it hard for him to breathe, apparently.” She frowned. “Anyway, what are you guys doing? Why's there a pot sitting on the counter?”

“Oh, yeah! Listen, Mina, this kid's amazing!”

Aaron and Gina excitedly told Mina about how I'd performed alchemy and crafted a tonic like they were bragging about a younger sister or something.

I-It was a fluke, and it only worked because I had the right ingredients. Don't hype me up so muuuuch!

“Wow, really?!” Mina gazed at me with round eyes. “Can you teach me how to do it, too?!”

“H-Huuuh?!”

“I mean, if I could just make us tonics, we won't need to haggle with merchants anymore! If anything, it could even make us money! It sounds awesome!”

Wow. Grown-up greed.

“I-I'm sorry. I used up all my ingredients already...” I said apologetically.

“O-Oh... Oh, I see.” Mina dropped her shoulders in disappointment.

“We're going to collect Solan flowers tomorrow,” Gina said. “Why not look for some Duana while we're there, Mina? That's what you need to make a tonic, right?”

"Um...yes," I answered. "To make a low-grade healing tonic, you need Duana flowers. Solan flowers are for antidotes, and antipyretics need Lilith flowers... That's what the book says."

"Wait, you...you can make antidotes and fever medicine too?!" Mina asked.

"You can probably sell tonics and antidotes to adventurers, and most people need fever medicine. Why not start selling them?" Gina suggested.

"...U-Um..."

I don't think they'll sell...

We lived far away from any towns. Behind our house was the mountain, and ahead of it was the lake and our field. We were miles away from the highway. It was an odd place for an inn.

But of course, having the mountain and the lake a stone's throw away was convenient because it offered a gorgeous view. And it meant we had plenty of nature's bounty to live off, and we had fresh vegetables in our fields. So long as one ignored the fact it was a long trek to get here, it was a pretty idyllic place. Well, Dad's cooking skills were probably average at best... *I think*. It was tasty to me, but "average" likely summed it up.

Anyway, if I could sell anything, it'd only be when a caravan stopped by. Maybe I could produce medicine, build up a stock, and sell it all at once... But I decided to think about it some other time. There were more pressing issues.

"...I'll go check on Grandpa!" I said.

"Oh, all right!" Mina nodded.

For now, the most important thing was to make sure Grandpa got better. There were still five more days until Dad returned home.

Dad, do your best!



THE next morning, I left Grandpa in Sirius' care (who simply grumbled a "Hmph. Bothersome" in response) and went hiking up the mountain with Gina, Mina, and Aaron. I never went too deep into the mountain when I came with Dad.

The flower field where the Solan flowers bloomed was near the foot of it. It was a spot I'd been to often. If I recalled, Solan, Lilith, and Duana flowers all bloomed year-round, which was also true for vegetables... I had to wonder if this world even had seasons or if mana simply explained away all oddities.

"Whoa, this place is so pretty!" Mina exclaimed upon seeing the field.

I couldn't blame her. All these flowers *were* beautiful. There were actually beehives scattered about in the trees, and bees collected nectar from all the flowers. The trees around here were cut for kindling and construction purposes, after which the stumps were removed. The ground was then plowed so these flowers could be planted.

If someone were to climb halfway up the mountain, they could find natural flower fields, unlike this one, but those were full of herbs. *I'd like to see it someday*, I thought.

"Hey, there are swings and a slide here too!" Aaron exclaimed.

"Oh...Dad and Grandpa put them up, I think," I replied.

I always helped out at the inn, so I rarely had the time to assist with outdoor projects. It made me a little sad, but there was no one else left to handle the laundry and cleaning after Grandma passed away. Dad was bad at it to the point where I decided I'd be better off doing it myself.

I guess that's not his fault. Doing it with a prosthetic arm must be hard...

We didn't have too many customers, so it didn't take too long for me to clean, but if we ever get a lot of customers, I couldn't see myself keeping up... Though apparently, laundry was a cinch with magic. I wanted to learn magic because of that, but Dad said it's really hard and dangerous.

"Wow. Hey, wanna swing for a bit?" Mina asked.

"Yeah, let's!" Aaron was all for it.

"What are you, kids?" Gina asked. "Don't forget what we came here for."

"I-I don't mind," I said. "But, *um*, Mina, how do you use magic?"

"M-Magic?!" Mina looked taken aback.

She said she wasn't very good at it, but she technically knew how to use it, didn't she? So I asked her, but she only twitched nervously.

"Wh-Wh-Why are you asking?" she blurted out, each word running into the next and not making much sense.

"Erm, Dad said magic is a very hard *technique* to learn," I said, lisping on one of the words. "But you can use magic, right? So I wanted to ask."

Mina fell into petrified silence.

...*Wh-Why are you clamping up like that?*!

"Uh, little miss, you need to understand that magic is difficult for humans to learn because we don't have a lot of mana."

"We don't?"

"Well, uh, basically there are these things called Spherits... How do I explain it...? Well, basically, they're like souls, and they're the ones who actually create magic. Magic is done by offering them mana, I think? That's how you do it. Demi-humans and beastmen can see them, but humans like us don't have enough mana to see them."

"Spherits..."

This really is a fantasy world... Like, sphere spirits? So magic is done by giving them your mana? That's pretty cool!

But what they told me matched what the book said. People didn't have a capacity for mana, so that's why they invented alchemy. Thinking of it that way, alchemy was a crystallization of human wisdom... So while part of me admired magic, I felt like learning alchemy might be worthwhile, too.

But wait, that means...

"...So you're bad with magic, Mina?" I asked.

"Ugh!" My question seemed to have physically wounded her.

"Ahaha... That sounds about right." Gina gave a sardonic smile. "But humans can use magic too. There are techniques people can learn to rapidly recover mana, and you can carry stones called Spherit Stones to help with casting spells.

Mina's just a slacker, so she doesn't practice enough. And Spherit Stones are really expensive...so she's saving up for one right now."

"Oh, so that's why..."

No wonder she was so greedy earlier. But if that's the case, why not just practice more?

"Hey, aren't these Solan flowers?" Aaron asked, presenting me with a few flowers he picked.

"Ah, yes!" I nodded.

While we were speaking, Aaron went and picked the right flowers. *I thought he was a useless bum, but it turns out he's pretty useful!*

I picked up the basket we brought with us and put the flowers in there, covering them with a cloth. We had collected about twenty flowers...which would hopefully be enough, even if I failed.

"Anything else we need to gather while we're here?" Aaron asked.

"Yes, Solemayu fruit."

"Oh, by the way, what's your name?" Mina asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce myself..." I bowed my head apologetically.
"It's Tinaris."

"Little Tinaris!" Mina exclaimed. "Okay, Tinaris, let's take some Duana flowers too. You can make some more tonics, and we'll sell them! Since the ingredients are pretty much free, we'll just take a handling charge, but you'll get most of the sum! They'll sell for sure, so c'mon, let's do it!"

"Cut it out, Mina," Gina griped at Mina, grabbing her by the scruff of her robe.

"Awww! Come on, it'll go well!"

"Sorry about her," Aaron said with a sympathetic smile.

"I-It's all right..." I muttered.

They were an easygoing group, that was for sure. But I really didn't mind, since this wasn't anything too serious. But with that money-oriented attitude of hers, maybe she was better off being a merchant than a mage...

Maybe I should actually learn from her... I mean, I am an inn proprietor's daughter.

"Let's go look for a Solemayu tree, then. You know where to look?"

"Yes, we use Solemayu leaves for cooking, so I've helped pick them every now and then."

Solemayu trees were pretty short. Their leaves were said to have healing properties and were often used to apply fragrances too. Their aroma wasn't very strong compared to other herbs, but they had a faint, vanilla-like scent. Its fruits were dark-red and small, about the size and shape of a walnut.

If I'm going to use their cores, I guess I have to split the fruit.

They were also as tough as walnuts, so splitting them was pretty hard.

"I think it was around here... There, that's the tree."

We left the flower field behind and climbed a bit higher up the mountain to where Solemayu trees grew. But on closer inspection, it seemed there were mostly only flowers blooming on the tree. Small, dark-red flowers similar to lilies in shape. This was a problem. I needed the tree's fruit, not its flowers.

"There's some fruit under the tree!" Aaron exclaimed, swiftly picking up a small fruit.

"Oh!"

Amazing! He *actually* had some talent for foraging! *What a surprise!*

"So, how many are we gonna need?"

"Um, as many as we can find..."

I didn't know how long it'd take me to properly dry the Solan leaves, and Grandpa and Sirius didn't tell me how much of the medicine we'd need. Having a lot of ingredients on hand couldn't hurt.

"I hope you can make that medicine for your grandfather," Gina said encouragingly.

"Me too..."

Can I really do it though...? I'm a kid who only started learning about alchemy

yesterday... And I couldn't dry the leaves properly...

I was anxious. The book didn't have the recipe for the medicine Grandpa needed. Did I need to set it in water, cover it in a cloth, or maybe use another method? Maybe it didn't require a pot and a spoon? *What if Grandpa doesn't know how to make it...?*

"Ugh..."

No, I have to repay him for everything! He accepted me like I was his own grandchild! Maybe I can't heal his disease, but I can at least make him feel well enough to eat again! I have to do everything I can!

I'd just have to ask about its traits, look for something similar to it in the book, and try my best to imitate the right way to make it. *It might not be exactly the same, but it should be close enough! I hope!*

"Let's take this much and head back home," Gina said. "Oh, there's some *Bimash* here. Can we take some of that too? Maybe I can make some Bimash pasta for lunch."

"Oh, sure. That's fine." I nodded.

That morning, Sirius had made us some soup and bread. Gina was going to make us lunch...which I was honestly looking forward to. But my first order of business upon arriving back home was to ask Grandpa about his medicine.

Wait for me, Grandpa! I'll do it!



BASED on what Grandpa told me, his medicine was a type of powder. He also scolded me.

"*You performed alchemy...?! Don't be reckless...!*"

Ugh... Don't look down on me just because I'm a kid! I'll do it perfectly. Just you wait! I'll pay you back for all the kindness you showed me; you'll see!

"Whoa!" Mina took a surprised step back upon seeing what was coming.

We thrust a pile of books onto the desk with a thud. I'd asked Aaron and Sirius to bring them over. All the alchemy manuals in Dad's study were for

beginners, so I assumed looking for one that focused on powder medicine would be simple enough. Or so I thought, but once I actually started looking, I couldn't find anything.

The table of contents didn't list anything regarding powders. Maybe only the intermediate or advanced books dealt with those? Maybe one of the other manuals did? To that end, I decided to hit the books! *Figuratively speaking, of course.*

"Whoa... Tinaris, are you going to read all this?" Mina asked with a frown.

"Yes."

"You should take a page out of her book," Aaron told her half-jokingly.

"Put a sock in it, Aaron." She glared at him coldly.

"Quite a surprise, though," Sirius said, closely examining a tonic I made yesterday. "This little lady made something like this on her first try?"

"Yep, she sure did! Amazing, isn't she?" Aaron boasted as if I was his own daughter.

Gina was in the kitchen, making lunch. I was at the coffee corner's counter, leafing through the pages of a book with Aaron and Sirius standing around me. Mina was sitting here before I showed up.

Grandpa was currently resting. Sirius used some basic healing magic to relieve some of his pain, but...magic can only temporarily alleviate a disease's symptoms. His breathing still came out in audible, pained wheezes.

Sirius held up a bottle of the tonic I made at eye level and rubbed his beard as if impressed. Was it really that unusual? Making it was easier than I thought.

"...Hmm, marvelous. You've got talent in alchemy, little lady."

"Really?"

"Yes. Controlling mana is quite difficult for humans, since they have limited mana reserves. If you learn and practice techniques to recover mana, you could become a high-ranking magician. If you're interested, why not consider going to Saikeorea? It's a country of scholars. I have some acquaintances there and could write you a recommendation."

"Wait, Sirius, *what*!?" Mina looked at him with her mouth wide open. "You never said anything like that to me!"

"That's because you're no good at magic, Mina," Sirius replied coldly.

"You wanna say that again to my face, mustachio!?" she fumed at him.

"*U-Um!*!" I said, talking over Mina's protests. "I appreciate the offer, but I think that was just a coincidence..."

That was the only kind of medicine I managed to create, so being complimented that much felt wrong.

"Hehehe... A coincidence, eh?" Sirius repeated my words, regarding me with one eye closed. "I see, a coincidence... This *was* your first time, yes?"

"What're you implying, Sirius?" Mina asked, still somewhat touchy.

"My appraisal spell says that this low-grade healing tonic is of extremely high quality. The freshness of the ingredients was no doubt a factor, but the mana used in its creation must have been quite pure as well. Little lady, I believe you're 'magician material,' as they say."

"The mana was pure...?"

What does that mean?

At my question, Sirius placed a hand over his chest and proudly explained it to me. In this world, Wisty Air, mankind worshipped multiple gods. But aside from them, the demi-humans worshipped someone called Saint Akari-Berz. It was said that in ancient times, she purified monsters and turned them back into normal animals. She had holy mana capable of counteracting the evil mana that polluted the monsters.

That...really sounds like something out of a fantasy novel.

The holy, primal mana was said to be lost today. Mankind needlessly created new religions, which created "unnecessary factors" that mixed into the world and changed the mana's quality.

"B-But that makes the gods mankind worships seem like 'unnecessary factors'..." I muttered bashfully, as if dreading to say the words.

"Yes, that's exactly what it means," Sirius confirmed.

Talk about being nonchalant!

"B-But...Dad always talks about the 'Gods of De Marl.' Are they unnecessary too?"

"All the gods made by humans since the time of Saint Akari-Berz, including the Gods of De Marl, caused the building blocks of the world, the primal mana...the Air, as it is called, to change. That made the Saint's holy mana stop functioning, and because of that, any who are polluted by evil mana—humans included—cannot be purified anymore."

I fell into pensive silence. Something that was there to begin with had changed and stopped functioning... New information made something old useless.

It's like a software update ruining an old feature. So maybe there's an update that can fix the holy mana function again?

"So if the holy mana were to adapt to the current age's Air, we'd be able to purify monsters?"

"Wonderful! That's exactly right, little lady," Sirius praised me.

"I see...!" I beamed.

"Calm down, geezer." Aaron pulled Sirius back by his shirt collar.

R-Right, Sirius is an archaeologist. Is this what he's looking into? He explained it like a teacher and said he knows people in that scholar country... Maybe that's his real job.

"Aah, my apologies." Sirius broke into something of a sheepish smile. "But a girl of your talents is hard to come by...! At least, that's what I think. That said, the purity of one's mana is indeed quite important. You understand, yes? The quality of this world's Air itself is degrading."

"The quality of this world's Air...? Huh? It's degrading?"

"It is! It's said that when a living being dies, the Spherits break its soul down to its core components. The body returns to the earth and the soul to the Air. Are you aware of the food chain in the animal world?"

"...Y-Yes, I've heard of it."

Microbes decompose corpses to make the land flourish and grow vegetation, which is then eaten by herbivores, which are eaten by carnivores...which then die and are decomposed by microbes... I learned that in primary school.

"Hmm, just wonderful. I wish Aaron and Mina had at least an inkling of your intellect. Perhaps I should have them drink your bathwater."

"Ick!" Mina moaned in disgust.

"Ahahaha." Aaron gave a carefree laugh.

I didn't like that idea, either. *Adamantly rejected!*

"But by the same logic, the Air makes use of those who live through the ages to sustain itself. Souls are reconstructed by the Spherits and are then placed into vessels of flesh once more... Ever so rarely, souls fail to enter a vessel, resulting in soulless flesh—what we call a zombie. Such zombies become seedbeds for the Primal Evil, Camilla, and form monsters."

His jargon was becoming harder to keep up with...and we'd completely gotten off track. *Weren't we talking about mana purity?* Still, I decided to hear him out until the end. Gina mentioned the Spherits earlier too. Lending them mana could produce magic.

Maybe they're like a filter...? No, it sounds kind of different...

Sirius looked quite knowledgeable. I considered having him teach me for a while.

"Now then, here is a question for you, little lady. Souls are disassembled and restructured by the Spherits. What are the Spherits then?"

"Huh? Uh?! They're like...nature spirits?"

It is a fantasy world after all... But them disassembling and rebuilding living things is pretty dark...for a fantasy world, at least.

"Ahahaha!" Sirius laughed at my answer. "Yes, it would be lovely if that was the case, but unfortunately, it's isn't."

"R-Right..."

"Spherits are this world's rules and providence. They cannot normally be seen, but they manifest as spheres of light when one uses magic. Hence, we dub them sphere spirits—Spherits. They break down the souls of the dead into the Air, and when living beings use magic, they take in the mana they offer. Once a Spherit is fully charged with mana, it converts that mana into a new soul."

"...It's like a shredder..."

"Hmm?"

"Ah, n-never mind. So Spherits have two roles?"

"Precisely! Your comprehensive faculties are exquisite. I *would* have Aaron and Mina drink of your bathwater."

"...Please don't."

I did sympathize with Sirius somewhat. Aaron and Mina had grown bored of his explanation and, halfway through his lecture, had walked off to another corner of the room to play cards.

W-Why?! This is some big stuff he's teaching me! It feels like you'd normally have to pay to get someone to teach you things like this!

"U-Um, Sirius, if people or demi-humans eexhaushtt..." I asked, slurring the word *exhaust*. "...their mana by using magic or alchemy, do they never get that mana back?"

"No, like I've told you before, there are techniques for recovering mana by taking it in from the Air. It takes practice, but it can be learned."

"I see..."

"Now, let us return to the topic at hand. I believe you understand everything about Spherits now, so we can begin discussing mana purity."

"Ah, o-okay."

"This relates to the degradation of the Air itself. Like we've said, the Air uses the Spherits to decompose the souls of the dead and restore itself, yes? But what if the souls of the living were to be polluted...? Or, well, perhaps polluted isn't quite apt. They are, in a manner of speaking, transmuted."

"But, um, if the Air is only being changed or transmuted, isn't 'purity' a strange way of putting it?"

"You truly *are* a genius, are you not? To realize this much at such a young age...! Once the owner returns, I ought to recommend he send you to Sakeorea as soon as possible..."

"N-No... It's an interesting idea, but I'm only four years old. So...!"

He'd stopped treating me like a four-year-old! And trying to act like one *now* wouldn't work... This was becoming more troublesome than I thought! I was interested in learning more, but it meant going to a land to the east. The far east, even. And this inn was close to the westernmost side of the continent... It'd take months to get there!

"But yes, describing the Air in terms of purity does come across as an odd choice. But the demi-humans, especially the elves and dwarves, use the way things were during the time of the Saint as their standard. Humans can't sense the Air's quality, but the demi-humans claim its purity is certainly in decline."

"Humans can't sense the Air's purity?"

"Yes, they cannot."

"But Sirius, you..."

Didn't he comment on my mana's purity...? Wait, so that means he's...

"Hehehe. Your eyes are quite discerning. I am a half-elf. While I can't see purity as well as a full-blooded elf can, I *can* sense it to some extent."

"Ah! Really?! Wow! A half-elf! A child between a human and an elf!"

...The more I hear about this person, the less I understand what he's doing in this party of ditzes!

"Humans care little for the Air's purity, since they can barely use magic as it is... But to those who use magic, the Air's purity is essential. Among mankind, some become capable of using magic through rigorous training. As such, these people sense that the Air is filled with 'unnecessary factors.' Even after using techniques for regaining mana, the rate with which it returns grows slower. There is, of course, research being done in Sakeorea into the cause of this... But

many among the elves and dwarves are convinced this is due to the faith humans offer up to the vague, meaningless gods they've created."

"Do you think so too, Sirius?"

"As sad as I am to admit it, I've traveled through the human countries, and the change in the Air's quality *is* quite noticeable there. By contrast, in the demi-human lands, the degradation is much less noticeable. It's believed this discrepancy is caused by the different gods being worshipped. Demi-humans, who harbor hatred toward mankind, vehemently claim that it happens because 'Mankind has lost its faith in the Saint Akari-Berz'... But I personally think the question of what gods are being worshipped is inconsequential."

"So you're saying that people's faith doesn't have anything to do with it?"

"Because I believe gods don't exist!"

Sirius punctuated this with a hearty laugh.

"But I *do* think the reason does lie with the so-called gods mankind created. By worshipping gods that don't exist, they introduced unnecessary factors into the Air, changing its properties. That change resonates with the Spherits scattered across the land, making it spread into the Air all over the world... Now, I've gone on something of a tangent, but this brings us back to the matter of your mana's purity, little lady. Do you understand what your mana being pure means?"

"Umm..."

The Air had changed in quality, but my mana hasn't gone through that change.

Huh? So that means, uhh...?

"Maybe it's because I'm still little?"

"That could be one reason, yes. But I believe the biggest factor here is your physiology. Even though your body takes in degraded Air, there is some kind of filter that keeps the purity of your mana from being tainted. You then used that pure mana of yours to create this low-grade tonic, which resulted in a high-quality product. That's what I can surmise. But this brings up another problem.

If all this is true, it means you, little lady, are a beacon of hope for the fields of magic and alchemy! Do you understand why?"

"...If I have some kind of filter that keeps mana pure, it could be *rhesearched*. And if that filter can be *discoverbed*, it can be used to remove *impyurities* in the Air!" I said, stumbling over a few of the words.

"Splendid! You truly are a little genius."

"C-Cut it out already, you mustached geezer!"

Gina had appeared behind us with a pot in hand. She slammed the pot down and pulled out her ax.

Wh-Why?!

"How dare you trick an innocent child?! You want me to slice you into ribbons?!"

"Now wait here, Gina! I am merely telling this little lady what she can do for the sake of this world's futu—"

"Slicing you into ribbons, then!"

"I'm sorry!"

Aaaah! If you have to do this, do it outside!



"**OKAY**, now that our bellies are full... We can help you look into that powder medicine!" Gina offered.

"O-Oh, thank you!"

Wait, we?

As I wondered over that word, Gina grabbed Aaron and Mina—who were trying to escape the room—by their collars and pulled them back. Sirius volunteered to wash the dishes and wasn't in the coffee corner.

I guess we'll have to look without him!

"Aaah, nothing in these annoying books makes sense to me!" Mina complained after just a few minutes of browsing.

"Stop whining. You just have to look for a page that talks about powder medicine," Gina snapped at her. "Besides, aren't you supposed to be a prospective magician?"

"Powder medicine... Powder medicine..." Aaron chanted as he looked at another book.

"See? Aaron gets it."

But he's been stuck on the same page for so long...

"Maybe powder medicine isn't listed in the beginner manuals...?" I wondered aloud.

The second book I checked didn't mention anything about how to make them in its index. We were checking all the pages to be sure, but it was similar in content to the first book I read.

Sirius returned from washing the dishes and picked up a third book. This one was larger than the rest and was so heavy that turning the pages was a bit hard for me...

Where did he even find this huge book anyway...?

"Incidentally, you can read and write, little lady?" Sirius asked me.

"Um, Dad taught me how to read. I'm still practicing writing."

"Hm, outstanding. Education is important. Very important. Extremely important!"

Sirius turned his gaze to Mina, who'd already grown bored of her book and planted her face on its cover, then to Aaron, who was still stuck on the same page as before. Finally, it settled on Gina, who was repeatedly flipping through the same book.

You too, Gina...?

"Don't you know about alchemy, Sirius?" I asked him.

"I'm a half-elf, so I wield magic instead." Sirius shook his head. "Alchemy is very much a human specialty."

"...Why don't the demi-humans use it too?"

"Well, magic can achieve most of the things alchemy can. Cooking and medicine are unique to alchemy, I suppose... But demi-humans mostly see alchemy as a degraded, inferior form of magic."

"You can cook with alchemy?"

"Apparently. Well, I don't use alchemy, so this is only based on hearsay... That said, most everyone seems to be in agreement that meals cooked by hand taste better. Even alchemists acknowledge that. It's hard to ensure the taste when cooking with alchemy. I also hear that if the process fails, the results can be quite terrifying."

"O-Oh..."

Dad only had one functioning hand, so I thought that I could lighten his load by cooking with alchemy... But the fact that there was no way of ensuring the taste was pretty scary. The thought of guests complaining after eating a screwed-up dish sent shivers down my spine. Suddenly, it felt like I got something different from what I signed up for when I decided to get into alchemy.

"...But alchemy's better when it comes to creating medicine, right?"

"That's true, yes. But demi-humans have very durable bodies, and they're long-lived. By comparison, humans are weak and fragile. That's another factor that contributed to alchemy's creation, I believe."

"I-I see..."

Elves were said to live over a thousand years, and dwarves had a lifespan of several centuries... And Dad told me beastmen were also more durable than humans and less susceptible to diseases. They had less need for medicine in general.

"Incidentally, little lady, did you finish drying the ingredients you gathered? They say making sure the ingredients are fresh is an important part of brewing medicine."

"Ah... You're right! I was so caught up in researching the recipe I forgot..."

Grandpa couldn't tell me about how to make the medicine, so I became

fixated on researching it. But after being told that the freshness of the ingredients was important, I decided I'd be better off drying them first.

I decided to ask our three bored partners for a favor.

"Hey, Gina, Aaron, Mina, I've got something to ask you."

"A request? Ask us for anything," Gina said.

"Could you crush the Solemayu and put their cores in this plate? The medicine requires the fruit's cores."

"Oh! Yeah, that sounds like our area of expertise!" Aaron grinned.

"Yeah, got it! Leave it to us, Tinaris!" Mina nodded.

"My word... Perhaps you'd be better off giving up on being a magician, Mina," Sirius uttered in exasperation.

"Zip it, gramps!" Mina snapped back at him.

...I have to agree with him.

Of course, I didn't say it out loud.

"Thanks," I said.

Leaving the research to Sirius, I focused on the drying process. I looked into how to do it yesterday. *The alchemist wraps the ingredient they wish to dry in a clean fabric like gauze. This time, I tried drying Solan flower leaves. Then, they need to be placed in the bottom of a pot, where the alchemist is to flow mana into it while prodding it with a spoon. Doing this extracts the fluids from within.*

Yesterday, I'd failed because I used a dirty cloth, but I used a clean one this time. I concentrated, so as not to send in too much mana, and gently tapped the bundle.

Tap, tap... Mana... Tap, tap... Mana...

The cloth lit up, and when the light died down, I checked the result.

"Ah...I did it!"

I opened the bundle, revealing a bunch of dried, rustling leaves. *I did it! It worked!*

"Fantastic!" a voice boomed near my ears.

"Aagh!" I staggered back in shock.

It was Sirius! *When did he get this close to me?!*

"You really are a genius, little lady!" he exclaimed. "To think you'd successfully perform a drying recipe despite being a beginner!"

"N-No, it's probably a fluke..." I murmured bashfully.

"And I have good news to celebrate your success." Sirius smiled with a triumphant glint in his eye. "I've found the recipe for the powder medicine."

"You did?!" I jumped off my chair.

I approached Sirius in a hurry, and he handed over a sheet of paper. It...wasn't from the book.

"I found this stuck between the pages. Your grandfather or grandmother likely kept it as a memo. Apparently, they both had the same illness."

"Ah... Thank you so much!"

"Oh, I can't take any credit for this." He shook his head. "It was stuck between the pages of the book you gave me. You very well could have found it yourself. But forget that. Hurry, you have medicine to produce, do you not?"

"Hey, we got the Solemayu fruit cores!" Gina showed up with the fruit cores in hand.

"Thank you! I'll try making it!"

I didn't have that many leaves to dry, but the required amount was two grams of dried leaves and two fruit cores. It required surprisingly little of both. The process required placing a sheet of paper in the bottom of the pot, upon which the ingredients were to be placed. However, the paper had to be Miha paper, made from the Miha root.

Aah! So there's another ingredient!

"Sirius, do you know what Miha paper is...?" I asked him anxiously.

"Hm? I believe this right here is Miha paper..." he said, handing me a sheet of paper.

"But this is a paper towel..."

"Mm? No, this is Miha paper."

"Ah! R-Right, sorry!"

So Miha paper is just paper towels...? I had it the whole time!

That said, paper—even just a paper towel—wasn’t exactly cheap, so Dad didn’t get it very often. But Grandpa’s life was hanging in the balance, so I decided I’d use it without any hesitation!

"So, I have to spread out the Miha paper...and put the ingredients on it. And then I send in mana...and squash the ingredients, mashing them together..."

I crushed the ingredients, grinding them together. In between grindings, I sent in some mana and then repeated the process. I assumed it would light up once it was ready.

Grind, grind.

"It's not lighting up..." I commented after a few minutes.

"You sent in a lot of mana, right? The tonic yesterday lit up really quickly."

"It probably takes some time for the ingredients to become a fine powder, and the more time it takes, the more mana it consumes," Sirius speculated. "Alchemists who aren't proficient with mana recovery techniques likely can't hope to make this... I see that this is a more challenging recipe than we first suspected. This might actually be an advanced recipe only skilled alchemists can make."

"Oh no!" Mina exclaimed. "Is Tinaris gonna be okay?"

"Go, Tinaris!" Gina pumped her fists. "You can do it!"

"Go, go, Tinaris!" Mina joined in.

I'd do my best even without you cheering for me... I have to do this for Grandpa.

I may have been a daughter who never repaid the debt she owed her mother, but I didn’t want to repeat that mistake in this world too. Grandpa always kept me at a distance, but...I couldn’t just let him die!

This inn became my home when Dad brought me here, and Grandpa and Grandma accepted me. I couldn't repay my debt to Grandma, but...I could save Grandpa!

"...Such an astounding amount of mana..." Sirius muttered, looking into the pot. "Your mana capacity is extraordinary, little lady."

"Go, go, Tinaris!"

"I'm sure it's almost ready! Keep going!"

"You can do it!"

The other three cheered for me too.

Grandpa...yesterday, when you patted my head before you fell sick... Was that your way of saying goodbye? If so, then I'm sorry...I'm not gonna give up on you yet!



"I can't believe it."

Grandpa drank the gross green powder I presented him with a cup of water while he pressed his fingers against the corners of his eyes. He then swallowed and took a deep breath. He placed the cup back on its tray and used his free hand to pat me on the head before saying, "I can't believe you actually...made the medicine..."

"Yes, it is shocking. Your granddaughter is quite the genius, mister," Sirius remarked.

"Yes, there's no doubting that..." Grandpa said, overcome with emotion. "You're a genius, Tinaris...! I don't worship any gods, but I still want to pray and offer my gratitude for this miracle. Oh gods, thank you for sending this angel to my side... Aaah, I still cannot believe it...I can breathe well again..."

"Grandpa... Thank goodness..." I murmured in relief.

"Tinaris? Are you all right?" Gina asked me.

I didn't want to admit it, but I felt very sleepy. Maybe it was because I used too much mana. At least, that's what Sirius said... I started to understand why

professional alchemists used mana recovery techniques for long periods of time while making potions.

I guess that's why they're... professional...alchemi...sts...mmph...

"Ah, she fell asleep."

"I can't blame her. She was pouring out mana for over thirty minutes. Sir, where's her room?"

"In the attic. Turn right in the corridor, and the stairs should be right ahead of you. That's her room... Please, carry her there."

"You got it!"

...It feels warm... Is someone carrying me?

Rocking and swaying... It felt nostalgic. Like when I was floating in a river, rocking in the cradle of my very own little chamber. That was the day I remembered everything...

Right... Maybe Sirius knows about it...

The Stone of Daybreak.

What does it mean? I should ask him when I wake up... Mm...

"There we go... Really, you're one impressive girl. My heart goes out to you! But for now...get some sleep. You've earned it!"



It was the morning of the fourth day since Dad left to bring a doctor. Apparently, I'd slept through the whole day.

U-Ugh... I can't believe a whole day went by...!

"Good morning!" I greeted everyone as I headed downstairs.

"Good morning, Tinaris."

"Morning!"

"Oh, you're awake."

"Good morning to you, little lady."

The adventurer party greeted me, all of them gathered around the coffee corner. But then I heard something sizzling in the kitchen. And something smelled yummy, too...

"Good morning, Tinaris. Did you sleep well?" a voice I didn't expect called out to me.

"Grandpa?! Are you sure you should be out of bed?" I peeked into the kitchen.

There Grandpa stood, a frying pan in his hands! And there were six plates ready on the table, loaded with food. Breakfast for six.

G-Grandpa's cooking...?!

He'd hardly gone down to the first floor over the last few months, and now he was cooking? And his bacon and eggs smelled and looked better than Dad's!

"Going down the stairs is still a bit hard on my legs, I'll admit... But, as the owner of this inn, I can't let my guests handle the cooking, can I? Now carry these plates over. Just be careful; they're heavy."

"Ah, o-okay!"

I put the plates on a tray and carried them out to the dining area, where Gina welcomed me with a grin... Was she that hungry? When I put the tray on the table, she patted me on the head.

Ugh, stop treating me like a kid...

"Thank you," she said.

"Whoa, it looks great!" Mina exclaimed with a smile.

"Your Grandpa's a better cook than the innkeeper!" Aaron said, his mouth already full.

You're eating already?! Wait, is it really that good?

I had a feeling that was the case, but Dad really was average at best when it came to cooking... Honestly, he always cooked the same dishes too. It wasn't his fault, given his arm, but it made me think that I ought to help him out with it once I got older. But then again, I also had my hands full with the laundry and

cleaning.

Then again, considering the size of our inn, having just Dad and me as the only workers here felt wrong... Though we made do just fine because we didn't get that many customers. Some days, we didn't get any customers at all. *We could live off the land, making money a non-issue, but what's the point of running an inn then?*

No, this isn't good... We have to do something about it!



“**LITTLE** lady, if I may make an offer?” Sirius approached me.

“Y-Yes?”

We didn't usually eat breakfast with the guests, but Gina said, “Join us!” So Grandpa and I decided to eat together with the adventurers in the dining area that day. We took some bread and dipped it in the soup. It was then that Sirius lifted up his index finger and proposed that I learn the “mana restoration technique.”

“I'll do it!”

“An immediate answer. Splendid! I should have a certain magician apprentice drink your bathwater.”

“I-I'll throttle you, you old coot!” Mina glared daggers at him.

“But Sirius, don't they teach this in the national colleges?” Grandpa asked with a frown. “We don't have that kind of money...”

“Ahaha, you've nothing to worry about, Owner. Your granddaughter is a genius!” Sirius said merrily. “You should come to my homeland, the Elven Empire of Forestria! I would love to accept her as my son's wife! And that much would be an investment!”

Everyone present glared at him with cold silence.

“...Mm?”

Gina drew her ax and aimed at his neck.



Ah, wh-what...? Did Sirius just drop a bizarre comment...?

"Sirius, you have a son?!" Aaron exclaimed.

"That's the first I've heard of it!" Mina joined in, shocked.

"Forget that, you two!" Gina said furiously. "This creep just said that he wants to have Tinaris marry his son! We should beat the stuffing out of him!"

"Ah! Y-You're right!" Mina said stiffly. "Trying to take such a money-mak...I mean, cute little girl for yourself is awful!"

"Hey Gina, I think Mina just called her a money-maker."

"*Miiiiiiina?*"

"Eeek!"

Ooh... Chaos is brewing...

"Hmm..." I said awkwardly. "I'm sure your son has his own feelings too... I'm sorry, but..."

"Don't worry, my son is still in his fifties. My wife is a high elf, so while he's fifty, he's still a thirty-year-old boy at heart. He should come into his own by the time you become an adult."

"Okay, go out back, Sirius. I'm punching you," Gina threatened, sticking her tongue out at him. And as adorable as that gesture was, her words oozed with danger.

In my past life, I never had a boyfriend... I was a plain, hard-working girl. It wasn't like I was into weird niche hobbies or dressed differently, but my classmates did tell me my nickname was "emo girl" back in middle school.

I looked into the term and found it meant a gloomy girl who was doomed to be perpetually single. I didn't think of myself as "gloomy." At worst, I just liked reading and studied a lot, but that didn't mean my personality was particularly anti-social. But my class was full of gaudy girls, so my personality just didn't fit as a matter of course.

Given how shallow those girls were, they probably just heard the term "emo" somewhere and tossed it around without really knowing what it meant, and I

didn't let what they said get to me too much. It wasn't like I would have to put up with their presence my whole life or anything.

But what I was trying to convey through that entire story was that... Jumping from never having had a boyfriend to being suddenly offered an arranged marriage felt like too much of a leap. *Sorry, Sirius.*

"*Hmm, but it's not often that one runs into such a bright girl. Do consider my offer seriously.*" Sirius nodded sagely.

"Why did your stupid offer become the topic here? Weren't we talking about mana recovery techniques?" Aaron cut in.

Nice, Aaron! Right! That's the topic! But if he's going to insist that I marry his son for him to teach me... I'll just have to give up on it!

"Erm... But if I don't marry into your family, you won't teach me?"

"Indeed. So do consider it carefully."

Really? Seriously?

He did say "Consider it carefully," but I didn't even know what kind of person his son was...

"I-I can't! I don't even know what kind of person he is!"

"Right you are! Then I'll send my son a letter, telling him to visit you... Though it's hard to say when he'll get here."

"H-Huuuuuuuh?"

I get the feeling an elf's sense of time was a bit different from a human's... And Sirius did say elves have longer lifespans, so if I marry an elf, I'll probably die before he does...

Wait, I'm actually considering it seriously! No, it's not like some part of me was actually thinking I might get my first boyfriend here! Really! I'm four; he's fifty! That's a no-go! A deal-breaker! He might look young because he's an elf, but that's morally wrong!

"Then, what will you do? Will you meet my son?"

"I, er, if it's just *meeting* him..."

"Very well! Then I'll teach you the mana restoration technique. Now, a fair warning, almost only one person in every country can actually work and do other things while performing this technique. Do be prepared for that, Little Lady Tinaris."

"...Ah, yes! I'll do my best!"

If learning that means I can make Grandpa's medicine without passing out, then I'll do it! Just you watch!



THE next day, Dad returned home. Rob, the family doctor, came with him and gave me a lot of vaccine shots while he was here. I understood they were important too. But Doctor Rob only gave Grandpa several months' supply of medicine and firmly warned him to come for a checkup in his clinic in Fei Lu before the prescription ran out.

Seeing Grandpa shrink at the doctor's admonishments was a bit sad to watch, but...it was kind of cute too.

And the next day...

"I'll be going back to Fei Lu today. Adventurers, I appreciate you escorting me home," Doctor Rob said.

"No problem, doc!"

"It was a long stay, but it was fun! Take care, Tinaris! We'll come to visit again sometime!"

"Yeah, stay safe! We'll definitely drop by again."

"Yes, you all take care too. Thank you for everything," I thanked the adventurers.

They were all a great help to me, but especially Sirius, who taught me the mana recovery technique. It involved focusing on the Air in the area and taking it in. I tried doing it, and indeed, the Air seemed to be constantly all around us. Taking it in was simple, but doing it while performing alchemy really was difficult. I could understand why it took so much practice.

"Owner, Master, I have something to ask you two," Sirius spoke to Dad and

Grandpa.

“What is it?”

“I hear the Rofola region is home to some ancient ruins. Do you happen to know where they might be?”

“Ruins...?” Dad rubbed his chin. “I haven’t heard anything about any ruins around here... Do you know something, Pops?”

“I hear there’s an old well at the peak of Mount Rofola... Maybe that’s what you mean?” Grandpa suggested. “Some people did come to investigate it before, but all they said is that it’s just ‘an old, dry well.’”

“All they discovered was one dry well?” Sirius asked.

“That’s what they said. Apparently, long ago, a Mythical Creature grew enraged, lifting up a slab of earth and forming it into this mountain,” Dad said. “I’ve tried using this as a rumor to attract more customers to the inn, but I don’t really know if it worked.”

“But you’re in the business of investigating things like that, yes?” Grandpa asked. “If you don’t believe other people’s assessments, maybe you ought to check it for yourself. I should warn you that Mount Rofola is quite precipitous, and the climb is quite difficult. If you intend to make it, you should prepare.”

“Thank you for your advice, Owner.”

“C’mon, Sirius.” Aaron waved at Sirius from the door.

I walked out to the terrace as well to see them off. I didn’t quite hear what Sirius was talking about with Dad and Grandpa, but I could hear it was something about Mount Rofola...

“Now then, little lady, don’t neglect your training. And I hope you will greet my son auspiciously when the time comes!”

“...R-Right...”

That’s what you have to say before you leave?! Sirius, why do you have to be like...that, all the time?!



AND so my long period of watching over the inn ended, and I started practicing the mana restoration technique while mixing tonics in the pot. Doing both at once really *was* a little too hard on me, though...

"Well, whack me over the head and call me an ukoke, you really *did* make a tonic..." Dad muttered.

The pot flashed, signaling the process was complete, and I started pouring the faint pink tonic into bottles. Dad picked one up and said that while rubbing his chin. He examined it from a few different angles and then shook the liquid inside it.

"Appraisal..." he said, activating his magic. "Hm. It's definitely a tonic, and its quality is good... On the market, something like this would cost 230 colts..."

"You can tell that much, Dad?!"

Sirius used appraisal magic, but apparently, Dad could use it too, despite claiming he was terrible with magic.

"Well, I *was* a knight once. I couldn't afford to waste money on counterfeits, you know? Hm, but wait... This purity... I can see why that old guy recommended I send you to Sakeorea."

"R-Really?"

Even Dad seemed to think I had talent. And I was interested too... Studying in the land of scholars. But it was so far away. I couldn't go there when we needed to run the inn.

"Maybe we should close up the inn and move to Sakeorea?" Grandpa suggested.

"Pops?! H-Hey, isn't that a bit..." Dad's eyes widened in shock.

"W-We can't do that!" I stammered.

Grandpa and Grandma tamed the woods around here to make the Rofola Lodge! We couldn't just close this place on a whim. True, we didn't get a lot of customers, but Grandma's grave was here!

"Ahaha, well, we're hardly getting any customers, given the location... I'd much rather see my smart little granddaughter grow up to become a

distinguished alchemist in Saiseoreea."

"I can't..."

It wasn't that I wanted to become an alchemist in particular...! Though, admittedly, being told I had talent made me happy. And capitalizing on that talent sounded terrific.

But I...

This blue lake. The field with its green leaves. The winding forest. The lush hills and mountains. Travelers who waved goodbye, promising they'd come again. And the graves on the other side of the lake. One for Grandma, and one I didn't know.

We were gonna cast all of this away and move to a different country? Just for me?

"W-We can't!" I exclaimed.

"Oh my..." Grandpa said.

"Grandpa, I can study anywhere! I love living here, so I can just practice here!"

"Tina..." Dad said.

Could Dad find a job in a country of scholars with just one arm? And Grandpa had his respiratory disease. Living in a pretty, pastoral land like this one would be much better for his health.

I decided to return the favor for everything they did for me. To them, and to that Mythical Beast who saved me... I'd decided I'd go looking for him when I got older. But that's only when I got bigger—until then, I'd repay all the debts of gratitude I could. That was my motto!

"If we're not getting any customers, let's call them here!"

"Are you serious? Tina, we can't just call people..." Dad explained.

"The *low-cal* ish a bit off the *bitten* path," I said, slurring my words in my attempt to appear serious and smart. "But maybe we can come up with something...like a sign!"

"A sign... Now that you mention it, we don't really *have* any signs to show the

way here from the highway. Newcomers can get lost on the way here... But if we get more customers, we won't have enough hands to run this place."

"Ugh..."

He was right. That was definitely an issue. Dad had a prosthetic arm, Grandpa's body wasn't well enough to work, and I was a kid.

"Mm...Marcus, maybe you *should* teach Tina how to use magic," Grandpa suggested. "You can use some magic, so I think she might be able to do it too."

"Teach her magic?!" Dad furrowed his brows. "Magic, eh...? But it's dangerous if it fails. Even a simple spell can cause an explosion and hurt other people."

"There's no telling how it'll go until she tries. Tinaris made an advanced alchemy recipe...and I think we can have faith in her talents."

"Pops..."

Magic... Magic! I wanna learn magic!

"Dad! I want to learn magic!"

Dad fell into silence, after which he said, "...Fine. I'll teach you some simple magic. But I'm more trained in combat magic. There's a lot of spells I can't teach you. And if you don't understand something or feel like you're in danger, I want you to quit at once."

"Yes!"

At age four, I, Tinaris, learned basic alchemy and the mana recovery technique! And now I was about to learn magic!

♣As It Turns Out, My Four-Year-Old Daughter is a Genius

THE thing I liked best about my country, De Marl, was its harmonious ideology. It decisively strove for friendly relations with its neighbors and repeatedly held Edesa Kura's human supremacist ideals and violent aspirations in check. In many ways, it was the conscience of the human continent.

But I probably also wanted to take revenge on Edesa Kura. I hated that country from the bottom of my heart. And it wasn't only because I'd seen my friends die fighting them... It went deeper than that. My parents had to live through their country being torn apart and their land being occupied by Edesa Kura. In the process, the militant country afflicted them with an illness that would torment them until the day they died.

Thankfully, my parents fled that land because of the disease and built our inn at the foot of Mount Rofola. They lived peacefully and brought my brother and me into this world.

Our lives were good for a while after that. But when Edesa Kura launched what it would later call the "Jiera Blitz"—though we called it the "Jiera Defensive Campaign"—I lost my arm in battle.

And on the way back from that campaign, I met the person I would devote the rest of my life to. A Mythical Beast led me to a container where I discovered a small foundling. A baby I would go on to call Tinaris and take back home with me.

I'd lost all my purpose in life, but holding that baby, that little bundle of potential and hope, made me feel as if I'd been granted a divine revelation. Put another way, touching that baby was like touching the endless possibilities of the future, and it left me breathless. Thinking back on it is nostalgic.

When I came home, Ma latched on to me, weeping. Apparently, they'd brought back my brother Romulus' body. Ma cried as she told me that De

Marl's knights returned him to them. And then I came home with one arm missing. Seeing the children she brought into this world reduced to this state broke Ma's poor heart.

But the only fight De Marl participated in at the time was the Jiera Defensive Campaign. My brother, being an adventurer, likely sided with the Jierans. I'd invited him to become a knight, but he always turned me down, saying with a smile that he wanted to be free to see the world... And he probably fought guided by his sense of justice. That was the kind of man Romulus was.

"Pops, you see, I... On the way back, I ran into a giant Mythical... It led me to a baby."

"A baby...? That's a peculiar story," Pops said. "But I suppose people have all sorts of problems nowadays. The state this world is in..."

"Yes, it's a pity," Ma said. "We're blessed to have Mount Rofola and the lake, so having another mouth or two to feed isn't going to change much. The poor thing... The gods must have guided her to us..."

"Yes, you're right... And you came back to us. Romulus probably kept you safe. That Mythical Beast must have been Romulus in disguise, guiding you."

"...Could be."

I can imagine he wanted to help me at the very end. He was always softhearted and broad-minded. He might have found this baby and simply couldn't leave her to her fate. And with that thought in mind, I realized I'd have to keep this child I held in my one remaining arm safe. For as long as I lived.

I was probably like my older brother in that regard, eh...?



FOUR years had passed since that day. Ma finally succumbed to her illness and joined the gods' in heaven, and now Pops was losing strength. I came home to repay my parents for raising me, and now I wouldn't have the chance to help either of them!

I took over running the inn from Pops, and it turned out to be much harder work than I thought. Our family home doubled as the inn's reception area, and

we had six cottages for the guests. Cleaning, washing the sheets, making sure each occupied cottage had hot water for bathing, and cooking what the guests asked for were just a few of my responsibilities.

Keeping the water hot meant I had to go chop wood in the forest for kindling. The meals meant I had to go hunting, fishing, and plow the fields. Managing the ledger, maintaining the stock for consumables: it all made my head spin! There was so much to do, I didn't know where to start!

I was so busy, some part of me wondered if I'd have been better off staying as a knight, fighting or handling office work. The fact Pops and Ma handled all of this on their own made me truly appreciate how amazing my parents were... And it also made me think that if I had stayed behind to help them, instead of leaving to become a knight, I wouldn't have had to condemn them to years of hard labor.

My life choices were one of many regrets. I'd lived the way I wanted, and now, it was all catching up to me.

I spurred my horse forward, heading for the port country of Fei Lu. A doctor who'd taken care of Pops in the past lived there. All the while, I was wondering if Tinaris would be all right... She was a smart, considerate child. A clever, good girl. Even when I had to ask her to help take care of the customers, she never uttered a word of complaint.

But was I right to leave her with those adventurers? There was that suspicious old guy there. But I thought she'd be fine. There were two women there, so I doubted anything bad would happen to her... If that group of adventures were bastards, they'd kill Pops and kidnap Tina. And that mage girl did mention something about *payment*...

My steed, Judie, was a bit of a pigheaded horse, as it were. She wouldn't let anyone outside the family sit on her saddle. She only let that suspicious old man ride her, and Doctor Rob's clinic was located in a hard to find corner of Fei Lu. A person visiting for the first time would struggle to find it, and that lost time could cost Pops' life. Going to get Doctor Rob myself would be that much faster.

"Damn it...I have to get back home, fast!"

Tormented with concern for Pops and Tina, I hurried to the doctor's clinic.

Fei Lu was called a port country owing to its status as a center of trade and commerce. Entering the country was relatively simple and streamlined since merchants were constantly traveling to and from there. But that same traffic meant a long line of people wanting to get in.

It was a great country, and its land was by no means smaller than De Marl's territory. In other words, it was quite large! Fei Lu was expanding, and each time I visited, the urban area was growing closer to the city center. So to reach the doctor I knew, I had to leave the main street and look for shops and houses I recognized.

"...A green pub's sign...a red triangular roof, the black cat's pharmacy... There!"

Next to that establishment, I found a shanty with a wooden sign hanging on its door. That was the clinic. It wasn't managed by the state, but rather by a small, private practice owned by a doctor named Rob. He was a bit unsociable, but his medical skill was guaranteed. My brother recommended him to us, and he'd taken care of the family since.

"Doctor Rob! Are you in?! Pops is feeling sick. I need you to come over, quick!"

"...My word, are you trying to give me a heart attack with all that shouting? This is a small clinic, so don't throw open the door... I-It'll break."

"A-Ah, sorry. I'm in a hurry. Listen, Pops is..."

"I heard you. I can hear you just fine without any shouting, friend... I'll get ready, so take a seat there. Aaah... You really are Romulus' younger brother, aren't you?"

I regarded his comment with silence. Doctor Rob was as short as a dwarf but had a large head and a slim body. His physique made me wonder if he was really human. But this doctor, dragging the hems of his oversized white coat as he walked, had looked after me, my parents, and Tina. He was, for all intents and purposes, our family doctor.

He had a wrinkled face, a pair of glasses that seemed all too small sitting atop his nose, and quite a peculiar, monotone manner of speaking. But he

immediately understood the situation and began preparing to leave.

He put up a sign on the door that said “Away on a house call” and looked at me as if to ask where the horse was. I realized I was overworking poor Judie, but we still had the trek back to consider.

“Knowing you, you probably exhausted your steed. We can’t have it collapse on the way back, can we? Have it drink this. It’s good for curing a horse’s fatigue.”

“A medium-grade tonic?” I said, looking at it.

Quite the unusual item to have lying around! The fluid had a red shade that was slightly thicker than a low-grade tonic’s. I went outside and added the tonic to the trough I borrowed. Judie, who was visibly tired, drank it without any complaint. Her eyes then shined as she looked at me and neighed vigorously, as if to say, “Come on, I can keep going.”

I was impressed with the tonic’s effectiveness and had to wonder if a horse could tell the difference in a medicine’s potency. This was wonderful, since we’d be able to make the return trip as quickly as we’d come!

“By the way, is Tinaris doing well? It’s almost time for her vaccinations.”

“Vaccinations? What kind of vaccinations?”

I brought Tinaris to Doctor Rob for a physical examination when she was still a baby, during which he gave her five or six shots. As I saw her hold back tears from the pain of those shots, I couldn’t stop thinking: “If I could take this pain in your place, I would!” This doctor was a devil for giving a little baby this many injections, but I knew all too well how dangerous diseases could be from my experience with Ma and Pops.

I didn’t know babies even *needed* that many shots, and the whole ordeal was quite pricy. But Tina’s health was worth more than anything. And despite the painful memories associated with those shots, Tina needed even more vaccines now? *Does this world have no mercy?*!

“The ones I gave her as a baby were different vaccines. A-type and B-type fevers, and also the Dedero Virus. I administered the vaccines for Red Throat Fever and Foam Flu when she was a baby, but those vaccines only become

effective after a second shot, so I have to give her another one. The Dedero Virus is especially nasty. Can melt the bones entirely if it gets bad enough."

"P-Please, go ahead!"

"Mm-hm. I'll bring the vaccines and syringes with me."

That disease sounds terrible! The world isn't just full of dangerous foes but awful diseases too!

"How much will it cost, then?"

"Fifty thousand colts. Can you afford it?"

"I can."

My retirement money easily allowed me this much. *And if it's for Tinaris' health, no sum is too big!*

"We've been interacting with the demi-humans more and more recently... So more unknown diseases have been spreading. You and Tinaris should be careful."

"W-We will."

Doctor Rob and I went back the way I came. The trip that would have taken seven days if I'd have let Judie rest would only take us five days.

Aaah, Tina, Pops! Stay safe! Don't force yourselves to cook and end up getting bad burns, or trip over something and get hurt!

Tina was quite mature and could sleep alone, so I gave her a room on the second floor... But I was gone and Pops was in such a bad state. She must have been crying from the anxiety...

I was so terribly worried about her.

She isn't crying, is she? She hasn't wet the bed? Did the adventurers poke fun at her for wetting the bed and make her cry? They looked like they can cook, but they didn't force her to eat things she hates, did they?! Though she's not that much of a picky eater in the first place...

What if those adventurers tormented her somehow... Or if anything happened to Pops... Or if they took the money and bailed...

The anxiety was eating away at me!



I hopped off Judie in front of the inn at Rofola, still overcome by my anxiety and concern. Doctor Rob wasn't a child—despite being small enough to pass for one—and could certainly get off the horse on his own. What mattered to me was Tina and Pops.

Be safe, you two! Please!

I was used to opening doors with just one hand, but when the knobs were set on the right side, it was hard to turn them with my left hand. I wondered if I should have the doors here changed to sliding doors, like Tina suggested.

"I'm home!" I called as I hurried up the staircase to the second floor.

"Dad!" Tina greeted me.

"Oh, you're back sooner than you said, Marcus." I found Pops on his feet.

"...Y-Yeah."

Or so I replied, even with my thoughts awhirl, but the truth was that I doubted the reality before my eyes. It was all too different from what I'd feared.

"Pops, should you be out of bed?" I asked him, my voice thick with concern.

"Oh, don't worry," Pops replied. "Tina learned how to make my medicine, so I'm all better now. She even healed my aching back and knees."

"Sh-She did?"

Tina did what? Pops' legs are weak because of his old age, and Tina...healed it? She made his medicine? How?!

"It's been a long time, Maro," Doctor Rob said, walking in behind me.

"Oh, Doctor Rob, you're here!" Pops smiled. "I'm sorry you had to come all this way."

"Don't let it bother you." Doctor Rob shook his head. "I see you're doing well. Well, I'll check up on you, so take a seat. That chair over there will do."

"A-All right."

Doctor Rob remained as composed and indifferent as ever. Sitting Pops down in one of the coffee corner's seats, he began his examination. I, on the other hand, couldn't understand the situation. What happened in the five days I was gone? Pops was fine, and Tinaris was apparently safe, but...

"Oh, sir, welcome back!" The adventurer Gina and her sister Mina walked into the inn and ascended the stairs toward me.

"O-Oh, there you are!" I said. "Thank you for watching the place for me... So, what's going on here? What happened?"

"Aaah, yeah, makes sense you'd think that," Mina said.

I left Tina in the care of these adventurers. They appeared to be coming back from the field, having picked poteitos and other vegetables. The other two adventurers were apparently out hunting a boar in the mountain. I wondered whether they could pull it off, given how large the boars could be. They were too dangerous for amateur hunters to handle...

Well, whatever, those guys can handle themselves. More importantly, what's this about Tina making medicine?

"Your daughter's a genius, sir! Our archaeologist thinks so too, so it's guaranteed!" Mina drew on me excitedly.

"H-Huh?" I stuttered.

"She's right! Tinaris learned alchemy to save Grandpa here!"

"A-Alchemy?!"

The more they told me, the less I understood. *Tina learned to use alchemy? Why? How?! Beginner alchemists have to learn all the basics at a state-funded institute to even get started. It's not something one can just use.* I learned the basics myself during knight training, but using mana required so much subtle attention that I couldn't really pull it off.

Magic had wider applications than alchemy, but it was too complicated for me, and I could only use the kind of magic applied to my sword. I didn't feel motivated to learn anything more than that. And if one was serious about it,

they needed to learn the mana recovery technique. I used magic to give elemental powers to my sword, but I couldn't do it unless I was in a nice, quiet spot I could concentrate in. Doing it while using magic or alchemy felt like an impressive feat to me.

I'd given up on alchemy and magic, since I simply wasn't suited for the delicate feat of handling mana, but...

"Erm, I read the alchemy books in your study," Tina told me, handing me a small bottle full of pink fluid. "They had instructions for making this..."

"That's a low-grade tonic... Mm? H-Huh?! All you did was read the books, and you made this?!"

"Yes."

I couldn't believe it.

"Th-That's... Tina, you're a genius..." I stuttered.

"Isn't she?!" Mina piped in.

"She is!" Gina nodded with a smile.

The sisters agreed with me, their eyes absolutely shining. Some people could manage this after spending years studying, but being able to use alchemy just from reading a book? *What can you call that if not a genius?!* It was definitely out of the ordinary.

"N-No, it's just...a coincidence. I got lucky..."

"That *can't* be true," Gina said. "If it was just a coincidence, you wouldn't have made Grandpa's powder medicine three times."

"Right!" Mina agreed. "You pulled off everything right, except for the first time you tried to dry those leaves. If you feel like making those in bulk, let me know, and I'll sell them for you!"

"N-No... Er, if you want to talk about money, you should speak to Dad..." Tina said bashfully.

"*Hmm?* What's this about money?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Apparently, some talking down was in order. Not Tina, of course, but that

mage girl.

"We're back! Oh, owner, you're back too!" The young male adventurer, Aaron, walked in through the front door.

"O-Oh, hello. Thank you for watching over the place while I was gone... Did you hunt a boar?"

"Naaah, it got away."

"We did hunt down an Uri Boar, though." The suspicious, older adventurer walked in behind him.

They too seemed to have seen Tina's alchemy at work and agreed that she was, indeed, a genius.

"Well, I always knew she was a smart cookie!"

A four-year-old girl helping out around the inn without a word of complaint. What can you call that if not genius? And now she could use alchemy too. A child prodigy if ever there was one!

"Your daughter has amazing talent," the older adventurer said. "Do consider sending her to study at Saikoreal! I have acquaintances there who could arrange for an invitation. I do believe your daughter should capitalize on her talent!"

"Mm... That is quite a tempting offer, but...Tina is only four years old. Sending her to the other side of the continent to study is..."

"What do you think of the Elven Empire of Forestria, then? It's more oriented for studying magic, but it has thousands of years of knowledge. It's also my homeland, and my son could look after your daughter. Do consider it!"

"No, that's... I'm honored by the offer, but we couldn't..."

This girl was left in my care by a Mythical Beast, and an elven archaeologist spoke so highly of her. Maybe Tinaris really wasn't an ordinary girl. Turning around, I found her looking up at me anxiously.

"Nnng! She's certainly no ordinary child. No normal child would be this cute!"

"...Tina, this man is willing to go this far to help you," I said, squatting down to look at her at eye level. "What do you say? What do you want to do? Do you

want to go abroad and study?"

I was older than Tinaris when I decided to run off and start a new life in De Marl. And my life ended up pretty bad, as it turned out, but the people I met and the experiences I had in that country were irreplaceable. A wife and daughter I loved, my friends and subordinates...I met all of them in that country. There were many painful goodbyes, but the good had certainly outweighed the bad.

Tinaris, I want you to see this big, wide world too. But you're still too small. I don't have the courage to send you to a foreign country! But this is just what I want. If you want to do something else, I won't force you.

"I do want to study. But I'm still little so going to another country is scary... And I can't leave you alone at the inn when Grandpa's sick!"

"Ah..."

She's an ANGEL!

"Are you all right, owner?"

"Ah!"

Tina was such a little angel my consciousness went blank for a minute there...

Uuu... That little, little baby I found...! She's only been alive for four years, but she's so worried over Pops and me... Nnng! She's such a good girl! And she was eating baby food until just recently! She couldn't even speak properly! She was still wetting the bed...!

They say girls grow up quickly, but I didn't think it would be this fast. It is too soon...far too soon. At this rate, she'll get married before I know it...!

Aaaah, stay a baby for a little longer, Tina!

"Hm, fascinating," Doctor Rob said. "Tinaris, if you're really learning alchemy, I'd appreciate it if you could make some medium-grade tonics and sell them wholesale to my clinic. Cheaply, if possible."

"Doctor Rob..." I said, somewhat bothered.

That man never lets anything faze him.

"But that aside, I need to give you some vaccines too, Tinaris. Come now, sit down and hold out your arm."

"Huh? Huh?! I-I'm getting shots too?!" Tina cried in a mixture of surprise and fear.

"Of course. Getting your vaccines while you're still young is important. I'll give you six different shots this time around. And don't worry, I've brought some low-grade tonic. It shouldn't even leave a mark."

"Ugh..." Tinaris' voice tapered off gloomily. "F-Fine... I understand."

That probably wasn't the problem, Doctor...

But being the obedient girl she was, Tina sat down in the chair Pops vacated and extended her arm, just like she was told. *Aaah, that little, dainty arm is going to be poked by a needle six times...!*

If I could take your place, Tina, believe me, I would...! But me taking these vaccines wouldn't help you any...!

"Marcus, you're thinking that you'd take those shots for Tina if you could, aren't you?" Doctor Rob asked, seemingly reading my mind.

"Ah...! Well, I... Forget that. Did Tina really make Pops' medicine, though? I hear only experienced alchemists can make it."

"That's true, but she really made it," Pops insisted. "See? I'm doing fine. And drinking the tonic she brewed made my legs all better."

He wiggled his legs to illustrate.

"Ah, don't do that, you could hurt yourself!" I chided him. "The tonic only temporarily takes away the pain."

"Well, yes, but...Sirius here says Tina's tonic had very high mana purity, so it's several times more effective than a normal low-grade tonic. Her using alchemy is impressive, but the fact her mana purity is high is just as important!"

"Huh...?"

Her mana purity is high...? What could this mean? Is it possible she's...?

"It couldn't be... Is Tina actually an angel?!"

"You *must* be tired," Doctor Rob regarded me squarely. "You should go rest in the hot springs or something."

"*Ooh!* You've got hot springs here?!" the magician girl asked, her eyes positively sparkling.

I wouldn't get your hopes up...

"We do, but...they're not in a good spot..." Pops said. "It's halfway up the mountain and the road isn't paved. Not so much as a trail leading up there. Some guests tried heading there, but they tripped and got themselves dirty on the way back. Others just couldn't find it."

"We could show you the way if you're dead set on it," I added. "We could go with you too, but there's no partition to separate men from women."

"...I-I'll pass, then," the magician girl said, dropping her shoulders.

But the expression on her face didn't hurt my heart as much as my daughter's when she had to suffer through those shots.

Aaah! I'd take your place if I could!

"How many more, Doctor Rob?!" I asked him desperately.

"Two more," was his deadpan reply.

"Did you hear that, Tina?! Just two more! Hang in there!"

"D-Dad, could you stop shouting like that?!" Tina demanded, her cheeks slightly flushed.

"...Yes, ma'am."

She got mad at me!

♣Me at Age Five

“IT’S ready!”

I mixed in all sorts of herbs useful for alchemy that I’d gathered from the garden, like Milson grass and Buus flowers. I’d found a recipe for manure in my alchemy recipe book and tried making it. And the result was...hehehe...a resounding success! It was simpler than I thought.

“All right, let’s check if it works!”

Five years had passed since I was adopted by the Rofola Lodge. Five years since I began my life as Tinaris. In other words, I was five years old. I was sure I’d die when I’d floated down that river and was found by bandits and beasts. But five years later, I was alive and well. I owed it all to the man who saved me... but I still couldn’t bring myself to trust men that easily, which may not be the nicest thing to say, given that I still lived with my dad.

To that end, I was working on my alchemy so someday, I could live independently. Alchemy certainly was useful for everyday life. One month had passed since my family became just my one-armed dad and me. We both had to run the inn by ourselves now, so I strove to make more advanced items. That way, with my help...Dad wouldn’t have to work as hard.

“Hi Dad, how were the crops?”

“Huh? Tina, what’s that black soil you’re carrying there? Where did you get it? It looks heavy.”

Dad went from one question to another without taking so much as a breath.

Listen and be amazed, I thought to myself smugly. It’s nowhere near as heavy as it looks!

Honestly, it was, though.

“This is manure I made with alchemy! Using it on your crops should increase the quality and yield of your harvest! And it’ll even make the crops grow

faster!"

"*Manure?* Alchemy can make manure?"

"Yes...! *Oh*, but this is my first time making it... It might not do anything if I messed up..."

"Well, hand it over. I'll use Appraisal on it."

"Ah, right!"

Appraisal! Dad can use magic to assess the quality of items!

Work your magic, daddy-o!

"Hmm..."

"H-How does it look?"

"Produce Manure Puepue... Good quality. Impressive work. All right, I'll put it to use."

"Yay!"

He's putting it to use already?!

"Th-Thank you!"

"Mm...I should be the one thanking you. What are you thanking *me* for, Tina?" Dad asked, patting my head.

"...Oh..."

Was thanking him that weird? But he looks happy.

"Thank you, Tina. A good harvest means we can have more stored up in the pantry sooner. Can you come help me spread the manure?"

"Yes!"

Taking a pair of gloves, I went with Dad to spread the manure in our field. It was just after a harvest, so there were a lot of spots with nothing planted. Dad used his wooden arm for support as he plowed the fertilized soil. Forming ridges in the field, he planted poteito seeds.

"Mm, this looks about right," he said as he concluded his work.

"Ah! Dad, I think guests are coming!" I said, spotting silhouettes in the distance.

"What?" Dad asked, straining his eyes. "Oh, you're right. Looks like there are two of them... Tina, go get a room for two ready."

"On it!"

My body grew stronger with age, and I could move a lot better...though I still wasn't very good at running. But being a kid, it felt like I had endless stamina! And, well, my body was definitely light. Compared to how I was in my past life, I felt as light as a feather. But, just like in my past life, running was not my strong suit.

So, I simply broke into a light jog and checked one of our cottages for two. There was no trash, the sheets were clean and ironed, nothing was left in the closet, and the bathroom was clean.

"Ah..."

I entered the first floor of our house, which doubled as the inn's reception area, just as a young couple was checking in.



Wow... They're so pretty.

It was a man and a woman, and they were both gorgeous. The woman was dressed in a rather revealing outfit, while the man had emerald hair and eyes. He wore a purple cloak and carried an instrument that reminded me of a ukulele. The woman had long, light-pink hair and violet eyes. She had heavy makeup on, which gave her something of a gaudy impression. And her breasts were quite large.

The oddest part about them, though, was that they were traveling too lightly. Most travelers usually had at least an overcoat, so their things wouldn't be stolen so easily. Bandits had been going around the roads for some time now, so not having a weapon to defend yourself would invite them to attack.

The country of Fei Lu sent knights every now and then to deal with the bandits, but they always seemed to crop up time and again. To that end, merchants often hired bodyguards.

Did they only travel a short distance? They didn't seem to be carrying any weapons, so they didn't look like adventurers, but...

"Oh? Who's this girl?" the woman asked upon seeing me.

"Oh, that's my daughter, Tinaris. Tina, is the room ready?"

"Yes, everything's set."

"Right. Thanks. Here's the key to your cottage, then."

"Thank you kindly." The man accepted the key. "Do the other guests eat here too?"

"Yes, but...you're the only guests we have today, so you have the place all to yourselves."

"Oh, that's a pity." The man gave a forced smile. "We thought we could liven the place up with our song and dance."

"Song and dance...?" I accidentally said aloud.

The lady squatted down in front of me, looking at me at eye level. "Yes, that's right. Roin and I are performers. He's supposed to be a troubadour and I'm a

dancer."

"Traveling performers..."

So, there are people like that in this world too, huh? I guess that's why they're traveling light...

But the man looked pretty weak, so I had to wonder how they weren't attacked by bandits. And people as pretty as them traveling unprotected felt like a recipe for trouble.

"Traveling performers, eh...? Isn't traveling on your own dangerous, though?" Dad said, apparently thinking the same thing as me.

I mean, isn't it?

"Y-Yes, well, we're actually part of a troupe, but..."

"He wanted to propose to me, so we snuck away from the troupe!" the lady exclaimed, beaming. "The troupe is staying in De Lulua right now, so once we're done here, we'll be going back."

"E-Enofa!" Roin cried.

"P-Propose?!" Dad and I said in unison.

H-He's proposing to her?! W-Wow! Wooow! But, wait... He wanted to propose to her, so they broke off on their own...? And once he's proposed, they're going back? Or am I missing something here?

"I-I didn't say that!" Roin insisted.

"Oh? Then why did you say we'll be traveling just the two of us for a while?" Enofa asked teasingly.

"Well, that's...er... A-Anyway, I'll go check out our room! I need to, *uhh*, make preparations... I mean, no, r-right! I need to check on something that shopkeeper said... I mean, no! There's something I need to ask the innkeeper!"

"Yeah, yeah... See? You can read him like an open book," she whispered into my ear and winked.

"I-I see..." I nodded vaguely.

Roin really was pretty obvious with his intentions. His limbs were shaking

nonstop, and his eyes darted in all directions. And when he was like this, nothing he said was convincing. In fact, it felt like the more he talked, the deeper the hole he'd dig for himself. But the lady seemed to like it, so I assumed it worked for them.

"O-Oh, come on...! Why do you have to be so perceptive?!"

Dad regarded him with a pitying look.

Dad, he's a guest. You're being rude...

I did understand how Dad felt thought. Though Roin was probably serious about going through with this act...

"Ah, no, that's not what I meant...I talked to this one shopkeeper. He told me you can see the Twin Moons here in Rofola..." Roin said.

"Oh, the Twin Moons." Dad nodded in understanding. "Now would be the time, wouldn't it?"

"Twin Moons?" I asked, approaching the counter.

This was the first I'd heard of it.

"Yeah. You know how there are two moons in the sky?"

"Yes."

Wisty Air had two suns and two moons. The temperature was always pleasant, though, and unlike Japan, there was no noticeable change in the seasons. Those suns were probably smaller and closer and radiated less heat than the sun I knew from my past life... Or so I assumed. I didn't really know for sure, obviously.

As for the moons, I wasn't sure what role they played in this world. There might be someone researching them out there, but...I supposed that's just how other worlds worked.

But then again, if there are two moons, doesn't that mean there are always "twin moons?"

"Every few years, there's a day when the Ril Moon and the Roal Moon intersect. The intersecting moons shine down on Lake Rhiode, creating twin

moons. One on the water's surface and the other in the sky. It's said that couples who see this moon are blessed with twins."

"Woow..."

So, it's like an astronomical show! And it's going to happen soon? I wanna see it!

"Well, the part about twins being born is just a legend," Dad finished.

"It still sounds lovely!" I said excitedly.

"Doesn't it?!" Roin beamed at me. "That's why I want to...p-propose to Enofa while looking...at the Twin Moons..."

"So **that's** why!" Dad and I said in unison.

I couldn't help but nod and smile. Roin was blushing profusely and shivering like a leaf though...

Can he really pull this off...?

"Hmm, but there is a little problem." Dad frowned. "I think it's almost the right time... But I only recently inherited the inn, so I don't know the exact date. I only saw the Twin Moons once when I was a lad..."

"Huh?! B-But...it should be soon, right?"

"Well, yeah, I think... But I dunno if it'll be today or tomorrow or the day after... I don't think it'll be as long as a month, but I don't know the exact date, see..."

"Huuuh?! So we might have to stay here for days...?"

"W-Well, yes. Ah, don't worry about the lodging fees building up, though. We'll cut them down if you're willing to help around the inn."

"Um... You mention helping out with your inn, but can outsiders like us really do that...?"

"Don't you worry, I'll only ask you to do simple tasks! Probably..."

...I'm getting a bad feeling about this...

"D-Dad, weren't there some books about astrology in your study?" I asked,

pulling on his sleeve.

"Hm? There were?"

"I can look for them..."

"You sure you wanna do that? Will you be able to tell even if you do find them?"

"I-It's worth a shot!"

Honestly, I didn't know much about astronomy or constellations—especially given how different this world was from Earth.

"If Pops was still alive, we could have asked him for the exact date..." Dad uttered bitterly.

Dad...

I couldn't blame him. Grandpa passed away just last month, and his death was still fresh in Dad's memory. I couldn't quite believe it yet either. But right now, we had the customers to worry about. Their future depended on this affair.

I went up to the second floor and began scanning through the study's shelves. I couldn't reach the really tall ones, but...

Huh, that's weird...

I was bad with heights, but somehow, I was okay with climbing up a bookshelf. Maybe it was because it had proper footing. I knew climbing it was wrong because it damaged the shelf, but I had to get up there somehow.

That's not important now. Astrology books. Right... Wait, that book over there looks like it might be it.

"Yes!" I exclaimed as I reached for the book with my fingertips.

The book was titled *On the Two Suns, Moons, and the Stars*. It didn't look like a romance novel, so I assumed it was what I was looking for. I opened the book, and as soon as I flipped past the table of contents, I found myself looking at a two-page illustration of constellations.

This is it!

"So this is what they look like..."

Apparently, this world had constellations too. It was kind of exciting to discover that. It was another world altogether, but between this and how similar vegetables were, I had to wonder if this world and Earth were somehow distantly related.

That said, the constellations weren't even remotely similar to the ones I knew.

What are these names...? The Horolinz Berz Constellation? Ugh...

Apparently, its name could be traced back to the Kingdom of Beti-Zena, a country that existed long ago... Whatever that meant. I supposed the simple explanation was that the constellations were named after great historical figures. I didn't know what these people actually **did**, but it seemed important people were inclined to leave their names down in history no matter the world.

This wasn't what I was looking for, though!

"Oh, there it is!"

At least, it looked right. One line in the table contents was titled "Twin Lunar Eclipse." Flipping over to the page it listed, I started reading.

Apparently, there were two moons because someone called "The Elf of the Sun" deflected a falling meteor back into the sky. The meteor became the second moon, and the fire magic the elf used to fling it back became the second sun...or so the legend went.

"Huh."

I checked the book's front cover and the tables of contents again.

Is this a romance novel, after all...? All it's got is illustrations and commentary... Is this seriously an astrology book? Because if it is, I'm in trouble here. Maybe astrology just isn't as developed here. Well...I just need to figure out when the Twin Lunar Eclipse takes place.

"Hmm. 'The Twin Lunar Eclipse happens in eighteen-year cycles. It takes place at night, during the Dodon migration period... It's preceded by the distance between the two moons beginning to shrink during daytime...' Daytime?!"

So there was no real way of finding out!

I knew it...

Dodons were essentially buffaloes. They were as large as Rucks (cows), as fat as pigs, let out bird-like squeaks, and were as strong as a boar. A strange animal, all told. Some animals out there were pretty savage, but Dodons were especially ferocious. They had sharp horns and, when faced with vivid colors, would break into an enraged sprint to ram it. Every year, I heard rumors of travelers being attacked or killed during their migration periods...

Their meat was very soft and supple, though.

Makes sense, I guess. They're like cows...

Since they were wild animals, their meat was pungent, but male Dodon horns were used as an alchemical ingredient and sold for high prices. To that end, adventurers actively hunted them... And as one might expect, each year, there were stories of adventurers killed while trying to do so.

"...I guess we'll know it's time when the moons grow closer during the day. I guess it's better than knowing nothing at all. Yeah, better than nothing..."

I picked up the book and walked down the stairs. Dad and Roin were sitting at the coffee corner, discussing work that needed doing around the inn. It was probably necessary, since they didn't know exactly how many days it would take. I carried the book over to them and read out the explanation.

"So we'll know it's time when we see the moons getting closer during the day, huh?" Dad said, sipping his tea. "That's clear enough!"

"But it doesn't say the exact date..." Roin dropped his shoulders in disappointment.

Yeeep. What are you gonna do, though? Just give it up~

"Oh, no use complaining about it," Dad said with a shrug. "Why not rest for today? I'm sure you're tired from your trip. Why not take the missis out fishing?"

"Fishing?"

"Yes, there's Lake Rhiode behind us. We can rent you a fishing rod for two

hundred colts. And we'll cook any fish you catch for free."

"But renting the fishing rod costs money..."

"Well, we are running a business here."

I thought I saw sparks flying between Dad and Roin!

"How about this, owner? I make my living as a minstrel. If any guests show up, I'll entertain them with my songs for free."

This was his attempt at haggling for a discount. *But didn't Dad say he'll cut down on their fees if they help around the inn...?*

"C'mon now, Roin... Put yourself in my shoes, will ya?" Dad regarded him with exasperated eyes. "I dunno how long you're gonna be staying here. Just give up and help me out with cleaning and working the fields. Keep complaining, and I'll have to ask your fiancée for help."

"Ugh!"

Dad easily took the upper hand! But I didn't like the idea of Roin working the fields.

"Dad, if you let someone who isn't used to farming work the fields, it could drop the crops' quality," I told Dad. "And that could affect how our meals taste. Maybe you could just let him handle cleaning, laundry, and chopping wood?"

"Guh! Chopping wood?!" Roin exclaimed in clear displeasure.

"Hm, chopping wood..." Dad considered my suggestion. "Yeah, I guess that's probably the safest option."

Chopping wood was the most taxing task for Dad. He was missing an arm, so he had to do it almost entirely with his left hand. And when he had to do the laundry, handling some of the big sheets made his wooden prosthetic wet, and it took a long time for it to dry out.

Soap wasn't common in this world, so one had to rub things by hand to wash them. It was so hard for Dad that he often offered guests discounts for handling the laundry on their own. He also provided a wood chopping discount and offered to cook any game guests brought back from fishing or hunting for free.

Can our inn really grow with all these discounts...? And instead of relaxing here, it feels like Dad's working the guests to the bone instead... I'm not sure if this is something an inn should do. It's not like we're advertising outdoor camping as a part of the stay package or anything...

"Chopping wood and handling the laundry's already part of your lodging fee discount."

"Right... Are you that short on hands here?" Roin asked seriously.

"Ugh..." Dad frowned and then sighed before explaining. "See, the former owner passed away last month. My daughter's turning five, and I only have one arm. Can't handle all the work, so I have to ask the guests for help."

"Ah! That's a prosthetic arm..." Roin's eyes widened in realization. "Right, that does sound rough... I'm no good at manual labor, but I'll try to help out...for a discount, yes?"

"Right."

This was how our inn was operating right now—by relying on the goodwill of our guests. I looked forward to getting older and shouldering half that burden, especially when it came to the laundry. *Those big sheets will be no match for me...*

...Wait. Can't I just use alchemy to make soap?

"Dad!"

"You startled me, Tina. What is it?"

"I want to try making soap with alchemy, so can I have some time off from the chores?"

"Soap?" Dad repeated the word.

"Isn't that what nobles and royalty use to wash themselves...?" Roin asked.

"Yes!" I nodded. "With soap, laundry and washing the dishes will be easy! And I could probably make it with alchemy!"

"O-Oh..." the two of them uttered at once.

Back to the study it is, then!

Like I suspected, the alchemy recipe book did have instructions for making soap. If I recalled correctly, it required chemicals...like sodium hydroxide and glycerin. Back when I was unemployed, I was overcome by this odd sense of having to do something with myself and ordered a “Make-Your-Own Soap Kit” online, so I remembered the ingredients.

But in this world...or rather, when it came to making soap with alchemy, apparently it required two transmutations. The first one was to create the ingredients for the soap and the second was to mix them together.

It was considered a medium-difficulty item to create. I was already used to making tonics, so I wanted to branch out to more difficult creations next! *Let's get to it!*

“But gathering the ingredients is the real problem...”

But if I did collect them all, I'd be good. I checked the ingredients. It listed a spider web... Apparently, any spider's threads would work, so that was easily obtainable. Oil...again, any kind of oil would do, so that was fine too. Nunuja Ivy extract... *There are Nunujas growing in the mountains.* Caseopus digestive fluid...that was a type of carnivorous plant.

Spring water... *Water from Lake Rhiode should be good enough.* And moderately powdered Amans bark... Creating the powder was a bit difficult. The wording was strange too. What did “moderately powdered” mean? Was it like “according to your preference?”

“Anyway, I should get started on gathering the ingredients!”

Let's get going!

“Gathering ingredients? That sounds interesting. I'll join in.” Enofa, who seemed bored, decided to join me.

“Thank you!”

So with that settled, up the mountain we went!

Dad didn't let me hike the mountain on my own. His exact words were, “Going there without an adult is dangerous. What if you get lost?!” I felt he was a bit overprotective... But then again, I was five years old. A five-year-old girl

going up a mountain on her own seemed like a bad idea if there ever was one.

But that said, most of the ingredients could be found near the foot of the mountain.

If the ingredients are easy to find, I could mass-produce and sell them alongside my medicine! I could put one in the bathroom as a sample and have guests try it. And if they like how it feels, they could buy some for their journeys!

But that said, the question of if they'd like it remained to be seen. Still, even without selling it, having soap handy would mean we wouldn't have to spend hours washing sheets by hand. One issue, though, was that soap meant Dad was even less reliable when it came to laundry. He wouldn't be able to use it with his wooden hand. And this world had nothing in the way of rubber gloves...

"There are a lot of plants here. What do we take?" Enofa asked me.

"This and this," I pointed at the ingredients I'd need. "The vine on this tree is a Nunuja Ivy. We squeeze it and collect the extract. And then we need the Caseopus digestive fluid. They grow in the underbrush here and have a unique scent that draws in insects. Then they eat them."

"Huh? This plant eats bugs?"

"Yes, it does."

This world had carnivorous plants too. I was surprised the first time I saw it. Enofa didn't think a plant could eat bugs, either, and was apparently quite disgusted.

"Ugh... That's nasty..."

"We need to collect its digestive juices."

"What?! You're taking this stuff?!"

"Yes."

It was for the sake of making soap, after all. But I had to wonder whether it would wilt without its digestive juices or if it'd just produce more. I decided to check the next time I came. It'd be nice if it was the latter. I wouldn't want the plants to wilt because of me, and it'd be a waste if I couldn't use them repeatedly too... *Hehehehe*.

"That's all the things we need from the mountain... We need to get spider webs next."

"I-Is there any other gross stuff we're going to collect that I need to know about?" Enofa asked with a grimace.

"We don't need much. Two or three webs should do."

"You call that 'not much'...?"

I was sure I'd find a spider web somewhere. After looking around for a while, I heard Enofa chuckle. I looked up at her, and she waved her hands in a flustered manner.

"Oh, sorry. It's just that Roin's bad with spiders. A spider got on his shoulder during a performance and I found it. I didn't know he was afraid of spiders at the time, so I just told him. What do you think happened next?"

"...I think it's, um, easy to imagine..."

"That's right!"

Well, for how bad he was at hiding things, and considering he was in the middle of a performance where he couldn't start screaming or running... His expression must have been priceless.

I couldn't blame Enofa for laughing so hard she had to hold onto her sides. I kind of wished I could have seen his reaction myself... Though it probably was no laughing matter for Roin!

"He went pale and red at the same time! It was hilarious!"

"Hehehe..." I giggled.

"But he didn't stop playing. He's a pro that way. And he managed to introduce himself to the audience too... See, until then, I always thought he was this unreliable, suspicious-looking, creepy narcissist. That all he was really good for was his facial expressions..."

You're basically insulting him there...

"But ever since that incident, I realized he was kind of cute."

It was his reaction that made her see his charm!

"And once that happened, well, you know how transparent he is!
Hehehehe...!"

"So that's how you fell in love...?"

"Yep. I was the one who asked him out."

"Really?! That's surprising!"

"He's transparent but slow. He just wouldn't move things along."

"O-Oh."

His idea for the marriage proposal was transparent too, given that he came all the way to Rofola to do it. But looking at Enofa made me feel like she'd just say, "That's what's cute about him!"

"But, um...Tinaris, was it?"

"Yes."

"Don't you want to go visit a large country too? I can't imagine you'll meet anyone at an inn that hardly has any guests."

"Huh? Ah, no, I-I'm still too little, so I don't really..."

"That's a waste. You're better off experiencing love as much as you can. Otherwise, you might end up being a late bloomer who can't bring herself to do anything, like Roin."

"...I-I'll, uh, I'll try not to be like that..."

I definitely didn't want to end up like Roin. But given my age, love felt like the furthest thing imaginable to me... Or, well, mentally speaking, I was in my mid-twenties now, but my five-year-old body wasn't exactly wired for infatuation yet.

But that aside, Enofa's story struck a chord with me. *When I'm her age, will I fall in love like that too...?*

"Ah, there's a spider web," Enofa said.

"Where?! Can I reach it?"

"It's a bit high up. I'll get it for you."

"Thank you!"

And with that, I had everything I needed from here! Next, I needed to get Amans bark, so I went to the lumber pile. A bit north of the guests' cottages, near the forest, was our lumber pile, and near it was a post for splitting lumber. There was also a shed nearby that contained work tools like hoes and axes, as well as Judie's stable.

Right now, I needed some Amans bark, so I looked for some wood from an Amans tree in the lumber pile. It was a white, birch-like tree that gave off a pleasant aroma that was a bit like a cypress tree. Now wasn't the time to focus on the scent, though.

I looked around for a moment for wood with white bark... And soon, I found some! Like I thought, there were some pieces of Amans wood in the lumber pile.

"All that's left is water from the lake..." I said after collecting some bark.

"That's a lot of different ingredients," Enofa commented.

"Yes. But I can make soap with this!"

"Soap made with spider webs and bug-eating plants, huh... I know royalty and nobles use it for bathing, but I'm not sure I'd want to use something like that..."

"Aw... Don't say that... Once I transmute all these things together, the soap will only have the best parts of each ingredient!"

"Reaaaaally?"

"O-Once it's done, I'll have Dad Appraise it!"

The transmutation I'd be performing this time was supposed to extract all the good traits from the ingredients and expel the negative ones. I didn't know enough to guess what good traits spider webs had, but I think the person who wrote this recipe put a lot of work into researching the right ingredients.

I mean, if he went as far as spider webs and a carnivorous plant's digestive fluids, he had to have been thorough! Alchemists who come up with recipes must be amazing. You probably have to be really smart!

That just left the spring water and oil. I could take some oil from the kitchen

and water from the lake. I'd gathered the ingredients pretty quickly!

"Say, can I watch you do it?" Enofa asked me.

"Sure, I don't mind," I replied. "But I don't think it'll be all that interesting."

"I'm sure that's not true. It's not often you get to see an alchemist at work. It's pretty incredible you can do it when you're so young."

"Aah... I-I guess..."

She was pretty sincere.

"I read that alchemy was developed by people a long time ago to make life easier," I said. "So a lot of the simpler recipes use things that are easy to come by."

"Really?"

"Healing tonics, antidotes, and fever potions use water and herbs that grow everywhere, like Lilith, Duana, and Solan flowers."

"They do?!"

People didn't seem to know that. Medium and high-grade medicine required all sorts of ingredients, so their prices and effects were that much higher. I hoped I could make them someday. That way, I'd make a whole lot of money!

"I'll get started, then!"

"Good luck, Tinaris!"

"Thank you!"

The tools I needed were a pot and an alchemy spoon. I'd need to prepare the ingredients first. Some of them were fine as is, but since I'd be breaking them down into their components, the order I did things was important.

I started refining the ingredients per the book's instructions. I mixed them together while pouring in mana... And soon enough, the materials began breaking down. They dissolved into an oddly colored fluid. This was likely fine, since I did everything by the book.

"All right." I nodded before proceeding.

"Wow..." Enofa exclaimed as she watched me.

I placed the prepared ingredients into the pot then applied more mana. The book did say that once I started adding in mana, a small amount would do...

I mixed the ingredients together. *Stir, stir, stir...* I poured in a small amount of mana. *Stir, stir, stir...*

The pot then lit up, and I poured in more mana until the result hardened. The soap would have to solidify next. It was a good thing I had that wooden box ready.

"What's that?"

"A box I use to store the dried leaves I always use as ingredients. I'll cover it with a cloth and close the gaps, then put the raw soap inside so it can solidify."

"But it looks like you've got a little too much..."

"Yes, when you transmute things, sometimes you get a little more than you expect..."

"Huh."

I figured I'd just make a small bar of soap, just for testing purposes, so despite preparing a relatively big box, it ended up a bit flabby. I was surprised to see how much soap the transmutation produced.

Did it expand or something...?

But it wasn't really a problem. I could just cut it into smaller chunks later.

"How long are you gonna have to wait?"

"I don't know. It's my first time making soap..."

"Oh yeah. But for how weird the ingredients were, the fluid's milky-white and pretty."

"It really is."

For now, I could leave the soap to harden. I used another box in place of a lid.

"So that's it?"

"Yes. Thank you for helping."

“Don’t mention it. It was interesting to watch.”

After leaving the undiluted soap near the house, we noticed Roin approach us from the direction of the lake, carrying a wooden bucket.

“Oh?”

“Oh my.”

He probably went fishing.

He was supposed to start helping Dad with the inn tomorrow, so it wasn’t as if he was hiding from work.

“You went fishing, Roin?” Enofa asked.

“Yeah, it’s pretty fun once you get the hang of it.”

“Let’s see what you got... Ah, *aaaaah*, a snake!”

“Huh?!” Roin exclaimed.

“Nnnf?!” I squeaked as Enofa clung to me.

B-Boobs...squeezing me...!

“N-No, Enofa, listen! The owner said this is a fish! It’s called an Unan fish!”

Unans were eel-like fish. They were really big though, like the ones you see in places like New Zealand. I wondered whether I could have some broiled eel by cooking an Unan, but it was far too big for me to cut at the moment, so I had to shelve that plan for now.

But how do I make the soy sauce for it...?

I was pretty sure I’d need soy sauce for broiled eel. I’d have to check if I could make it with alchemy. Unans exuded a pungent stench, so the custom in this world was to cook it in fragrant herbs that soaked up the smell and added to the flavor. Apparently, the clash between the Unan’s scent and the herbs’ aroma made it surprisingly tasty!

“That thing’s edible?! But it’s a snake...!” Enofa cried, still disgusted.

“Apparently, it’s very tasty if you roast it with herbs,” I told her. “You could ask Dad to cook it for you.”

"Roasted with herbs...? Really?" She still seemed suspicious.

I decided to prove it to her. I called Dad, and we decided to have a campfire that night. Dad cut the Unan into multiple slices, which he filled with herbs, salt, and pepper. He then covered them in pieces of paper smeared with Ruck oil.

We surrounded the campfire with rocks and let it cook slowly in the residual heat.

"Mmmm! It's delicious!" Enofa exclaimed upon biting into her serving.

"It's really tasty!" Roin agreed.

"It's good, isn't it? Pops taught me how to make it."

"It's great, Dad!"

"Good to hear."

The sky above us was full of twinkling stars, and the moons floated side by side as if nestling against each other. Having a campfire by the lake like this, having dinner with the guests, eating the fish they caught...

This inn is such a lovely place...

Dad wasn't a great cook, but this fish really was tasty. *Maybe it's because Grandpa taught him how to make it. No...the credit goes to Dad for learning well. And someday, he'll teach me how to make it too!*

"By the way, how did the soap turn out, Tina?" Dad asked me.

"Oh, right! It should have hardened by now."

"We can check on it after we eat."

After we finished our dinner, Enofa carried over the box I filled with the undiluted soap solution. She set it near the campfire and opened the lid. We all peered inside.

"This is soap? Isn't it kind of big?" Roin asked.

"Yeah, I think you made a pretty big piece," Dad said.

"Well, I'll be cutting it into smaller pieces."

It was hard to use such a large lump of soap for anything.

Where did I put the knife... Ah.

"Hey, Dad... Do you have a knife I can use to cut the soap?"

"A knife that's good for cutting food won't do?"

"No, I don't want to use one of those for this..."

I preferred not to use one of the knives meant for food. I mean, soap isn't something you put in your mouth... I remembered seeing all sorts of really cute soaps that had labels warning they were not to be eaten.

"Well, you can use my knives," Enofa offered.

"What knives?" I asked.

"I use throwing knives in some of my shows. No need to worry about anyone accidentally trying to eat with those."

"Great! Then, um..."

"What's wrong?"

"Well, Dad said I can't use knives or blades until I'm older, so..." I said, fidgeting a little.

I did think he was being overprotective... *But letting five-year-old handle knives is dangerous.* Dad wasn't wrong. But if Enofa could do it for me, that wouldn't be a concern.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll handle it."

"Thanks, Enofa," Dad said, bowing his head.

"Why not just let Tinaris handle knives?" Roin asked.

"What are you, stupid? It's dangerous," Dad snapped him.

Calling a guest stupid struck me as a bad decision, but I was grateful that he cared about me. Enofa sunk the knife into the wooden box and cut into the soap. She turned the box over, and once a bit of air entered the cut, the soap slipped out.

"Ooh, it looks better than I thought," Dad said, impressed.

"Now I just need to add in some scent... I guess I should mix some flowers

with strong aromas? I wonder if there are recipes for essential oils. I could apply some scent if I had those..."

"What's that?" Enofa asked.

"Ah, nothing, never mind. Could you cut it into smaller pieces?"

"I don't mind. How small?"

"Eight pieces that are this size."

"Like this?"

About two inches vertically, three inches horizontally. The pieces weren't too big. And with this, my soap was ready! I handed two pieces to Enofa and Roin, who looked at them with amazement.

"Please use them; they're samples. You helped me make the soap, Enofa, so please have some."

"Oh, can I? Thank you! I know what you used to make it, so I'm a bit torn about it... But looking at it now, it's pretty. I'd love to have it!"

"Wh-What is this made out of...?" Roin asked anxiously.

"You're better off not knowing," Enofa replied coolly.

"What?!"

Yeah, I think it's for the best if Roin doesn't know how this sausage is made...

"Hehehe."

"Ahahaha."

Enofa and I exchanged a meaningful look and giggled as we thought back to her story from earlier. We could imagine how he'd react even now and it was pretty funny.

"Aww, come on, what do you mean?!" he insisted, frustrated.

"What about the rest of it?" Dad asked.

"We'll use it. We can use it for laundry or to wash the dishes!"

"Can we use it on utensils?"

"Well, not directly. You rinse it with water until the soap foams. But only when you need to get really pesky oil stains off!"

"I see."

"And then you wash it off with water!"

"A-All right. You gotta follow a lot of instructions to use soap, huh...?"

"I'd actually like to see how it affects the skin when you try to clean your body with it... But first, I'll want to try it on cloth and utensils and see if it doesn't hurt your hands."

"O-Okay..."

I assumed it'd be fine so long as it foamed properly, but I'd see how it went tomorrow. If this went well, I could mix in ingredients that were good for the skin and make body soap. Or materials that were good for hair to make shampoo. If I could store it in glass containers and sell it, I could double our female customers!

"Hehehe... Soap... There's still plenty of room for improvement with soap... Heheheheheheh..." I cackled to myself.

"T-Tina?" Dad asked with a hint of concern.



THE next morning, I went to water the fields after I finished sweeping the entrance to our inn.

"Oh...!"

The seeds were already budding!

But we only planted them yesterday! The manure's amazing!

It seems the harvests really come sooner than I thought.

"Good morning, Tinaris," Enofa greeted me.

"Good morning, Enofa! You're up early. Out on a walk?"

"Just practicing for a bit. If I don't dance every so often, my body gets out of practice."

"I see."

Enofa walked to the other side of the fence and started dancing. She was a dancer, after all. She raised her arms, extended her limber legs, and began gently rotating in place. But then, she suddenly squatted down and bent her upper half backward.

She's so flexible...! And pretty...

Every movement she made, from the tips of her fingertips to her toes, was calculated. It was the very picture of feminine form... It made me realize that women really were pretty. I was a woman myself, of course, and that was exactly why Enofa's beauty was so striking to me. So much so that it didn't even incur a sense of envy.

"It's beautiful!" I cheered.

"Thank you. Well, I do this for a living, after all," Enofa said with a light smile.

"It really feels, well, professional! I wish I could be like you when I grow up."

At least in terms of that figure...and those proportions.

"How come? I think if anything, you're a lot more impressive than I am," Enofa said.

"How?"

"I mean, aren't you? Despite being so little, you learned alchemy and you're helping your father."

Leaning on the fence, she placed her chin on her hands. The rising sun made her smile seem that much more dazzling.

"You're an amazing girl, Tinaris. I think most girls your age wouldn't learn alchemy, no matter how bad things got."

"U-Um..."

I couldn't tell her I was an adult on the inside. Learning alchemy at this age really was strange, wasn't it?

Maybe I should stop using it in front of strangers... But she did help me gather ingredients. That was a big help. Maybe it won't be as strange once I get a little

older.

"I'm positive you're talented. Believe in yourself and let it push you to new heights."

"...I will!"

My...talent.

I had no talents to speak of in my past life, so hearing her say that made me happy. I was all too plain back then. A girl without charm or any redeeming qualities, and the only thing I could do was work myself to the bone to compensate for those faults.

But having become Tinaris, I had a talent for alchemy. Doing it was fun, and I could create all sorts of things that delighted Dad and the guests. Seeing their happy faces made me feel fulfilled.

I liked alchemy, and I wanted to learn how to make more useful things. No...I knew I'd do it!

"Thank you so much, Enofa... Ah!"

"Hm?"

My hands, which I held up, went limp. Through the sunny sky, I could see the outlines of the two moons, and they were closer than last night.

This is...!

"What's wrong?" Enofa followed my gaze. "Huh..? The moons... Were they that close before?"

"Enofa! I think this is it!" I said excitedly.

"Oh...! R-Right..." Enofa stuttered, her cheeks turning rosy.

We almost forgot! The two of them came to Rofola so Roin could propose to her!

"I'll go tell Roin!" I said.

"Ah, um, sure..."

I'd finished watering the fields, so I dashed toward the guest cottage... But I

soon ran out of breath.

Haa, haa... I forgot...I still have a little girl's body... Haa, haa... My legs are too short... But do kids really get this tired from running...?! Oof...!

Just as the cottage was coming into view, I tripped and planted my face right into the ground.

"Mmnf!?"

O-Ooooow...

"Oh no! Are you all right?!"

Roin, who happened to come out of the cottage just then, helped me to my feet. He looked shocked to see me trip.

"Ah, Roin... The moons... They're coming closer..." I murmured, rubbing my aching nose.

"Huh?!" Roin looked even more surprised.

I was happy I managed to tell him, but...

"Eep..."

Looking up, he saw the moons were indeed growing closer. His face stiffened in suspense. I couldn't blame him. *Proposing to the person you love is a once-in-a-lifetime event...*

"Good luck!" I told him cheerily.

"...Th-Thanks!"

I was confident it'd work out! But him being nervous had little to do with how likely he was to succeed... All I could do was cheer for them. And if that's all I could do, I'd do it with gusto!

Go, go, Roin! You can do it!

"I'll go help make breakfast!"

"Y-Yeah... Then, I'll, uhh, I'll keep chopping the firewood left over from yesterday..."

"All right."

That meant we'd have plenty of firewood today... And he was going at it pretty mindlessly, so he'd probably do it until nightfall. And while having more wood was by no means a bad thing...I felt kind of sorry for him.

"Dad, the moons are coming closer!" I said as I entered the inn. "The Twin Moons are probably tonight!"

"Oh, I see. Then it's time for Roin to pay the piper, is it?"

"Don't you think we should make tonight extra special?!"

"Cook up a feast, eh? All right, what should we make?"

"How about roast bird?"

"Oh, that sounds good. All right, I'll handle it. I'm almost done cleaning out the blood from a wild bird I hunted the other day... Oh, and, could ya wipe the tables? Breakfast's almost ready."

"Okay!"

Yeah, it was probably too soon for me to see him dismember a bird. I was still five and I didn't really want to see that either. I indulged in Dad's consideration and went to clean off the tables.

And so, dinner for today was decided. Roasted bird. A staple Christmas food from my past life. To do that, one would need to dismember the bird...pluck off its feathers, cut off its head, remove its organs...

Ugh, that's pretty gross... But I'll have to get used to it someday...

I decided to leave the gore to Dad and wiped off the tables, and then started lining up the ingredients for the roasted bird. Normally, you'd want to keep the bird submerged in alcohol for a day to soften it up, but this celebration was done on short notice, so I figured we'd cut it down to half a day.

I sliced ciarorots, oniuns, poteitos, timates, punpkons (pumpkins), and pompoteitos (sweet potatoes), which we'd roast up with herbs. One could add garlic or mushrooms for flavor, but this was a matter of preference. I hoped Dad would let me help with the roasting.

Once we cooked the vegetables, we'd stuff them into the bird's belly, smear butter over its skin, and then roast it in the oven until it took on the right color.

Also, normally you could roast apples with the bird to further soften the meat, but apples were hard to come by. All the fruit growing on the mountain were berries.

The result wouldn't be as pretty as it could be. But considering we could only buy butter when a peddler passed by, and we'd have to use a whole bird when they weren't that easy to hunt, it was a pretty luxurious meal... It was a roasted bird!

"Okay, tables wiped and vegetables cut! Next up..."

It occurred to me that having the coffee corner stay as is was a bit dull, given the occasion.

Maybe I could decorate it? No... It's too soon. Maybe I could just get a nice tablecloth ready without them seeing it?

"Tiiiiinariiiis!" I heard someone woefully cry my name.

"Aaaaah!" I yelled as the door opened with a thud.

Roin stumbled into the house.

Wh-What?! I didn't call for them yet! Breakfast and the feast aren't ready... Dad's cooking in the kitchen; when did he have time to call for them?

Roin looked really flustered... Did something happen?

"Th-The ring! The ring's gone!" He told me, half in tears.

"...Uh?"

Huh? What? What did he... The ring's...gone?

"Huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh?!"

It's gone?! Did he just say the ring is gone?! But aren't you supposed to give a ring when you propose?! Okay, now's not the time to be daydreaming!

"What happened?!" I rounded on him.

"I know I put it in my bag after buying it! But I checked for it just now, and it was gone!"

"Did you turn your bag over when you looked?! Maybe you dropped it under

your bed?!"

"I looked everywhere!"

What's with this guy?! How do you lose your engagement ring on the day you're gonna propose?!

"Hey, what's with all the racket?" Dad asked, walking into the coffee corner.

"Dad! This good-for-nothing said he lost his ring!"

"You lost your ring...? Wh-What?! Are you serious?! The Twin Moons are tonight!"

"So, I, er... I've been wondering if you can use alchemy to transmute me a new ring, Tinaris..." Roin mumbled awkwardly.

"A ring? With alchemy?!" I asked him, my eyes round with shock.

You can make rings with alchemy? I-I've never done that!

"You're trying to sponge off Tina?!" Dad snapped at him.

"I mean, I don't have any other real way out of this! I'll keep looking! But what if I don't find it...?"

"I'm, uh, not sure if I can transmute a ring..."

"I think you can, but..." Dad answered with a frown. "Tina, you're more of an alchemical apothecary. Transmuting metals is a different field."

"N-Noo..."

There are different alchemy fields...? But he's in really big trouble. Maybe I can pull it off, anyway...?

"I'll go look up metal transmutation in the study..."

"I don't mind you trying, but keep in mind that there are more prohibitions on transmuting metal compared to transmuting potions," Dad warned me. "If anything's too complicated, check with me, all right?"

"Roger that." I nodded.

"Roin, you go look through your room again." Dad turned to Roin. "Calm down and be thorough. Check your pockets and inside your bed."

"I-I'll try..."

And be more careful this time, you ditz! I thought to myself.

I hurried over to the study and scanned the books from the bookshelf's alchemy corner.

I think a book about transmuting metal was around here...

I took a book with a gray binding and opened it. It looked to be the right one.

Alchemy: Metal Transmutation Edition

"Geh."

What is this...? This is nothing like the alchemy I know!

"You will need a circuit for transmutation," the book said.

What's a circuit?! I thought all you needed for alchemy is a pot and an alchemy staff or spoon!

"This is the process of mixing metals to create new, different kinds of metal. However, the transmutation and production of gold, silver, and platinum follow the following rules..."

No, this is nothing like what I know! I don't want to do something annoying like this; I just want to refine and fashion metal! And this is supposed to be a beginner's book too...

And I couldn't obtain a pot capable of containing hot metal. Or an alchemy staff for mixing molten metals either!

I couldn't see how I could do it. Roin was finished. He'd have to propose without a ring. Case closed. *I'm no good with this kind of alchemy.* This morning, Enofa said I had a talent for alchemy, but transmuting metal was way out of my league.

Maybe we could just make a handmade substitute without alchemy? Maybe Enofa would like a ring made of beads? If it's a ring her lover made her with all his heart...then even a handmade one from cheap beads would work!

"I gotta find a book for making handmade jewelry and stuff!"

There!

It must have been one of Grandma's books. I pulled it off the shelf and checked the table of contents. Knitting patchworks, embroidery, pressed flowers...

"Pressed flowers...?"

My eyes stopped there for some reason. I flipped over to the right page and indeed found a pressed flower between the pages.

A lily of the valley?

I saw them growing around a tree planted in an isolated house in my neighborhood in my past life. It really lingered in my memory, because I remembered seeing a lot of them sitting in potted plants, but the owner of the house warned, "They're pretty but venomous. Be careful."

It was stuck against the faint pink paper, and behind it was a written date and the words "Pieris Flower." Right next to it was apparently a description of its symbolism in flower language...

"The two of us, together forever, on this journey called life."

"This is it...!"

Doesn't this sound like something you'd say when proposing to someone?!

It was only flower language, but it was pretty romantic. I didn't know Grandma was into this sort of thing.

That thought saddened me. She passed away when I was only three. If she was still around, and I knew she had these kinds of hobbies, we could talk about it so much more...

"Flowers, huh...? I remember back in elementary school, we'd make floral wreaths with shepherd's purses. And necklaces and rings... Rings..."

It wasn't that I'd forgotten, but I stumbled over that word. *Rings.*

"...Wouldn't that be really pretty?"

The only problem was if Roin could make it.

I'm sure even a good-for-nothing like him could make something that simple! I mean, he's a minstrel; he's used to handling instruments.

I hurried downstairs, where I found Roin having breakfast. I excitedly told him my idea.

"You can make a ring with flowers?" he asked me.

"Well, you take flowers with long stems and twist them, so they're as thick as a finger... But I think I have a good idea."

"A good idea?" Roin and Dad repeated.

Yep. A good idea. The kind a man would never come up with. Looking at Grandma's book helped me come up with it.

"We can use pressed flowers. I found a book about flower language in the study, so we can use it to see what meanings flowers growing around here have, and have Roin propose that way! And then, once you give her the flower ring, we could preserve it by making it into a pressed flower."

"Oh..." Roin's eyes widened.

"That's a pretty romantic idea," Dad said, rubbing his chin. "And it's pretty economical too."

"You don't have to spend money if all you want to do is make a woman happy," I said cheerily.

"R-Really?" Dad asked.

"Really," I maintained.

Dad just didn't get women.

Roin opened the book and started picking flowers. It occurred to me we wouldn't actually have that extra firewood he was supposed to chop though...

"I think he'll be worrying over which flowers to pick all day long," Dad said with a wry smile.

"What about Enofa?"

"She had her breakfast and then went fishing at Rhiode. I guess she figured he'd need some alone time." Dad jerked his chin in Roin's direction.

Yeah, figures. He looked paler than a corpse when I came downstairs...

"Enofa's such a sweet lady," I said.

"She's probably too good for a guy like him." Dad shook his head.

I had to solemnly agree.



TO my surprise, Roin kept agonizing over which flower to choose for half the day. His expression was full of tension and urgency, making it hard for me to approach him.

I'm kinda scared. Is this actually going to turn out well...?

With Roin being...well, like that, Dad decided to go look through their cottage and see if he could find the ring. Enofa ate her lunch next to the lake, too, out of consideration for Roin. I spotted her looking up and mumbling, "They really are moving closer..." to herself, with flushed cheeks.

And that only made me feel like she was getting her hopes up extra high...

"T-Tinaris..." Roin approached me.

"Yes?"

"Th-This flower right here. Does it, *uhh*, bloom around here?" he asked, pointing at a picture in the book.

"Hmm..."

A flower would be ideal for the proposal, but if it didn't grow around Rofola, we wouldn't be able to get it. To that end, I went out with Roin to look for flowers, which was also a convenient excuse for me to gather spare ingredients for alchemy. From Roin's perspective, my job was to look at what flowers grew around Rofola and tell him what they symbolized in flower language.

"That's a Lemone flower. It means, 'I'm your slave'..."

A-Are you sure that's the kind of message you want to send here...?

"But yes, it grows around here. You can find some halfway up the mountain."

"A-All right, then let's go with that."

"Are you sure that's what you want?"

Consider what this flower means!

"Yes. Since the moment I met her, I...I've been a slave to her love..."

"Er, all right. Then let's go look for it."

"Y-You were supposed to be moved by that..." Roin told me desperately.

"Well, I wasn't. Not even a bit," I told him curtly.

"Aww..."

And he's supposed to be a minstrel. I thought he'd have more of a poetic way with words.

Anyway, let's just hike the mountain. If it gets too dark, we might run into a big bear. Those things are nocturnal creatures, so we'd be better off going there before nightfall.

"Can you fight if you have to, Roin?"

"N-No, not at all."

"We should have Dad come with us. It'd be dangerous if we ran into a boar or a bear."

"Huh? There are boars and bears on the mountain?!"

I was a bit anxious, since this was later than we usually went to the mountain. I decided to stop by the cottage and call for Dad. When I explained the situation, he grimaced. I wasn't sure if it was because he didn't find the ring or because of the symbolism behind the flower Roin picked.

"You can fight, owner?"

"More or less. I lost my dominant arm, but I can manage with my left. I should be able to fight off a bear, no problem."

"Really...?"

"Maybe we can have bear stew to celebrate your proposal, eh? Though drawing out all the blood might take a while, so it won't be today. Ahaha!"

"Ugh... No thank you..." Roin muttered.

I preferred boar stew, personally. The first time I ate it, I had my reservations,

but it tasted similar to pork. It was juicier and its flavor was a bit odd, but it was still tasty. In terms of personal taste, I was of the opinion that either of them would probably work if we had some soup made from kelp from the lake.

If we could cook it with soy sauce and miso, it'd definitely taste better than just adding salt and pepper! Guaranteed! I need to get my hands on some soy sauce and miso! If I can find something like soybeans, I think I could manage the rest with alchemy!

"Tina, where on the mountain is that flower?" Dad asked, snapping me out of my culinary delusions.

"Halfway up," I answered.

Right, we have to hurry, or it'll be dark by the time we come back. We can't leave Enofa anxious for long... Though Roin is so nervous, it probably looks suspicious.

We started walking the unpaved trail up the mountain. My short child legs made it even harder to walk. I hoped that someday, when I struck gold, I could have this road paved. But right now, that was a pipe dream...

Aaaah, I wish I could learn how to make all sorts of tonics already...!

"Hey, Roin?" Dad said.

"Y-Yes?"

"You're a minstrel, right? Are you gonna sing when you propose?"

"Oh, um, yes, that was my idea at first... But I decided against it."

"How come?" I asked.

"I use my music to make money... So rather than that, I want her to hear my true feelings. And I feel like my music would just be noise that drowns it out."

Noise... Really? But well, if he feels that way... Ah!

"There it is! That's the Lemone flower!"

"Is that it?"

Just as we reached the halfway point, I spotted small, yellow flowers blooming on the side of the trail. They had moderately long stems, and despite

being small, their color was vivid. As an aside, transmuting Lemone flowers with water created an antidiarrheal medicine.

"Let's try making one right now," I said.

"Right here?!"

"It could wither, so we could put a few of them in this bottle."

"Oh, ah, er, r-right."

The bottle I brought had some water on the bottom. I put five flowers in it. I didn't want Roin to screw up, so I thought having him practice making a flower ring might be a good idea.

I mean, he can't be that clumsy, but better safe than sorry.

"Like this?" he asked after a short while, showing me the result.

"I didn't think you'd do it this quickly... Huh, it looks fine."

Apparently, my concerns were unfounded. He did a pretty good job.

"Ooh... It's pretty cute..." I continued. "If you have a daughter, you could play with her and teach her how to make these."

"You said you two travel with a troupe, right...?" Dad asked. "If you start a family, wouldn't you be better off settling down somewhere?"

"Oh, well...I was thinking the same thing and asked our troupe leader about it. They told me they knew someone in a small country to the east who could help us build a house..."

"A small country to the east?"

"Yeah, a new country that's been established in recent years. I think they're building up a few towns... Ah, but yesterday when I was eating outside, I thought that maybe living in an inn like this one might be nice. Dinner under the starry sky, with your family and guests... It's great."

I felt the same way. This really was a lovely way to live...and I was glad Roin thought so too. This inn was a bigger blessing than we deserved.

"Really? That's good to hear," Dad said with a lukewarm grin. "But running an inn isn't something you can do without devotion. You see, we're lucky to have

food from the mountain and the lake, but living away from the countries means consumables are hard to come by. Roadside inns need approval from the countries running the highways, and sometimes you gotta drive away bandits. Not to mention that you need to be pretty much self-sufficient..."

"U-Ugh... Yeah, it makes sense. Well, I still need to talk it over with Enofa too..."

"Yeah, you should... But I do understand how you feel. Running an inn with your family is a leisurely way of life."

"Yes!" I wholeheartedly agreed.

I loved my life right now. When Grandpa died, and it was just Dad and me, I was worried about how things would turn out. But even on days where we had no guests, I could practice alchemy and gather ingredients. There was plenty to do even with all the work at the inn! And I got to meet all sorts of nice, interesting guests. Like now!

These were all things I could never imagine in my past life, where I was a shy, gloomy girl. It was strange. There was so much to do, but every day was fun and fulfilling. Back then, I would work and work, only for nothing to go right. I hated how sad and pathetic I was. Maybe it was all because of how young I'd become?

"Oh, we should be getting off the mountain. The sun's setting."

"L-Let's hurry back!" I said.

But Roin was silent.

"You all right, Roin?" Dad asked him. "You ready for this? The moons should eclipse soon."

"Y-Yeah..."

I looked up at the sky, and Dad was right. The two moons were beginning to intersect. Once the two moons intersected, the unified moon would reflect on the surface of the lake...forming the Twin Moons. *An astrological event that occurs once every eighteen years, where there are two moons—one in the sky and one on the ground.*

Dad and I hurried down the mountain so we could make dinner. I was anxious to see how Roin's marriage proposal would go!

"Looking at the moon, it'll be a few hours until it happens, so we can take our time and cook," Dad said.

"Right!" I agreed excitedly.

"Oh, Tinaris, could you tell me more about pressing the flower?" Roin asked me.

"Oh, right."

Thinking about dinner made me forget about it...

"Don't worry, we can still make it," I told him.

"Thank you!"

"Pressed flowers are very easy to make."

"They are?"

"You put two sheets of paper between a book's pages, and then you put the flower you want to press between them. If you just press it between the book's pages, the flower's juices might dirty the book, so you should use thick paper. That's all you need to know."

"Huh? That's it?!"

"You just have to wait until the flower loses all its moisture and leave it until it becomes a nice pressed flower... You can leave it pressed to the paper and use it as a bookmark... Do you have a book you can use, Roin?"

"...I don't think so, actually. Would a notebook do?"

"I think anything that'd press the flower would... But make sure there's weight applied to it."

"Oh, that should be fine. I keep it closed with a string."

"Then you should be fine. So long as you don't lose this one too."

"I-I'll be careful."

Please do.

"I'll go help Dad make dinner then... What are you going to do, Roin?"

"C-Calm my nerves."

"Okay...?"



AND finally, the moons intersected. Dad, Roin, and I joined Enofa on the banks of the Rhiode to watch this unusual phenomenon. And, well...

"You sure hooked a whole lot of fish," Dad commented.

"Well, I spent the whole day fishing..."

It looked like we'd be having fish for breakfast tomorrow. And we'd be able to dry them for later too. We'd kept the celebratory meal for after the proposal, so I was pretty hungry.

"Let's eat outside today too," Dad suggested.

"Oh, then let's get everything ready." I nodded.

And so, the two of us left, leaving the couple alone. The preparations looked just about perfect!

"How is it going?"

We reached the front door and then turned around. The moons almost completely overlapped each other in the sky. The eclipsed moons were then reflected on the lake surface.

I saw Roin get on one knee and present the flower ring. He said something, but I couldn't hear what it was from this distance. But that was fine. His proposal was for Enofa's ears only. She spread out her arms and wrapped them around Roin in an embrace...

"Looks like it went well," Dad said.

"Let's carry out the food!"

"Yeah."

This was a happy night, albeit in a different way from yesterday. It was a mysterious sort of feeling! I carried the roast bird Dad made this morning, along

with salad and a pot of soup. I placed the pot over the campfire, and Dad brought a few glasses and a bottle of liquor.

"Now then!" Dad chirped. "A feast and some drinks to celebrate! And I'll cut the fish you caught, Enofa!"

"For the small fish, you can just pick out their insides and roast them as is," I added.

"Th-Thank you!"

"Huh?! Th-Thanks, you two!"

Roin and Enofa thanked us, their expressions full of emotion. Roin probably assumed we didn't prepare anything for the occasion... We prepared a table near the campfire and set it up so a few tree stumps could serve as chairs. The table was pretty simple, done by setting a plank between a couple of stumps, but it was good enough to place the plates and cut the fish.

Dad used a knife to prepare the fish Enofa caught, and I poured some liquor into their glasses. As I did, I noticed the Lemone flower ring sitting on Enofa's ring finger.

"Enofa, Roin! Congratulations on your engagement!"

"Thank you!"

"Thank you, Tinaris. For all your advice..."

"This flower ring was your idea, wasn't it, Tinaris?"

"Huh?!"

She figured it out already?!

I was so surprised my voice lapped over Roin's.

"I mean, making a flower ring and preserving it by making it into a pressed flower? Roin could never come up with that!" Enofa said with a smile.

"Ugh..." Roin hung his head.

"E-Erm..." I stuttered.

"Oh, don't worry about it. Knowing Roin, he probably lost his ring at the last

minute and came crying to you, didn't he? He's such a troublesome little boy."

"Huh?!" Our voices overlapped again.

How did you figure out that much?! Enofa, you're amazing! Roin could never cheat on you like this!

"Mm?" I heard Dad's voice.

"Dad, is something wrong?"

"No, it's just, I found something in the fish's stomach... Mm? Wait, is this...?!"

"What's wrong?"

"What, what?"

"Did something happen?"

The three of us approached Dad, who raised his voice in shock. His eyes were wide in surprise as his fingers rummaged through a large fish's open stomach. As we looked on, Dad pulled something out of the fish's gut.

What's this...? A fish egg?

"...It's a ring," Dad finally said.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Roin cried. "That's the ring I got! Why was it inside that fish...? Aaaaah!"

"Huuuh?!" I raised my voice in surprise too.

"What? Roin, is this the ring you were going to give me...?" Enofa asked, her eyes round with apprehension.

"Y-Yeah! I got it, thinking I'd propose with it. What is it doing inside a fish!?"

Huuuuuh?! The thing Dad found in the fish's stomach is the ring Roin got for Enofa...?! Why?! How does this make sense?!

"...Didn't you spend all of yesterday fishing at the lake?" Dad asked, eyeing Roin dubiously. "Maybe that's when you dropped the ring..."

"Huh...? Ah." Roin's eyes widened in realization. "Now that you mention it, while I was fishing, I was practicing how I'd propose... And just then, I hooked a big fish..."

"So you're saying that fish swallowed the ring? And then Enofa hooked the same fish today? How do coincidences like that even happen? But..."

"That's the only way it makes sense," I said, agreeing with Dad's theory.

We all saw him take the ring from the fish's stomach. Nothing else could explain it. The only other possibility was that Dad found the ring in the room and pretended to find it in the fish... Which would be a rude assumption to make about Dad. He wouldn't do anything that gross.

"Hehehe... Ahahaha!" Enofa burst into giggles. "What kind of story is that?! I can't believe it!"

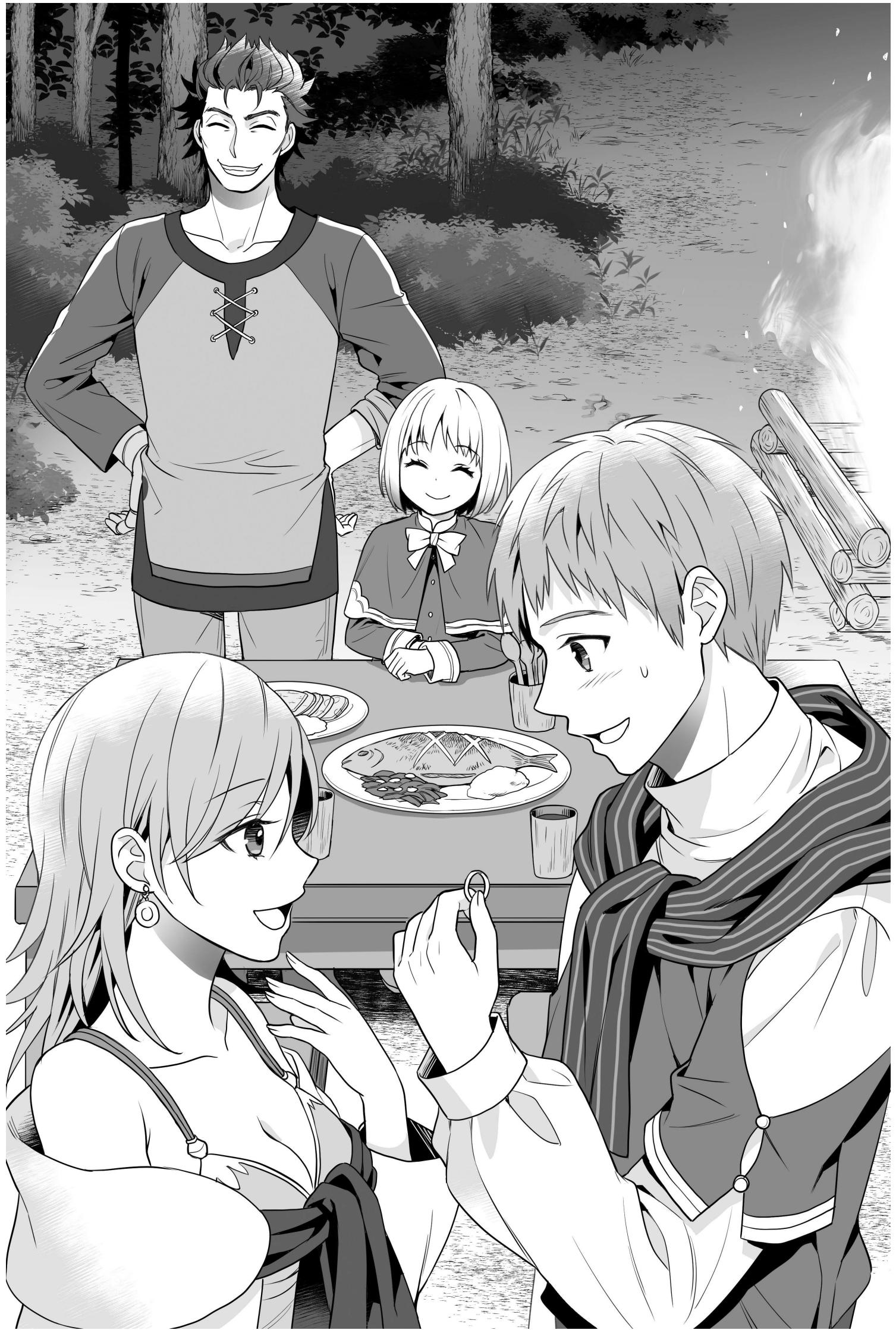
"Ahaha, ahahaha... Seriously? That's what happened...?" Roin cracked a wry smile.

"Well, see..." Dad said, cracking a sardonic grin of his own. "It looks like, one way or another, this ring was fated to find its way to Enofa."

"Ah..." Roin let out a shocked gasp. "Y-You're right..."

"Yes, when you put it like that, it sounds lovely," Enofa smiled. "I don't think you can call this anything but a miracle."

Dad gave Roin the ring. Realizing we had a bucket handy, I scooped up some water and washed the ring clean. Using the soap I made! I returned the ring to Roin and sat back down.



And then, Roin placed the ring on Enofa's finger. They brought their foreheads together and shed tears of joy as they smiled at each other. It was a sweet, wonderful sight... I felt my heart warm up with emotion.

"Talk about a surprise, eh..?" Dad smirked, scratching his cheek. "All right, let's get to eating. The food's gonna get cold. I'll have you two know a roasted bird's hard to come by this time of the year."

"Right! This is a feast!" I affirmed Dad's words.

"Wh-What about the fee for all this...?"

"Well, normally it'd be ten thousand colts... But today, the Rofola Lodge is gonna cover all expenses!" Dad said with a magnanimous smile.

"Thank you!"

You're so generous, Dad! Let's give Enofa and Roin all of our blessings!

"All right, raise your glasses. Tina, you get juice," Dad said, calling for a toast.

"Right!"

"Cheers!!!"



"WE owe you two a lot," Roin said.

"Thank you for everything, Tinaris," Enofa squatted down and told me.

"Oh, not at all! I got to enjoy your music and dancing for free," I said modestly.

"Oh, that much is nothing." Enofa shook her head.

"It really isn't," Roin agreed. "And I had to show you my skill as a minstrel."

The next day, the newly betrothed couple announced they'd be returning to their troupe to break the news to their friends. Each country in this world managed its own census. When it came to travelers like them or an inn like ours, which wasn't part of any country in particular, there were no specific rules or processes when it came to marriage. That said, each country worshipped its own gods, so people tended to marry according to whatever faith they

followed.

“Oh, and *uh*, this is a gift... Use it if you’d like,” I said, handing them a few pieces of soap.

“Oh, soap!” Enofa said.

“Thank you. You really gave us so much...” Roin said gratefully.

And you weren’t reserved about taking any of it! But it’s fine; you’re celebrating.

I warned Roin, telling him not to accidentally eat the soap, to which he insisted with a smile that he wouldn’t. It did little to curb my concerns that he would end up doing it anyway.

“I hope you two find happiness!” I waved goodbye to them.

“Yeah. Take care,” Dad said, waving beside me. “Oh, and *uh*, you might want to decide on a name for your kids early. Coming up with Tina’s name was really hard.”

Dad was acting like he was some kind of experienced parent compared to them. And my name was...if I recalled right, based on his favorite dancer in De Marl...?

Wait. Enofa’s a dancer too... Aaah, now I feel even closer to her for some reason...

“I-It’s still too soon for that!” Roin said, his cheeks turning rosy.

“Is it, though?” Enofa asked, a teasing smile on her lips. “We can think of it while we’re on the road. Goodbye, you two! We’ll drop in to visit next time we’re in the area!”

“You’re always welcome here!” I said.

The Rofola Lodge always welcomes its customers!



“**THAT** was a lovely inn.”

“It really was. We definitely have to come visit here again someday.”

The young couple left the inn, walking with their arms linked on the way to De Lulua, where their troupe awaited their return. The afterglow of last night was still on their minds. A marriage proposal, followed by food and drink. A night of joy, tenderness, and love.

On Enofa's finger was the ring. They didn't expect to find the ring Roin lost in the belly of the fish she hooked up, but it ended up being a pleasant surprise.

"By the way, the owner told us to come up with a name for a child. What do you think might be good?" Enofa asked.

"Actually, I've had a couple of names in mind ever since I heard about the Twin Moons..." Roin muttered.

"Oh? What names?"

"Remember when we traveled to the east, to the demi-human continent? We ran into a tribe that called the moons René and Moné. So, if it's a boy, we can call him René, and if it's a girl, we can call her Moné."

"Borrowing the moon's names, huh? *Hehe...* That might be nice. A minstrel's choice. I like it; it's romantic!"

"Oh, and..."

Roin paused for thought. The inn's owner said it was hard work and wasn't "something you can do without devotion," but he couldn't get the last two evenings they spent out of his mind. He was raised by the troupe, so to him, the feelings he experienced in these few days were so poignant and pleasant, he couldn't find the words to describe them. But he was sure Enofa, who had been there with him, felt the same way.

"Do you think, maybe, we could run an inn ourselves? The owner said it's really hard, but... Yesterday and the day before... I had so much fun here."

"I know how you feel! I've been thinking the same thing."

"Really?!"

He had a feeling she felt the same way. Their faces drew closer and they smiled. They would spend those happy moments together, this time as hosts. They would stand beside others, bringing joy and smiles to them.

"We might not be as good at it as Tina and the owner were, but... Yes, I like that idea! We should talk to the troupe leader. Living on our own, leading self-sufficient lives... It sounds lovely! It won't really be all that different from now. We'll host and entertain people from all over the land. Managing everything will be hard, but I'm sure the two of us can do it!"

"Enofa..."

"And besides, just clinging to life was the most we could do until now. So now that we have something we both aspire to...I think we should do it. We can make our place in the world, with our own hands! Between the two of us, there's nothing we can't do!"

"Yeah... You're right!"

The path the two of them chose could very well be a harsh, tumultuous one. But they'd walked down hard roads together before. So they'd be fine.

The trek to De Lulua would take them two weeks, but their stride felt lighter and quicker than ever before.

♣Can Never Let Your Guard Down

A month had gone by since Pops passed away. I...well, I knew the day would come. His illness was getting worse, and he was getting up there in years. While Tinaris was able to help with his medication, there was no cure. After we gave him a simple cremation and held a memorial service, I regained my composure more or less.

The girl I'd adopted that day, Tinaris, turned five and was growing all too quickly. And today, she'd made a *lot* of manure and showed it off to me.

"I made a new kind of manure!" she proudly announced.

"Thanks. Look at this, Tina. I used the manure you made last time, and the poteitos are already ready for harvest!"

"W-Wow! Already?! The manure really *is* good quality!"

"Yeah. Let's try it again."

"Yeah!"

Last year, Tina learned alchemy to create a medicine that would ease Pops' disease. Ever since, she'd started making not just medicine but also seasonings for food, fertilizer for the fields, soap for laundry and dishes, and whetstones to improve the farming equipment. It all made life that much easier for us. We could well have reached De Marl's standard of living.

Perishable products and ingredients like pepper weren't available in the area, and we could only restock when a merchant caravan passed by... But still, the way things were going, Tina and I were, by and large, self-sufficient.

"Hm," I hummed as I looked at Tina, who looked back at me questioningly.

She really has grown. And we needed to restock on perishables...like black pepper and some seasonings. We were also short on alcohol, oil, seeds, flour... and clothes. It was about time I got Tina some new threads.

"Say, Tina." I squatted down to look her in the eye. "Aren't those clothes

getting too small for you? Why don't we head out to Fei Lu tomorrow and buy you some new ones?"

It would take five days to get to Fei Lu by horse. We'd have to camp out. That meant the inn would have to close for a while, and we'd need to make some preparations, but not much could be done about that.

"Besides, you've got a stock of all those tonics you made. Why don't we sell them for some coin?"

"O-Oh! Good idea!"

...That's what got your attention?

With some mixed feelings as a father, I set about finishing what farming still needed to be done before we left.



THE following day, I hitched the wagon to Judie and loaded it with camping equipment. I put up the "Closed For Errands" sign on the inn's door and took all the valuables and money with us, so there'd be nothing to steal.

While buying Tina clothes is important, maybe I should also buy her a horse. It won't be cheap, but two horses means we could carry that much more.

As I contemplated things on the road, we reached the trade country of Fei Lu within five days.

"Woooow... It's gotten even bigger than last time!" Tina exclaimed upon seeing the streets.

"Yeah, it has."

Fei Lu was the closest country to the demi-human continent and a center of trade and commerce. This was also where our family doctor, Doctor Rob, ran his clinic, so we came to Fei Lu quite often. But we were always surprised to see how their territory seemed to grow every time we came.

And it's been two years for Tina... Hm?

"I'm surprised you remember what this place looked like two years ago. You were only three at the time," I said.

"Huh?! Ah, r-really? W-Well, Fei Lu's gotten so much bigger that even I can remember how much smaller it was before!"

"Mm. I suppose?"

I always thought it's hard to remember things when you're young, but Tina probably had a good memory. Which reminded me...that shifty old adventurer recommended I send Tina to study in Saikorea or the Elven Empire of Forestria. Moving to either place was an option.

Recalling that comment made me think back on the couple who got married at our inn not too long ago—Roin and Enofa. I could have left the inn in their hands. He was interested in running an inn, so I could've left the Rofola Lodge to him for a while until Tina finished her studies and decided on her future.

Well, if fate would have it, they might come to visit again someday. If Tina hadn't decided on her future by then, we could discuss it some more.

But what mattered at present was our business in Fei Lu. The customs inspection wasn't too much of a hassle. There were only traveling merchants and vagabonds in line this time, so we got in pretty smoothly.

Fei Lu had many houses under construction, so unlike De Marl, it wasn't surrounded by tall walls. This country had knights to protect it, of course, but I had to wonder if there were enough of them to go around. I relied on Fei Lu a lot for supplies, so I hoped the country would stay safe in the face of bandit attacks.

Judie suddenly neighed nervously as we entered the inspection post.

"What's wrong, girl?" I asked.

The horse pounded her front hooves against the ground anxiously, shook her head, and snorted.

"What's the matter, Judie?" Tina asked, looking at the horse with concern.

We stroked her neck soothingly, which did calm her, but... I drew my sword with my left hand and looked around. But the only people in sight were just merchants and travelers.

"...All right. Let's start by buying a new horse," I told Tina upon confirming

everything seemed safe.

"Huh? But I thought we were going to sell the tonics..."

"We will, later. But first, we gotta find the right horse... If we don't find a good horse right away, we'll need to make a few trips to the stable."

"But why do we need to buy a horse all of a sudden? We have Judie..."

"Well, once you get older, Judie won't be able to support both of us. And we'll have a lot of things to bring back too, so we may as well get another horse now."

"Okay..?"

Tina still didn't seem to understand what I meant. But either way, I decided we should hurry. We had a lot to buy, after all.

Our first stop was the ranch. There were a few large stables in Fei Lu's west end, and while they mostly dealt with husbandry and dairy products, there were a few that sold horses as well. I'd bought a few horses there in the past.

Judie was a military horse bred in De Marl and was one of the farewell gifts I'd received when I left the knighthood. She was a proud horse who wasn't attached to anyone else, so they might've decided to pawn her off on me since she was too much of a pain for them to handle...

To that end, she was a proud girl with a bit of a wild, stubborn streak. But, to put it another way, she was earnest and dependable. *If only Kelt, my ex-wife, was as tolerant as Judie, I'd have been much better off... But no. It was my fault for neglecting Kelt. She didn't do anything wrong. Trying to shift the blame to her would be wrong of me.*

"Wow, look at all these horses!" Tina exclaimed as we approached the stables, her eyes shining with excitement.

"Just don't get lost; we have a lot of places to go today."

"I know!"

As we stopped near the ranch, I got the feeling Judie was eyeing me funny. I explained that this wasn't cheating—that we were looking for a younger brother or sister. *Tina's gonna need a horse sooner or later.* Thankfully, Judie

was smart and snorted as if to show she understood. *Good girl.*

I called for the rancher and told him our business, after which he graciously offered Judie some water and hay.

The horse we'd find would have to get along well with Judie and suit Tina too.

"Oh, Sir Marcus. It's been too long," a familiar face greeted me.

It was Goyu, the father of one of my subordinate knights from my time in De Marl, a young man called Ayuu. Goyu was apparently running the ranch.

"Oh, Goyu? You moved to Fei Lu?"

"Yes, my son injured his knee in a battle five years ago... The whole family resigned from the knighthood and we moved here to help our relatives with their ranch."

"Oh... So Ayuu injured his knee, huh..."

I let Judie inside the ranch and tied her up. We were outsiders, after all, so I couldn't let her roam freely. The area was fenced off, so the ranch's horses couldn't come here either.

Goyu explained the process to me. I'd bring potential horses here and check if they got along with Judie first. Then I'd make sure they were a good match for Tina.

Goyu used to run a ranch back in De Marl, and when they moved to Fei Lu, they took all their horses with them. Impressive.

"Five years, eh...? Was it during the Jiera Defensive Campaign?"

"No... It was a monster."

"I see..."

A monster. Those showed up every now and then, and dispatching them was part of the knights' duties.

So that's what happened to him...

"It's a good thing he came back. He's a proud, lofty knight."

"...Thank you kindly. To have the former vice-captain of the Azure Knights

speak so kindly of him... I'm sure my son will be overjoyed. Would you mind coming to visit him...?"

"Oh, ah, first I need to get a horse. My daughter should be coming back any minute now..."

"Your daughter? Oh dear! Should I help you look for her? Things have been getting dangerous around these parts as of late."

"Mm? What do you mean?"

What he said set off alarm bells in my head. Perhaps it was my discarded knight's intuition. "*Things have been dangerous,*" he said...

"Oh, haven't you heard? There have been slavers going around Fei Lu."

"Slavers?!"

"Fei Lu's been growing exponentially, so there aren't enough knights to cover all our territory. There have been demi-humans touring the land too. That makes this place a perfect hunting ground for slavers."

"...Could you come help me look for her?" I asked, feeling a black emotion brewing in the pit of my stomach.

"Yes, of course. Let me come along. This is my ranch after all."

"Thank you."

Tina's eyes were red and the fringes of her golden hair were tinted red too. She looked unique enough to draw attention. And putting aside my parental bias, her facial features were fair. She was a pretty little girl. Slavers aside, a strange man might approach her with vile intentions.

I told Judie I'd be back soon and walked outside the ranch's outer fence with Goyu.

"Heeeeey, Tinaaaa! Can you hear me?! Come here!"

She was a bright girl, so I assumed she wouldn't go too far. And she was cautious, so she wouldn't follow a stranger. But...

"Mm?" Goyu hummed suspiciously, holding up a hand to block the sunlight.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"That man over there seems off," he said, squinting at a figure not far from us. "First time I've seen him around here. Is he a customer...?"

I was surprised he could see the man with the sun in his eyes. It was a young man. He had black hair and eyes and was scratching his head with a peeved expression. But he was waving his other hand as if signaling to us...

This is fishy.

"Excuse me, are you from around here?" he asked, approaching us. "Could I ask you for directions?"

"No... Sorry, I'm looking for my daughter. She got lost while checking out the horses. We're looking for her."

"Sorry, I haven't seen any kids..." The man then gasped as if recalling something and pointed to the right. "Oh, actually, I saw a girl playing in the flower field over there."

The man had a flippant face and was dressed far too lightly to not live in the area. *But he asked us for directions?*

I drew my sword with my left hand. Goyu looked shocked at my sudden movement.

"Agh!" The man staggered a couple of steps back, his slender eyes wide with surprise.

Interesting. A bit too late though.

"Marcus, what are you doing?!" Goyu asked me.

"Where are your friends?" I asked coldly.

"H-Huh? Wh-What are you talking about?" the man stammered. "I just got lost and—"

"No matter how bad you were with directions, no one would point at a sign that says 'To the mountains' and tell us there's a flower field over there."

"...W-Well, I came down from the mountain, and like I told you, I'm a little lost, so..."

"If you're gonna lie, you could do a better job. You went mountain climbing

when you're dressed that light? The only mountain near Lei Fu is Mount Jiel. It's the furthest edge of the continent, where the demi-humans used to live. There ain't no flower fields up there. I can tell you that because I scaled this mountain once. So stop lying to my face and answer the question, you petty charlatan!"

"Nngh!" The man swallowed nervously as I held my sword to his throat.

He raised both hands in the air and took a step back. I carefully closed the distance, taking a cautious step forward. This way, I wouldn't tear into his throat immediately...

"You're one of them, right? You're working with those slavers. You stand around, waiting for concerned parents to pop up and point them in the wrong direction to buy time. Oh, yeah, I know all about people like you. Takes me back, really. You must be working for Zabudo. Am I right? I see that piece of shit is still pulling these operations. Really, they should have been beheaded by now..."

"How...?!"

"Oh, yeah. See, despite appearances, I'm a former knight. Happened to spend a few of my campaigns chasing your boss around. Always managed to find a way to avoid the gallows, that one..."

"...Kuh..."

The anger I felt back then bubbled up within me again. Zabudo was a fairly famous slaver in this region. Edesa Kura was the only country that still encouraged slavery, so Zabudo's outfit was operating as their underling. Even I thought they'd have been better off washing their hands of this disgusting business if no one else was willing to deal with them anymore...

But that was only part of why I felt so angry about this. I spent a lot of time as a young knight going after Zabudo. I was an up-and-coming knight. Since it meant going up against humans who were mostly untrained in combat, it was considered a beginner's job. And it was nasty work too, so it was hoisted off on beginners like me.

I took on that task to see if I could make it as a knight. And at the time, I lacked the skill to finish the job. But the war had escalated, and I didn't have the

leisure to chase Zabudo any longer.

That was a stroke of good luck for them. And while I knew that, I had to opt-out of the pursuit. Part of it was because I was ordered to do so, but I couldn't deny that I was hungry for glory and wanted to fight on the frontlines. *Someone else would catch them*, I told myself.

"And that was a mistake."

The man glared at me wordlessly.

"I should have caught that bastard and killed them while I was still charged to do so."

"Urgh... Agh..." The man before me started panting and sweating.

Had I killed Zabudo back then, it wouldn't have come back to bite me decades later. Tina wouldn't have been in danger today.

"F-Fine, I'll talk!" The man gave in, overwhelmed by my anger and the sword held to his neck. "I'll talk, so don't kill me!"

Oh, that's no good. Was my bloodlust too strong...?

This man was young. Probably a green underling. The role of distracting the pursuers was the easiest and safest one. He was likely a new hire for the slavers. I almost felt bad for him as he squatted down crying, his hands still desperately held up in the air. I wasn't bent on killing this guy, but I looked at him with a cold, menacing smile nonetheless.

"You better be honest, pal. If you're not, I'll start cutting things off, little by little. Starting with your legs."

"D-Don't worry! I won't lie!"

"Sorry, Goyu, but could you call Fei Lu's knights over? We need a few more hands on deck here."

"U-Understood!" Goyu said and ran off to get the knights.

"Well?" I returned my glance to the man, smiling at him.

The man brought his hands together and spilled the beans. By the time he finished, Ayuu, Goyu's son, had shown up.

"Marcus, sir!"

"Hey, Ayuu. It's been years. Good timing. Can you take care of him?"

"Let me come with you," Ayuu insisted.

"No, having everyone come with me will be trouble. The slavers are planning a diversion in another ranch nearby too. Tell the knights the slavers should have reinforcements 'near the sea.' Assuming they're not dumb, they'll know what to do."

"Ah...! Understood..."

Ooh. You really are a citizen of Fei Lu by now, aren't you? And you understood what a former knight like me was hinting at. It'd be a shame to see your talents go to waste...

Back when Ayuu was part of the Crimson Knights, he would always do the running, but with his knee being permanently damaged, he couldn't move as quickly as he used to. I felt it was a shame he wasn't willing to work as a knight just because he was frustrated with his leg.

Not that I doubted his injury, of course, but at least he wasn't in my shoes. He still had all his limbs... He could at least work on training young knights for Fei Lu. In my case, De Marl's knights insisted on inviting me to be an instructor at the knights' academy, but I turned them down.

I had to look after Tina. That was part of why I left De Marl and went back to Rofola. The other reason was that I wanted to take care of Ma and Pops, repay them for everything they did for me... But it was too late for that now. I hoped that my presence with them in their last few years on this planet meant something at least.

"Now, then."

Sheathing my sword, I headed down the hill. There were a few ranches built close together in this area, and newcomers could easily get lost. This was especially true for people with children. People who visited the farms didn't just come to look at the animals, but also to watch cows being milked.

This meant there was a crowd in a large area that was easy to get lost in. And

it was easy to get away with snatched children undetected, as there were plenty of barns and warehouses to hide them. It looked like a safe place, but it was actually a perfect hunting ground for slavers.

They would take children and demi-humans abducted from across Fei Lu to the shore along the shortest route possible, loading them onto ships bound for Edesa Kura.

It was a simple operation, really. The only countries situated along the shores of the human continent were Fei Lu and Edesa Kura. But that also meant exposing their route was terribly easy.

I got off the road and headed in the direction of the sea. The scent of saltwater gradually became stronger. I entered a small forest, sheltered from the sea breeze, and there, I found a warehouse, hidden a short distance from the ranches.

I crouched as I confirmed the road to the warehouse and my eyes widened in surprise.

Seriously...?!

“It’s this way. But you really are one amazing kid. Not everyone can use alchemy. You truly are a huge help. Medium-grade tonics are expensive.”

“Oh, not at all! I’m just glad you called out to me before I sold it.”

Walking on the road was a middle-aged lady with her reddish-brown hair tied up in a bun and none other than my little girl, Tina. The lady was dressed in an apron and pulled Tina by the arm, leading her to the warehouse. I loudly got to my feet, intentionally making noise to draw their attention.

“Oh, there you are, Tina,” I said, feigning ignorance.

“Oh, Dad! Where did you come from?”

“Oh, is *that* your father? Good day, sir. I work at one of the ranches around here, and some of our cows got into a fight and were hurt this morning. This girl said she had some tonic on hand... My apologies. I shouldn’t have taken her without asking for permission!”

She was quick to shift gears and come up with a story. *Nothing like that*

amateur from earlier.

"That right? Then why don't you give her one, Tina?"

"Huh...?" Tina looked taken aback for a second but came around to my suggestion. "All right...?"

"Anyway, come on, we need to check out the horses. Could you show me the way back?"

Confirming the lady let go of her hand, I wrapped my left arm around Tina.

"Huh... Whoa!" Tina exclaimed as I picked her up.

My right arm was a prosthetic and couldn't hold a sword. I was a bit disappointed I couldn't cut that old woman's head off where she stood, but that wasn't something I could do in front of Tina anyway.

A child shouldn't have to see that kind of bloodshed.

Consider yourself lucky. You got away with your head again, old lady Zabudo.

"Here you are, ma'am..."

"Thank you, dearie. You're a big help."

"Take care, you old bat," I said coldly.

"Yes. I could say the same to you, petulant child." She regarded me with a thin smirk.

She figured out I was the knight who hunted her down all those years.

A real villain if ever there was one...

I turned my back on her and walked off, heading down the road leading back to the ranches. Tina shuddered a bit as I carried her and asked if I knew that lady.

"Yeah. She and I, we...we used to play tag. A long, long time ago."

"Tag?"

"Yeah. You'd be surprised how fast she could run. She was pretty too. Well, back then, when she was younger... Used it to pull the wool over my eyes a time or two, I'll admit. Eventually, I gave up on chasing her. Figured this woman

might be a bit too much for me.”

“...Mmmm?” she hummed, eyeing me suspiciously.

Apparently, Tina had gotten the wrong idea about us, but... While I didn’t like her being suspicious of *that*, it was better than her knowing the truth. But Tina didn’t pursue the matter, so I simply chuckled.

As I walked off with Tina, I hoisted her onto my shoulders. I imagined it’d probably be more comfortable than being carried, given I only had one arm.



"Ugh... You're too tall, so let me down!" she started to fuss.

"Oh...? You're bad with heights?"

"I-I'm scared, so...I can walk on my own!"

"Aww..." I let out a heartbroken moan.

She doesn't like it that much?!

I let Tina back down on the ground. Just then, I noticed Fei Lu's knights heading into the forest. The hag probably ran after she saw my face. Would Fei Lu's knights successfully seize control of her route?

That depends on how skilled this country's knights are, I suppose... A smart commander would probably split up their forces to beat them to the punch.

Still, I got the feeling that crafty crone would find a way out of that bind as well. She might have been old, but they didn't call her the Queen of Slavers for nothing. It felt like an odd thing to be confident about, but I knew she'd find a way to shake them off.

Just let death claim you already and leave us in peace... I thought bitterly.

"Sir Marcus!" Goyu hurried over to us.

"Oh, hey there, Goyu. Could you help me find a horse for my little girl? Tina, this here is Goyu. He works at the ranch."

"Huh?!" Goyu looked surprised at how calm I was, given what had happened not an hour ago. "Um..."

"Hello there," Tina greeted him. "Pleased to meet you."

"Ah, yes! Hello to you too!" Goyu nodded precariously. "Let's find you a good horse, shall we...? Come over here..."

He calmed down once he saw my relaxed demeanor. It made sense he'd be confused. We were looking for Tina just now, so going from that to "Show her a horse" probably put him on the spot.

He introduced us to an excellent male horse, which Judie seemed to gaze at with oddly coquettish eyes.

Cut it out, girl. From his perspective, you're an old hag.

"This one feels right. How much for it?" I asked.

"Well, it's a military steed, so it'd be 52,000 colts..."

"Ooh..."

It's expensive... But it's an animal. And a young male, at that. It's probably cheap for a military steed...

We also needed to look for an inn and go shopping, so I didn't want to squander too much time here. Haggling would take too long, and I had no way of knowing if I'd find a more compatible horse next time.

"Deal," I said, eventually deciding to go for it.

"Thank you. I'll go prepare the saddle and everything else it'll need."

"Aren't those usually sold separately?"

"No, no, I'll throw them in as a freebie. I couldn't bring myself to be a greedy merchant when it comes to you, Sir Marcus."

"You say that, but be too generous, and you'll end up in the red before you know it."

"Don't worry about it. You looked after my son."

"...Goyu, if that's your reason..."

I had to turn his generosity down. Ayuu climbed his way up to the position of officer, but it wasn't because I sponsored him or anything. To begin with, we belonged to knight orders of different colors: I was with the Azure Knights, he with the Crimson Knights. Ayuu became an officer as a result of the efforts he put in.

I didn't help him in particular. His hard work was what earned him his achievements. But just as I was about to refuse, I heard a voice call out to me from behind.

"Sir."

It was Ayuu.

"Oh, you done?" I asked him.

"Yes, we were able to rescue the children from the southwestern warehouse. We rounded up the whole outfit."

"You did?!" I asked, my eyes widening.

The whole outfit? Then...

"You caught Zabudo too?"

"Yes, we have Zabudo in custody."

"Are you kidding?! How did you get your hands on Zabudo?"

"Well, you told us where they'd all be..."

"I... Well, yeah, but... I figured that old hag would run for it. You caught her? Really? What did you tell Lei Fu's knights?"

"...W-Well, I...I told them there was another way to the shore... A route only people familiar with the region know. So I told them to keep people posted there, just in case..."

I was struck speechless but then started laughing in surprised joy.

"Really now! You're incredible, Ayuu! That crone's given me the slip every single time, and you just caught her! Ahahahaha!"

I started laughing and slapping Ayuu on the back.

"Huh? Huh?!" He was confused by my praise.

This guy's amazing!

After taking a minute to laugh with relief and joy, I turned to face Goyu and Ayuu, who both looked at me in surprise.

"Ayuu, you should join Lei Fu's knights. You can command even with a bad knee, right? Seeing you this time convinced me. You can still do this."

Ayuu's face filled with emotion. "I... Thank you so much, sir! But my knee always feels off. I really don't think I could work as a knight with my knee like this..."

"I understand, but letting you just fester here would be a waste... Oh, right.

Tinaaa!"

"...Yes?"

I brought them over to Tina, who was with Judie a short distance away. I had her hand over a middle-grade tonic. It wouldn't heal an old injury, but...

"If you ask the knights, they could supply you with medium-grade tonics as part of your salary. Drink it every now and then, and it should mitigate the pain better than a low-grade one."

"B-But medium-grade tonics are expensive... And, wait. This tonic, it's perfect quality!" he exclaimed, using his own Appraisal skill.

"My little girl here can use alchemy. If you drink some of her recent tonics, their quality should be high. With that quality, they should be as potent as a standard high-grade tonic. If your only problem is pain, it ought to fix that."

"Sir Marcus...!"

Completely healing the injury will require him to drink high-grade tonics over an extended period, which is a very expensive treatment. But medium-grade ones should be more than enough to get rid of the constant pain.

"Well, it'll still probably ache on rainy days. Not much to be done about that... Have you had a doctor check you?"

"Well, no. We don't exactly have much money..." Ayuu muttered uncomfortably.

"Mister, where does it hurt?" Tina asked.

"Should be around the knee," I answered for him.

"Mm. You can have these then!" Tina said, taking out two medium-grade tonics.

Generous of you.

"Are those medium-grade tonics...?! And they're all perfect quality! Just one could sell for 5,000 colts! I can't afford this!"

"Oh, their value went up by that much?" I asked.

"Yes! The Lizardmen from the demi-human continent are in the middle of

some kind of infighting, which made the cost of tonics spike for us. I'm pretty sure you could find vendors that would give almost 10,000 colts a bottle for perfect quality tonics..."

Apparently, we came at a good time. Fei Lu relies on the demi-human continent for their medicine supply, and the price has gone up. We'll be able to sell Tina's medicine for more than I initially thought.

"Well, let's just say that'll be our payment for the saddle, bit, and the reins. Right, Tina?"

"Hm? Oh, yes! That's right!"

Goyu and Ayuu were still unconvinced. This wasn't enough. I decided to just insist that Ayuu drink it instead of selling it and asked where we could find a good inn. They quickly pointed us in the direction of a nice place in the western part of town.

With this, we had a new horse. And since the cost of medicine had gone up, we could afford to bring a lot of wheat back with us.

Once we got to the inn, I hung up my coat and sat down to relax. Tina was glued to the window, her gaze fixed on the view outside.

Guess she can be childlike sometimes too...

"We'll sell the tonics tomorrow, Tina, but let's start by getting you some new clothes."

"Oh, all right. *Hmm*, Dad, actually there's something I'd like to ask for..."

"Oh?"

It wasn't often Tina asked me for something. I walked up to her, only to find her face was kind of flushed. Was she sick? Or maybe being around people all day made her a bit dizzy?

"You probably know this, but my clothes are getting kind of tight..."

"*Mm?* Yeah, I figured. That's why we're going tomorrow..."

"Could you let me pick my...u-u-u-underwear by myself? Please?"

"Of course you can."

"A-Aah... Th-Thank you, Dad," she muttered, sighing with relief.

I, on the other hand, stood frozen for a moment. My thoughts ground to a momentary halt. *Underwear, eh? Right... Yeah, that makes sense. Of course, she'd be nervous about that. I, however, hadn't considered it at all. But yes, it made perfect sense.*

Once Tina gets old enough, she'll need to get a brassiere...and she'll probably say, "I'll handle the laundry, so go away, Dad!" even louder than she already does... Yeah...

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"Nothing. Let's go to bed."

"Okay...?"

My little girl really is growing up too fast...

♣Me at Age Six

A year and a few months went by, and I turned six years old. I became capable of more tasks and was allowed to do more without supervision. I started brewing not just low-grade but medium-grade tonics regularly, and I also started helping out with the cooking. Honestly speaking, I was already better than Dad was!

And also...

“Tina, time to go back.”

“Okay!”

I rose to my feet, the bouquet of flowers in my hands releasing petals into the wind. We were in front of a few graves, fashioned from circular tree stumps. There were names etched on the wood. The one in the middle was Grandma, on the right was Dad’s brother, and the left one was Grandpa, who passed away last year.

His death was probably unavoidable. He was already sick, and there was no curing his condition. The powder medicine I made could only alleviate his symptoms. The saving grace was that he passed away painlessly... *I’ll never forget how Dad patted me on the head, looking at Grandpa’s serene face with kind eyes...*

I had to wonder, where do people go when they die in this world? Do they simply reincarnate, like I did, with their memories intact?

So, if we meet again, will I be older than them this time? Grandma, Grandpa...

“That’s Giyaga’s caravan.”

“Oh, it really is.”

We spotted a row of large wagons rolling along the highway. Drawn on the wagons’ canopies was the mark of the chimera, a Mythical Beast. Apparently, Mister Giyaga was a merchant who was saved in his youth by a chimera. Of

course, it might have just been a story he cooked up to help sell his wares...

Mister Giyaga was a fan of the Rofola Lodge and a regular patron of ours. He traveled to Fei Lu, and sometimes even went as far as the demi-human continent to restock, then sold his wares in De Marl's markets. He would also occasionally stop at a roadside inn and offer his services to traveling adventurers.

He looked like someone who might run a circus troupe, but he was actually a very nice man and a serious merchant.

"Oh! Marcus. I've got a real nice treat for you this time," Mister Giyaga greeted Dad.

"Hey. Thanks. Kinda feel bad about you giving us all these freebies."

Since he was a regular patron at the Rofola Lodge, Mister Giyaga often brought Dad little presents from his travels. He had a long nose, like Pinocchio's, that always pointed up at the sky, and a self-satisfied smile. His gifts were usually on the strange side, but today, he seemed particularly smug and confident.

"Hello? Mm...? Hey, we're here," he called to something in the carriage. "What's with that scary face? Huh? Timing...? Ah, fine... Sorry, the special treat still needs time to collect itself before it comes out."

"What are you talking about?" Dad asked Giyaga.

"Well, it'll come out later. Forget that, though! How're you doing, Tinaris? I got you a present too! Look at this."

"I-Is that...?!" My eyes widened at the gift he showed me.

It was a small bottle full of tiny, colorful balls. But besides that, he had a fine, purplish powder!

"Are those Murder Moth scales?!" I asked him excitedly.

"Uh? Why does this powder have such a dangerous name?" Dad asked aghast.

"Huh, so you care about that more than the gumdrops, do you? I see..." Giyaga seemed a bit disappointed.

"I mean, the powder's so much rarer!" I told him. "It's actually amazing; it's used to make a perfect, supreme antidote!"

"A supreme antidote? Really?" Dad sounded surprised.

Mister Giyaga still looked heartbroken though. I wasn't sure why. It made sense Dad wouldn't get it, since he didn't know much about alchemy anyway. But as Dad and Mister Giyaga gave me little presents like this, I'd look them up in the alchemy manuals... And before I knew it, I'd become really knowledgeable about alchemical ingredients!

Or, well... I was about average compared to other alchemists. That's how I felt. It wasn't really my fault, since I was self-taught. If I wanted to seriously study alchemy, I'd need to go to a dedicated school in one of the countries.

And honestly, I wasn't so keen on learning that I'd throw everything away to go study. So, for now, I was just polishing up on what I could. And learning how to make things we didn't have using alchemy was pure fun!

"Murder Moths are an unusual breed of moth that inhabits the massive tree forest in the east," Mister Giyaga explained. "They're about as big as a person's head, and they kill people by sitting on their faces and suffocating them."

"Well, damn. I can see why they call 'em that," Dad muttered.

"I brought over a few other things I figured Tinaris might want. Deadly Scorpion stingers, Venom Lizard claws, and Toxic Serpent's fangs," he said, smiling at me.

"She's six; why do all the gifts you give her have toxic names?!" Dad groaned.

"Yay!" I cheered.

"You're happy about these things?!"

"It's because they're all ingredients for the supreme antidote! I'll run over and start making it!"

"D-Don't do it inside the house! Are these things safe?!"

"It's fine! You're supposed to put them in the pot with their bottles!"

"With their bottles?!"

The recipe book did recommend making antidotes in places with good ventilation. To that end, I would need to take the gifts Mister Giyaga brought me last year—a pot and staff made specifically for alchemy purposes—and work my magic near the lake instead of inside.

Mister Giyaga probably brought those ingredients specifically so I could make the antidote, and he could buy it off me. I'll get to it as soon as we finish here!

"And I bought her these gumdrops from the demi-human continent... They're all the rage there too. But Tinaris is more interested in alchemy ingredients, huh..." Mister Giyaga sighed sadly.

"Thanks for playing along with her hobbies, Giyaga," Dad told him. "But half the reason you did this was so you could have her make tonics and then buy it off her, right?"

"Well, I *am* a merchant... But being a fan of this little girl is hard on the heart. Gives me such mixed feelings, I suppose. I'd just like to see her get happy about candy or clothes or cute accessories too. I mean, she's getting to *that* age... So I've got some special things set aside for her."

"Giyaga...!" Dad shouted.

Mm? What's that treasure box Mister Giyaga's got over there...? Does he need to carry it into one of the cottages? Dad probably shouldn't carry that. Should I help them?

"Dad, I can help you carry that if you want!"

"Ah! No, no, don't worry about it!"

"Huh, but..." I started to say when a loud voice suddenly interrupted me.

"Daddy?!"

"Huh?"

A loud sound came out of a nearby carriage, and a pair of blue eyes locked on to us from inside.

Huh? What?

"Daddy?! What's going on here?!" the voice from the carriage asked in an

accusatory tone.

“Wait, what?!” I asked.

“N-Nakona?!”

“Whaaaat?!” I asked again, louder.

A girl jumped out of the carriage with a loud thud. She had pink hair tied in a braid on the left side. She looked about ten years old.

“*Daddy!* I asked you what’s going on here! Answer me!” the girl demanded.

“Huh, wait, ah! N-Nakona, why are *you* here?!”

“Forget that, *Daddy!* That girl just called you ‘Dad!’” she accused, pointing at me. “What does that mean?! You’re *my* Daddy, right?!”

An awkward silence hung over us for a few moments.



"E-Er..." Mister Giyaga stuttered.

The girl drew on Dad, who was flustered and out of sorts. Mister Giyaga was perplexed by this development, while I was just plain confused.

"N-Now wait, wait just a minute, Nakona. I can explain this, but before that, tell me what you're doing in Giyaga's carriage. Aren't you supposed to be with your mother in De Marl...?"

"Don't dodge the question!" the girl, Nakona, snapped at him.

"Fine, fine... She's my adopted child, I suppose. I found her abandoned in the forest, and figured that if I left her there, some animal would eat her. So, I took her in... *Er*, it all happened after your mother and I split up..."

"Dad, you were married?!" I asked him, appalled.

"Ah, yeah... I was too caught up with work, and one day, she just left me a divorce letter and disappeared..." he said, a forced smile on his lips.

"Oh..." I said, full of guilt.

I'd only heard that Dad was a knight before he picked me up... But Dad was old enough to be married and have children.

Ooh... Really... So, Dad was...married before, huh... So, this girl is...Dad's real, blood-related daughter...?

SERIOUSLY?!

"An adopted child!" Nakona said excitedly. "So you didn't remarry, right, Daddy?!"

"Well... No, I didn't..."

"Then... Well... But..." Nakona frowned, unsure whether she was satisfied with that answer or not.

What are we supposed to do about her...? I didn't know Dad was divorced and already had a kid...

I moved through life without thinking too deeply about it, but Dad had had a whole life of his own before meeting me. He had an impressive job as a knight and only inherited the inn after losing his arm in battle. He told me that simple

explanation, and I just went with it, but a person's life can't be summed up that neatly.

For example, in my past life, Mom's husband...my dad from my past life... passed away from an illness. It was during my sensitive teen years, and, at the time, the entire situation was crippling. When he was told he only had a few months left to live, something about him changed.

He stopped caring about Mom and me and threw himself into a life of gambling, cabarets, smoking, and drinking...and he started beating Mom too. He fell into complete despair and self-abandonment and devolved into the scum of the earth.

Mom still earnestly thought of him as her husband and tried to get him to receive treatment, but it wasn't long before the disease claimed him.

Looking back on it, I felt like I could understand some sliver of how he felt. Wanting to live freely, as you wish, with what little time you have left... I could understand how that felt. That wasn't wrong in and of itself. But...being such a burden on his family, hurting us like that, it was selfish and laid out the rottenness of his soul to all who saw him.

I could hear some voice telling me that it was a family's job to forgive things like that. And maybe that was right... Honestly, him being a burden on us didn't matter all that much! But I felt like I had to ask:

How could you give up on your life like that...?

We'd be left behind after you're gone. We'd still have to live on after you're dead... Why didn't you think of us...?

...To that end, I hated you, Dad. You shattered my ability to believe in people.

I suddenly felt a pair of pretty, cobalt blue eyes fix on me. The girl, Nakona, was glaring at me.

"Ah...! E-Erm, I..." I looked up at Dad for help.

Dad simply looked back at me, confused, his eyes the same color as the girl's. *I thought her eyes looked familiar.* It was because they were the same as Dad's.

Dad... Dad, huh...?

"E-Erm... I'm Tinaris..." I introduced myself.

"This is *my* Daddy!" Nakona cut me off aggressively.

"Oh..."

"N-Nakona?!" Dad looked at her, surprised. "Listen, Tina is..."

"I'm not giving him to you!" She clung to Dad's knee.

"Nakona!"

Wh-What am I...supposed to do about her...? I hung my aching head.

She was right, and I...I also felt like I couldn't trust father figures. *Marcus* was a nice, kind man, but he wasn't my *real* father. But he did raise me... And at the same time, he *was* her blood-related father...

What do I...?

"...F-For now, how about we continue this talk inside?" Mister Giyaga suddenly suggested.

Another silence settled over us. No one objected.

Mister Giyaga's caravan consisted of three large wagons, carrying twelve subordinates. They were divided into teams of three, consisting of an appraisal merchant whose job was to handle restocking, a silver-tongued salesperson who also knew all the trade routes, and a bodyguard.

Each group was in charge of different types of merchandise. Weapons and weapon-making materials, alchemy and medicinal ingredients, clothing, accessories and jewels, foodstuffs, curios... It was quite effective, and the groups were well sorted out.

A heavy silence loomed over our inn's first floor, where our reception counter and coffee corner were. I tried making the supreme antidote but couldn't concentrate on it with the pink-haired girl glaring at Dad and me in the room.

"H-How about I introduce you two, Tina?" Dad suggested.

"O-Okay..." I nodded vaguely.

"This is Nakona, my daughter from my ex-wife. She's, *uhh*, ten years old right about now...?"

"Eleven!" Nakona corrected him sharply.

"E-Eleven years old. Five years your elder, as it goes... Hahaha..."

A difficult age... Especially when it came to how girls treated their fathers. I responded with dry laughter, just like Dad, but Nakona kept frowning at us like a dissatisfied cat.

Oh boy... This is trouble...

"So, uh, Nakona, it's just you, right...? I haven't seen your mother around..."

She stuck to her sour silence.

"Don't make that face and explain yourself. I won't get mad and send you back."

"...Really?"

"Really."

...It made sense. This girl, Nakona, was his daughter. His ex-wife took her when she broke up with Dad. Dad came home to an empty house, a divorce form, and a letter informing him that she was moving back in with her family. Their things were all gone too...

They very much walked out on him, though it's hard to say how much Nakona was on board with the idea. She probably just followed her mother. Maybe she was happy to leave, or maybe her mother dragged her away...

I assumed what she'd say next would answer that question. Dad and I directed slightly nervous gazes at Nakona. *If she came here to meet Dad, doesn't that mean her mother took her away against her will?*

"...Well, you see, Daddy...Mommy got remarried."

Upon hearing those words, Dad looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

Whoa... This girl just dropped that bombshell right off the bat...

Hearing about his wife's remarriage from his daughter... I had to cheer for Dad on the inside. Keep going, Dad! Live on! This talk's just getting started!

"I told her not to... But Mommy said she loves that person! That she already has a baby in her belly!"

Dad's silence was mortifying. He was shivering! His arms were crossed and he was looking up at the ceiling and trembling. I could almost see how fast Dad's mental HP bar was depleting!

Stop it, Nakona! His mental HP is already zeroed out!

"I, uh, I...I see..."

That's all you have to say in this situation?! Dad, you're...you're so strong! You really are a retired knight! Still pushing forward, even when you're on the edge!

"And you know who she's marrying, Daddy?! A knight who used to work with you!" Nakona dealt the finishing blow.

"Gfah!"

D-Daaaaaaaaaaaaaaaad!

"The Captain of the Crimson Knights!" Nakona continued mercilessly.

"Him?!" Dad breathed out, slamming his fist against the table and rising to his feet.

"Dad!"

I didn't know who that was, but Dad was livid. Nakona fanned Dad on further, slamming her hands on the table in imitation and exclaiming, "He's trying to steal Mommy from you!" This prompted Dad to turn toward the table as he got up and whack his forehead hard against it.

It looked like it hurt, but I couldn't blame him. His actual, eleven-year-old daughter just told him someone was "stealing his wife." It had to be a painful thing to hear.

"...I had a feeling that would happen..." Dad said with a heartbroken voice. "They were always close and were extra friendly during parties in the castle... Looking back, Lico used to come to the Azure Knights' barracks, crying about how Rondered wouldn't look at her. She had me and Dir buy her drinks all night, crying about how Rondered wouldn't pay her any attention..."

"Dad..." I said gently.

"Ah...! R-Right, sorry, Tina. Might be too soon for you to hear about things like

that..."

I was an adult on the inside, so I understood. Dad lay face down on the table but raised his head upon hearing my voice and patted me on the head. He looked twenty years older, though...

"...We lived together in a small house, like the one we lived in with you," Nakona said. "I said I was fine living there, but Mommy said she wanted a big house, with servants... So I went with her to that man's house. And my room was really big... But there isn't anyone there. Mommy doesn't talk to me anymore, and she keeps bringing private tutors every day... But I don't want to study! I can't see my friends anymore and I have to eat all alone in my room! I don't want to live like that!"

"Nakona..." Dad said, looking at her pitifully.

"...I hate studying, but...I can tell! I can just tell...Mommy thinks I'm in the way. She has a new man, and that's the only thing on her mind! That's the kind of woman she is!"

Dad looked up at the ceiling again. I could kind of tell what he wanted to say.
Girls can grow up incredibly fast...

"I see. So...Mommy told you to come to me?" he guessed.

"No. I snuck out. I found Mister Giyaga's caravan near town and asked if he could take me to you."

"All right. I'll send her a letter then."

"What? No! If she knows where I am, she might come get me!"

"If you don't want to go back there, you can stay here. If anyone comes to take you, I'll send them away."

"...Daaaaaddy..."

"But we need to tell her where you are. I'm happy you decided to depend on me... So I'll keep you safe. Daddy's on your side, Nakona."

"...Daddy."

I could feel their family bond tightening again from across the table. *Marcus*

really was a nice man. He was trying to be a dad, and I thought it suited him, but...

What is this feeling...?

"Huh... Daddy, what happened to your hand...?" Nakona asked, her eyes widening.

"Ah...! O-Oh... Well, I lost it in the war. That's why I quit being a knight and took over this place. Sorry for not telling you... Are you surprised?"

Nakona didn't know about his missing arm. He might have a prosthetic now, but it was still his right hand—his dominant hand. He tried to pat her head on reflex before remembering his hand was gone. He always patted me with his left, so it never bothered me. He was like that for as long as I knew him.

But Nakona was in shock. I could tell that much from her expression. And it made sense. It was pretty daunting the first time you saw it, and she was only an eleven-year-old girl...

"Well, I guess we're a family of three from now on. Nakona, you're going to have to do your share of the work too! We don't have enough hands on deck as __"

"A family of three?" Nakona repeated, shifting her eyes in my direction. "You mean, *her* too?"

"Huh?"

What is she implying...?

"Of course I do. I mean, she's..."

"Daddy! You're *my* Daddy! You can't be anyone else's Daddy!"

"Nakona, listen, I decided I'm going to take care of her..."

"...What... What are you saying?! Are you going to say you don't need me either, Daddy...?"

"Huh? No, what are you..."

"Daddy, you dumb-dumb!" Nakona ran off in tears.

"Nakonaaaa!" Dad called after her but was cut off by the sound of her

throwing the door open and dashing outside.

It was evening, and almost time for us to prepare dinner. Giyaga's caravan would take care of themselves with the cottages' kitchens, so we only needed to cook for ourselves. And we needed to prepare the baths, so we had to start cooking now if we wanted to make it in time... *Buuuuut...*

"...Dad, you should go after her. I'll make dinner."

"T-Tina..." Dad looked at me awkwardly. "Sorry!"

That girl was emotionally unstable...but I couldn't blame her. Her mother remarried some rich man and got knocked up with his child... The woman she always thought was her mother suddenly became another man's wife and the mother of someone else's child.

Meanwhile, when I looked back on the day I "remembered" my past life, I couldn't help viewing Marcus adopting me as something that sort of happened to someone else. But if I was her age, I wouldn't know how to process any of it. I'd lose my nerves and just run.

But there was also another problem cropping up now...I couldn't trust father figures. *Marcus* was a nice, kind man. I didn't doubt that. But he didn't feel quite like my father. I did call him "Dad," but...I couldn't really get rid of that distance. He wasn't related to me, not really. This whole thing with Nakona only further reminded me of that.

I couldn't help but wonder what would've happened if my Mom from my past life got remarried. *Could I have brought myself to trust whoever she chose? No... I probably would have treated them the same way I treat Marcus. Even if I'd have gotten a new father, I probably would have treated him the same way. Because I...!*

"Hello?" Mister Giyaga's voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

"Whoa!"

Mister Giyaga peeked into the room from the open door. Apparently, we were too loud... I hadn't said much, but Dad and Nakona were shouting.

"H-Hello. Do you need anything?"

"Are you done talking? Because... Oh? Did Marcus go to the toilet or something?"

"Ah, no, Nakona threw a tantrum and ran off, so he went after her..."

"Oh, my." Mister Giyaga frowned. "Well, girls can be difficult when they get to that age..."

"Definitely..."

I couldn't deny that. Not when I just saw how "difficult" she could be before my very eyes.

"But that's going to be a problem..." Mister Giyaga scratched his head. "I wanted him to hear about it as soon as possible."

"Hear about what?"

"Well, you see, there are apparently monsters prowling these parts..."

"M-Monsters?!"

Monsters—creatures that didn't exist in my past life outside of fiction. According to the stories, monsters started appearing after Saint Akari-Berz purified the Primal Sin. As soon as she passed away, the monsters began growing in numbers. When a monster dies, it releases the Kathra—Primal Sin—within its body into the air, forming new monsters.

It was worth noting that Kathra was different from Camilla—the Primal Evil that formed Zombies. Zombies and monsters were technically different types of creatures.

Kathra was a punishment of sorts, enacted by the world on creatures that had committed crimes against it. It was, in a way, a manifestation of the sins they committed. On the other hand, Camilla was an aggregate of malice released by living beings capable of emotion.

Zombies are created when a soulless human body is filled with Camilla produced by humans. If left alone long enough, they can evolve into "human-formed monsters." That's because when left unchecked, Camilla can change into Kathra.

It was hard to grasp all of this at first, but put simply, monsters are created by

sins, while zombies are accidentally created from human malice.

Zombies... Back in my old world, there were stories about human disasters or viruses that produced them. Like a dead baby's grave filling with Camilla, and as it matures, it eventually rises from the grave and starts mutilating cattle and chickens... And when you beat it, it only produces more zombies...!

In fiction, of course. That never happened in real life.

But long story short, monsters were much more dangerous than zombies!

"I think De Marl dispatched knights to exterminate them, but killing the monsters scatters Kathra into the air, which produces more monsters, and I think the knights are really struggling," Mister Giyaga said.

I hung my head, concerned.

"De Marl's knights told me to let you guys know about it. They said you and your guests should avoid going out at night. But Marcus is a former knight, so he probably knows all that."

"Y-Yes..."

Dad and I were often told to stay indoors after sunset. To that end, we couldn't heat any bathwater after dark, but...

Oh no...

"Mister Giyaga, I'm sorry, the baths for the cottages..."

"Huh? Oh, yes. I understand, the monsters make it harder to schedule things... We'll help boil them tomorrow, so if you could at least sell us some firewood?"

"...Yes, of course! I'll have it prepared."

"Aww, you're such a dependable girl, Tinaris. You'll make for a good bride someday..."

"Th-Thank you...?"

I was an adult on the inside, so I was a bit uncomfortable with that comment. *I wonder how old I'll have to be until men stop dropping these kinds of comments. Hopefully, they'll stop once I'm not a little girl anymore.*

But an inn that had its guests heat up their own bathwater... I couldn't help but feel like our inn was doing things the wrong way. And the building was starting to show signs of wear too...

"This place is really starting to show its age, eh..."

"Y-Yes... I'm sorry..."

"No, I mean, I'm not as bothered by it as Marcus is. He's wondering if you'd be better off closing the inn so you can go study in Saikorea."

"Ah...!"

This question had probably been smoldering in Dad's heart this whole time. He wanted to see me make the best of my talents in alchemy... But...

I looked in the mirror near the coffee table. My ears were growing pointy recently, and the fringes of my blond hair were a purplish-red hue. My eyes were crimson.

By comparison, the human customers that came to the inn mostly had brown hair. Bright hair colors like Nakona's weren't that unusual, but... The gradation in my hair and the color of my eyes were something I'd never seen in anyone else. My memory was understandably hazy by now, but I thought the "mother" I saw when I just came to this world had long ears too.

Even if I ignored my hair and eye color, I couldn't ignore the pointed ears. And it felt like they were getting longer every year...

No, I'm just getting older. That's all!

Or so I tried to tell myself, trying not to think too much about it. *But could it be that I'm not...?*

"Tinaris?" Mister Giyaga asked me.

"O-Oh, it's nothing." I shook my head.

"Do you want to study alchemy in Saikorea, Tinaris? I'm sure you can go far!"

"...I want to restore this inn! This is the house Grandma and Grandpa left us, so...!"

...Will that really be possible for me though? If Dad...Marcus chooses Nakona

over me, I won't be able to stay here any longer. And if that happens, I suppose I'd just...make a living selling the medicine I make with alchemy. And Sirius seemed to really like me. He offered me the opportunity to come to the Elven Empire of Forestria to get married, so at worst, I could pretend to take him up on that offer and study magic there.

Then I could go back to the human continent, study alchemy in Saikorea, and maybe open an atelier to make a living for myself... And if Sirius' son is a nice man, maybe marrying him is an option after all...

"You're a good girl!" Mister Giyaga said all of a sudden.

"Pardon?!"

"You're such a good girl, Tinaris! I'm moved!"

"...Y-You're exaggerating..."

"Here's an idea! Why don't you open a pharmacy by the highway?"

"A pharmacy?"

"Yes, yes. You could open a pharmacy and sell the medicine you make. They're high in quality, so you could sell them for a little higher than the market price! That way, you can save up money and hire a carpenter to renovate the inn! I think it's a fine idea!"

"Renovate...!"

Right, that was an option! But...renovate the place? True, it looked old, but the building was still solid and steady. It wasn't like the roof was leaking or anything... If there was anything I'd outright change about it, I'd like to furnish the cottages and baths with a Heatstone.

Tinaris' Note!

Heatstones are a material imported to the human continent from the dwarves' country. Placing this unusual stone in water makes it heat up and boil quickly. When someone with mana touches them, they can boil water in the blink of an eye!

They're supposed to operate on some kind of magic, but even humans can use it. I don't know for sure, though, since I haven't seen one yet!

"By the way, Mister Giyaga, can you get some Heatstones?"

"Heatstones? Ah, for the bath?"

"Yes. With seven Heatstones, we could easily boil the bathwater for both the guests and us."

"I see. Well, we're going to restock in De Marl's market soon, and then we're going to head back to the demi-human continent. We could stop at the dwarves' country... With my merchant's spirit and my love for you, I'll definitely secure seven of them to bring back to you!"

"R-Really? But aren't Heatstones expensive?"

"Fifty thousand colts for seven!"

"What?!"

"Well, fifty thousand if you haggle..."

"F-Fifty...thousand...colts..."

I had no idea how much Heatstones were naturally worth! Fifty thousand sounded about right though.

Don't do anything crazy, Mister Giyaga!

But if he can really get seven of them for just fifty thousand...

"All right. If you're willing to go that far, I'll make sure to save up fifty thousand colts and wait for you."

"Then it's a deal?"

"As an advance, I'll make sure you have ten supreme-grade antidotes by tomorrow!"

"Antidotes? You mean, with the things I brought you today...?!"

"Yes!"

The air between Giyaga and me shivered for a long moment... At least, that's how it felt to me. The door was still wide open.



THE next morning, I woke up in the attic.

Oh yeah, I let Nakona sleep in my room...

I didn't mind. The attic was my second room, in a way. It was where I hid all the things Grandpa and Dad couldn't see, since they didn't suit a little girl. I actually felt more comfortable in the attic.

I slid out of bed, got dressed, and did a few stretches on the attic's balcony. I did my hair, and as I did, I examined myself in the mirror. My ears were definitely getting longer... Much longer than they were when I was younger! I had to wonder if they'd end up being as long and pointy as elf ears. After all, Sirius was a half-elf, and now my ears were about as long as his.

I used hair bands to tie up my hair on the sides. That way, my ears would be hidden, and my hair wouldn't get in the way.

Maybe I can make it into a bob cut and hide my ears that way? No...the wind might ruffle my hair, and they'll be visible... Just growing it out so I can use different hairdos to hide my ears might be simpler. And cuter at that.

I tried not to think about it yesterday, but I really am a little...weird. Blond hair with naturally purplish-red fringes. Crimson eyes. Pointy ears. I always thought I was human, but demi-humans and Mythical Beasts lived in this world. And I faintly remembered the "mother" who gave birth to the current me, and she had elfish ears. And a stone embedded into her forehead too...?

"May the blood of the Stone of Daybreak never come to awaken."

I'd forgotten all about it since I was so occupied with alchemy recently, but I should probably look into it. I want to ask Mister Giyaga, but what if he reacts with, "What?! You know about the Stone of Daybreak?! You're a threat!" and throws me to the wolves...

I got the feeling this stone was related to why I was abandoned in the first place. It could be really dangerous! To that end, I decided to leave the matter be for now and look into it once I was old enough to investigate on my own.

And besides, I had a mountain of problems to resolve already. Now wasn't the time to be caught up in this one!

"...Good morning," I said as I went downstairs.

"Morning, Tina," Dad said. "Sorry about yesterday."

"It's fine. I like being in the attic, anyway."

Dad gazed at me with pitying eyes. I couldn't blame him. His real daughter showed up, throwing tantrums and tears in every direction. Meanwhile, I was being visibly reserved around him. He probably felt bad and apologetic. But really, I didn't mind. Especially when it came to the room.

"The attic's bigger, so it feels like an improvement, really. Actually, do you mind if I make it my permanent room?"

"Tina, listen, you don't have to force yourself..."

"I'm not forcing myself though. I've wanted to set up a medicine cabinet in my room but thought it was getting too cramped. So can I just keep using the attic?"

"...Thank you. I owe you, Tina..."

...You're exaggerating...

"I'll help you make breakfast. Oh, and Giyaga said they'll take a bath in the morning, so they'll need some firewood to boil the water. I'll also be working on the antidote outside today."

"Firewood? Got it... Just be careful with alchemy. I know someone who had their face *blown off* because of an alchemy accident."

"I will!"

Talk about a scary story... I really should be careful...

"...By the way, where's Nakona?"

"Mm? She isn't up yet? What am I going to do with her...?"

"I'll go wake her up," I offered.

"Thanks. Tell her she won't get any breakfast if she doesn't get up."

"Hehe. I will."

Dad's cooking didn't taste that good, but he made food every day, never skipping a meal. In that regard, he...kind of reminded me of my mom from my

past life. She would always cook, no matter how busy she was and despite not being good at it...

The father I knew from back then was the kind of scum that would cast mom and me aside, but Marcus was different. If he was what a father should be, maybe I could stand to trust him a bit more.

Not at once, of course. The image of the father I knew from my past life was too deeply rooted.

I'm feeling really confused now... Maybe I should just straight up start calling him Marcus instead of Dad?

I went up to the second floor, passing by Dad's room and his study to the corner room.

“...Good morning, Nakona. Rise and shine.”

That was where my room was until yesterday. The bed, sofa, and closet were the same as they were before. The books Dad and Mister Giyaga got for me were still sitting on the bookshelf too.

If I was going to change rooms, I didn't mind leaving the furniture behind, but I at least wanted to take my clothes and books back. I did take my clothes for the day when I left yesterday, but most of my things were still in this room. Nakona was older than me though, and wouldn't fit into my clothes, so I assumed she'd hand them over if I asked.

...Wait, did Nakona even have any luggage? Does she have clothes to change into?

My call was met with silence.

“...Hello...?” I knocked and called out to her again.

I could hear her inside, but she didn't respond.

Wait... Is that why...?

“Um, I'm just checking to be sure, but you don't have anything to wear, do you?” I asked.

“...Yeah...” she eventually replied bashfully.

"...Mister Giyaga is here, so we'll buy something you can wear from him. I'll bring you your clothes with your food, okay?"

"...O-Okay."

"What kind of clothes do you want, by the way?"

"Something easy to move in..."

"All right."

I hurried down the staircase and explained the situation to Dad. Apparently, Dad didn't think of that either and heaved a perplexed sigh. He then put Nakona's breakfast on a tray, which I carried up to her.

At worst, she could be naked, so I simply left the tray on the floor in front of the door and called out to her. I then made my way to Mister Giyaga's cottage, where I ran into Mister Drake, one of the caravan's members, doing his morning stretches.

"Good morning, Mister Drake," I greeted him.

"Good morning, Tinaris! Sure is nice out today." He beamed at me.

"Yes, it is... Um, I know this is sudden, but I need to buy some clothes. And, erm, some underwear too..."

"Finally?! Wait here; I'll go tell the boss!"

"Huh? No, not clothes for me...!"

Finally... Finally what?!

"Oh, you mean for the big sister?"

"Big sister?"

"That girl, Nakona. She's Marcus' daughter, so that makes her your big sister, right?"

...Oh. I guess that's not wrong?

"R-Right... Anyway, she needs some clothes. She can't leave her room otherwise."

"The clothes she had on yesterday must have gotten torn or worn out when

she was running away from Marcus... Ahaha! I'll go get her something."

"Th-Thank you... And sorry for bothering you so early in the morning..."

I didn't tell him it was both of those things, if only to protect Nakona's dignity.

After buying Nakona some new clothes, I returned to her room. I carried the empty plate and utensils back to the kitchen and left the new clothes in their place. Then I waited for Dad to come back from delivering the firewood to Mister Giyaga. As soon as he returned, we started eating breakfast.

Halfway through our meal, Nakona came down from the second floor, dressed in her new clothes.

"Morning, Nakona," Dad greeted her with a smile. "Did you thank Tina yet?"

"Ugh..." She fidgeted uncomfortably as she looked at me. "Th-Thanks."

"You're welcome," I said, cracking a slight smile. "Did the clothes fit? Do you like the way they look?"

"Yeah!" She nodded. "They're a perfect fit and easy to move in too! I could beat up a bigbear with these!"

...Huh?

A bigbear... A large, carnivorous creature that inhabited Mount Rofola. It was similar to what I knew of as a bear, except it was twice as large and only subsisted on meat. It was essentially an apex predator.

I only bought you clothes... Not armor...

"Nakona, you do know those are just normal clothes, right...?" I asked her.

"I can't see you beating a bigbear..." Dad agreed with me.

"Dad, that's not what you should be pointing out..."

"Don't worry!" Nakona puffed up her chest. "Back in De Marl, Uncle Gildias taught me martial arts and how to use a sword! I'm actually pretty good at fighting!"

"Gildias did what?!"

...Isn't that the person Dad mentions every now and then when he talks about

his time as a knight? One of his old subordinates, I think...

I suppose he respected Dad so much he decided to look after his daughter...?

"S-Still, bigbears are no good," I told her. "We can't cook them since they tend to taste like the last meal they ate, so we don't hunt them."

"Hm, what can we hunt, then?"

"Boars or bigboars. We can preserve their meat as jerky or dried meat..."

"Then I'll go hunt a boar today! I live here too, so I'll help around the inn!"

"W-Wait!" Dad stopped her. "Look, we do need to restock on pork, but it's too soon for you to go hunting alone! I'm not letting you hunt when you're not familiar with this mountain... If you want to work, you can chop the firewood. We do have the caravan staying here, after all."

"Boo." Nakona huffed grumpily.

"And you be careful with your medicine brewing, Tina," Dad warned me firmly too.

"I will."

I knew to be careful, of course, since I'd be making something new that day. And it mostly used toxic materials, so it required extra caution.

"Medicine brewing?" Nakona cocked her head quizzically.

"Yeah, Tina's all sorts of amazing, Nakona," Dad said boastfully. "You might not believe it, given her age, but she can use alchemy."

"What?!" Nakona exclaimed.

"D-Dad...!"

If you put it like that...!

"H-Hmmm. Really now?" Nakona looked at me with hostile eyes.

She was positively glaring at me. But this time, she didn't shout at me like yesterday—I guess she felt obliged because I helped out with her clothes. She probably had plenty of nasty things to say though.

"W-Well, I can do an eight-punch combo!" she eventually boasted.

"Huh?" I asked, unsure what she meant.

"Oh, really? That's amazing, Nakona!" Dad exclaimed with a grin. "That's my daughter!"

"H-Hmph!" she cooed grumpily.

...I don't get it. Eight-punch combo? Is that a martial arts thing?

I was just happy she didn't blow up at me again. And I didn't want to see the clothes we just bought her get ripped like the ones she had on yesterday. We hadn't even paid for them properly yet.

"Now then..."

Dad said he'd handle cleaning up after breakfast, so I prepared twenty empty medicine bottles and went outside. I stopped under a large tree near the lakefront. Lake Rhiode was the largest lake on the human continent, but... People in this world weren't really interested in sightseeing. It wasn't as large as Lake Biwa in Japan, but it was still big enough that you couldn't see the other bank. It was large enough to fish in too.

But the only thing built around Lake Rhiode was the Rofola Lodge. It was a bit odd, but people in Wisty Air didn't live in villages or towns, but mostly in "countries." Different "countries" were connected by the highways, but the land between the countries and off the roads didn't belong to anyone.

There were long distances to travel between countries, so the land between them was developed, and roadside inns and stores opened. To legally open a business, an establishment needed to receive a permit from at least two countries.

"Let's get started."

So if I were to open a pharmacy between this inn and the highway, I would probably need permits, right...? I'd consult Dad about it when the time came.

For the time being, I'd need to gather funds! Dad wouldn't just kick me out... At least, I didn't think he would... But since I carried the secret of the Stone of Daybreak, a time might come when I would need to live alone. And to that end, I'd need a fortune of my own.

The capacity to live on my own, a job that would enable me to make ends meet... To do that, I would need to start by *geeeently* concocting fifty low-grade tonics!

I didn't have enough of the smaller potion bottles, so I also brought two big jars. These were called Economy Jars—they weren't used by adventurers, but by merchants like Mister Guyaga. They used them when they needed to divide the materials they sell.

Each jar was worth about twenty little bottles. Filling up one of these was much easier than filling up twenty bottles one by one. This was how alchemical apothecaries mass-produced low-grade tonics.

One bottle was worth about two hundred colts, so a jar with twenty bottles worth of tonics was an easy way to make lots of money. Part of me wanted to produce more, but I'd eventually run out of ingredients. And, according to Mister Guyaga, even alchemical apothecaries used to crafting large quantities of medicine can only make one jar a day.

I decided I'd make two jars, and while I used the mana recovery technique, I'd start making the supreme antidote. Yep, the low grade-tonics were essentially me warming up.

"It's ready!"

I poured the prepared tonic into the jars. *Two full jars ready.* Normally, each of these would cost four thousand colts, but since the tonics I made were all of good quality, their cost went up by an extra thirty to even forty colts per bottle. I could sell each jar for about five thousand colts! And two whole jars would be ten thousand colts! That would be enough for Nakona's clothes with some money left over.

"Now for the antidote..."

Its ingredients were spring water, Solan flowers, and the materials Mister Guyaga brought me: Murder Moth scales, Deadly Scorpion stingers, Venom Lizard claws, and Toxic Serpent's fangs. The water I used was from a waterfall on Mount Rofola, which meant it was high quality. I also picked the Solan flowers from the mountain.

Much like making a tonic, the antidote was crafted by mixing the water with the Solan flower and other ingredients and applying mana during the process. After the initial transmutation was complete, the concoction was left to simmer for a while, during which I was to add more mana and stir it.

I felt beads of sweat roll down my forehead. It was harder than I thought and took longer than I expected. I knew I'd walk away from this with my arms sore from all the stirring.

Grr, I gotta finish this, though... I said I'd make it.

I poured the water into the pot and then added the ingredients. As a safety precaution, ingredients with toxic properties were to be inserted and mixed while still in their bottles, with their lids open. You could loosen their lids but never open them completely.

“...Solan flowers, then the scales...and...”

I loosened the lids and dropped them into the pot. Once everything was in, I added my mana slowly and gently, and then it was time to mix!

Churn... Churn... Churn...

If I could make the supreme antidote, it might mean I was good enough to create high-grade tonics. Of course, a medium and high-grade tonic wasn't potent enough to restore Dad's lost arm, but a supreme tonic might be able to do it... If nothing else, the alchemy recipe book did say there were reported cases of a supreme tonic restoring lost limbs...

Dad... Marcus... The man who raised me. I'd often thought about how I could repay that debt. How I could return the favor for this kind man who raised a strange girl without ever complaining. And this was the best thing I could come up with.

My way of repaying him for everything would be the supreme tonic. That was what I decided as soon as I learned of the tonic's existence, and right now, I was taking the first step toward making that happen.

I've gotta focus!

I concentrated my mind and body on pouring mana into the concoction. I

sensed the Air around me...and took it in...

I'll do it. For sure!



MISTER Giyaga looked at the result with stunned silence.

“...Is this real...?”

“What do you think, Mister Giyaga?” I asked.

“W-Wait. I’ll try Appraising it...”

I looked up at Mister Giyaga full of anticipation. Dad, Nakona, and the rest of Mister Giyaga’s caravan crowded around us in front of the inn as Mister Giyaga appraised my supreme antidote. Everyone capable of Appraisal magic—Dad included—gazed at the bottle containing the bright-blue liquid I made.

That way, we’d know the quality for sure, but supreme antidotes were generally hard to come by. And as one might expect, there was no precedent of a six-year-old alchemist successfully brewing one...

If I made it, it would be an unprecedented event in this world—in human history! Or so everyone said, until I brought the actual bottle. I just hoped it worked out—I’d spent four hours brewing this thing.

“...Its quality is ideal. There’s no mistaking it... That’s a supreme antidote.”

“She’s a genius...”

“That’s incredible! It’s a real supreme antidote! Tinaris, you’re a genius!”

“I can’t believe a six-year-old girl made this...! Even the larger countries can only produce a few supreme antidotes every year! What will the alchemists there think?”

“This really is impressive... And it’s ideal quality too! That alone should double its price!”

“Aah, aaaah! Indeed! Indeed, indeed! You could even present this as a tribute to the elf king and the dwarf king in the demi-human continent! Forget five thousand colts; I’ll pay a full ten thousand for this!”

“Ten thousand?!” My mouth fell open. “Huuh?! W-Wait, are you saying one

bottle alone is worth ten thousand colts?!"

"That is exactly what I'm saying! Five thousand is for good quality antidotes, but yours is ideal quality! Tinaris, you shouldn't let the other merchants haggle you down! That won't do. I insist you sell it to me for full price!"

"...D-Dad...?" I looked to him for help.

Was it really worth that much? Could medicine really be that expensive? I looked at Dad, who was examining my other successful bottles with his Appraisal magic...

Why is he looking at them with scary eyes like that...?!

"I can't believe it... I... I always thought you were incredible, Tina, but this... Making a supreme antidote at your age..."

"Is it really that incredible?" I asked.

"Incredible doesn't do you justice. There's only one alchemist in the entirety of De Marl who can make a supreme antidote! And the handful of alchemists who can make it are so busy with work, they only make a few every year, if at all... And since it's a tricky antidote to get right, their quality is usually just standard... I think this is the first time I ever saw an ideal quality one..."

"Grr..." An ominous growling reached my ears.

Aaaah, Daaad, Nakona's glaring bloody murder at me! She's a kid who thinks her mother betrayed her, and you're all she has! Stop doting on me and pay attention to her! If you keep praising me instead of her, she'll blow up at us again...!

"Tinaris, I'd really like to buy one of these off of you," Mister Giyaga said. "Ten thousand colts, what do you say?"

"Aaah... D-Dad, can I really sell them for this much...?"

"Yeah, that's about the market price. Well, maybe calling it market price is wrong... It's not exactly in circulation. You really are one incredible girl... It normally takes inexperienced alchemical apothecaries thirty years before they are capable of making things like this."

"R-Really?!"

"Really. The only alchemist I know in De Marl who can make one of these is Elysis. And in Edesa Kura, there's Reiden... Saikorea has two, Shary and Mei... Those are the only four alchemists I know who can make something on this level."

Only four people on the whole continent?! W-Woow... I, er, might have actually pulled off something amazing... Wait, no, my goal is to make the supreme tonic! This was just a stepping stone for that... It was just practice, but...

"So, um, maybe I can make a supreme tonic now that I've made a supreme antidote...?"

"Oooh! Aiming high! Ambitious, aren't you?"

"A-Ambitious..."

I was under the impression that alchemy's final goal was to create the Philosopher's Stone or something like that... But apparently it wasn't? Was the supreme tonic the highest you can aim? I could ask, but I didn't think Mister Giyaga would know the answer to that.

"Uh, no, I want to make the supreme tonic because..." I trailed off, unconsciously looking in Dad's direction.

I wanted to restore Dad's arm... I'd heard losing his right arm made him retire from the knighthood. And even with his wooden prosthetic, he still struggled with everyday tasks. The prosthetic had fingers, but they were like a doll's, and if he needed to grip something, he'd have to bend them one by one. And, of course, they didn't have much grip strength.

It was also quite heavy, but this didn't bother him as much since he was a former knight... But still, it didn't help him with work. And since his right hand was his dominant hand, he struggled whenever he had to write with his left, which was a waste of paper. And he struggled with opening doors too, since he wasn't left-handed...

"...You don't mean my arm, do you?" Dad asked, looking at me quietly.

"E-Erm..." I looked away awkwardly.

I mean, I'm not your real daughter, so I have to repay you for taking care of me. And I thought...this would make you happy.

“...She’s an angel.”

“Such a good girl!”

“...Can the world be so kind...?”

Mister Giyaga and the people from the caravan started to praise me, all of them covering their faces with their hands and looking up. *What’s gotten into them?*

“I’ll get the money ready right away!” Mister Drake said excitedly. “It’ll be 14,000 colts for each bottle! I’ll raise the price!”

“Wait! What do you mean, you’re raising the price?! I can’t let you do that; you brought me the ingredients! At least deduct their price from the cost!”

“Aaah, look at this sweet angel that descended upon us!” Mister Giyaga said, overcome with emotion.

“Seriously, what’s gotten into you?!” I finally asked.

“Fine, we’ll deduct the cost for the ingredients,” Mister Drake said, smiling at me. “It’s back at ten thousand colts then.”

“Mister Drake!”

Just the ingredients are expensive after all! And you’re selling it to me for ten thousand colts after deducting them from the price?! This is so much money, I don’t know what to do!

“Now you have the money you need, right?” Mister Giyaga beamed at me.

“...Mister Giyaga...” I felt tears build in my eyes.

The money for the Heatstones... In the end, I balanced out everything I owed him.

“All right, then we’ll buy ten of these ideal quality supreme antidotes! And after I deduct the cost of the Heatstones you asked for, it’ll leave you with fifty thousand colts.” Mister Giyaga placed a pochette in my hands. “Oh, and you can have this pouch as a bonus from me. I thought it’d suit you.”

"Oh, thank you..." I muttered, unable to keep up with everything.

"Wait, what's this about Heatstones?" Dad asked, confused.

Oh, drat. I never consulted Dad about the Heatstones, did I...?

"Oh, erm, I'm sorry, Dad! I just moved things along without telling you... Actually, I..."

I told Dad about my exchange with Mister Giyaga.

"Tina... You worried about that too...?" Dad asked, visibly moved.

"She's a little angel," one of Giyaga's merchants said.

"An angel." Another one nodded.

"A future saint," Mister Drake added.

"Bow your head before the saint!" Mister Giyaga ordered.

"S-Stop it!" I waved my hands, flustered.

Why do these people keep treating me like this?!

"...And you still ended up earning fifty thousand colts..." Dad eventually said.

"Yes, the fee for the Heatstones is already paid for," Mister Giyaga told him.

"Leave it to me; I'll get you seven Heatstones from the dwarves' country!"

"Yeah!" Mister Drake said firmly. "If it's for you, Tinaris, you can be sure we'll put our all into getting those Heatstones!"

"Th-Thank you so much!" I gratefully bowed my head.

That sounded promising! With Heatstones, we'd always have hot water for our six villas and our bath... We wouldn't need to chop firewood to boil water anymore!

"So, what are you gonna use these fifty thousand colts on?" Dad asked me.

"Hm, I've actually been wondering...could we make a place for selling medicine near the highway? We don't have anything to tell guests which way leads to the inn, and some of them don't even know it exists at all, so..."

"Ugh..." Dad grimaced. "Y-Yeah, we are a ways off the highway, aren't we...?"

Since we didn't have a sign, I figured I'd rather just tell guests where it was and increase our traffic that way... And since we didn't have enough hands on deck to support a lot of customers, I figured I'd sell my medicine by the highway to make sure we don't go into the red and let people know about the Rofola Lodge while I was at it. *I could be the inn's poster girl...literally!*

...But what if people just go with the flow and, after buying medicine from me, say, "Maybe I'll just stay here." I'll have to explain I can't accommodate them myself...

"I'm not letting you live alone by the roadside," Dad said gravely.

"Yes, I understand how you feel," Master Giyaga joined in. "Given the things she'll be selling, it might be dangerous."

"But..." I uttered.

It was Mister Giyaga's idea to begin with...

"But I do think having a roadside apothecary would help travelers..." Dad continued pensively. "And it's not like we have that many customers coming in. We're free most of the day..."

"Yes, and a store that sells provisions might be helpful too..." Mister Giyaga appended.

"You're right. People run out of provisions and condiments along the way, and it's hard to get a hold of those on the road..."

"Spices are especially expensive..."

"And a place to bathe too. Travelers can't do that without going into a country. So an inn on the roadside might be good for that..."

Hmm, aah... What? How about...?

"Dad, I have an idea! A way to spend those fifty thousand colts! How about paving a road to the hot springs?"

"Huh? Where did that idea come from?" Dad asked.

"Hot spring...?" one of Mister Giyaga's workers, a female merchant named Merilia, repeated my words.

She's already interested! How didn't I think of this sooner?!

"Yes! We can pave a path to the hot spring halfway up the mountain! There's only a trail there and getting back is a little hard. But if we paved a good road, we'd be able to offer a hot spring as an extra feature on top of the baths in the cottages! It'll attract more people! Though we'll need to renovate the hot spring, so it's separated for men and women, and set up dressing rooms..."

"Do you really think a hot spring will attract more guests...?" Dad asked dubiously.

"Absolutely! Especially ladies!"

"I agree with her one hundred percent!" Merilia backed me.

And we can make a footbath and sell hard-boiled eggs cooked in the water...!

For a moment, I wondered where we'd set up the hot springs themselves, but... *We can figure that out after we pave the road up the mountain!*

"And you can make seasonings and spices using alchemy, can't you?" Mister Giyaga suggested.

"Y-You're right! So long as I have ingredients for it..."

"You can create them with alchemy, right?"

"Yes! Dad, what do you think...? I'll give up on selling on the roadside, but if it's near the inn..."

"Near the inn, eh...? Well, so long as you're within sight, I suppose..."

"I'll learn how to cook! I'll make yummier food! How about we make a space people can dine in even if they're not staying at the inn? And we can expand the coffee corner inside... Guests could enjoy the hot spring and then eat outside while enjoying the view! And we can set up a counter for selling medicine and spices in the corner of the dining area... What do you think?!"

Dad crossed his arms, thinking things over. I tried calculating things and estimated just paving the road would completely deplete the fifty thousand colts I made, so we'd need some extra money.

So I figured we could make a little café and integrate the apothecary with the

dining area! That way, we can make money and save up for building and maintaining the road to the hot spring!

And by the time we do that, we'll probably get the Heatstones, which will lower the workload of heating the water and make it easier for the guests to bathe whenever they want.

"It's not a bad idea, but can you really manage all of that? You're only six years old, Tina."

Ugh!

I couldn't forget that. Dad certainly didn't!

"We've got our hands full as it is whenever we have guests, and having more buildings to manage might be a bit too much for us. And it's not like everyone who walks down the highway are nice travelers. If you want to sell expensive medicine and spices, I can't agree to it until you get a strong bodyguard."

"R-Right..." I muttered, a bit disheartened. "That makes sense..."

When I was washed down the river, the first people to pick me up were bandits. The highway might be dangerous if people like them are loitering around... Even if I'm near the inn, spices and medicine often rise in demand, so our profits could be quite generous. More money would mean a greater likelihood of drawing attention from bandits.

Hmm... I'm going to need some kind of security...

"But the hot spring is a good idea," Dad added with a smile. "I'm not sure even fifty thousand colts will be enough to pave that trail, but I'll check with people I know from De Marl. I've got connections with a few construction workers."

"Mmm, construction isn't quite my field of expertise, but I'll negotiate so you can get stone for cheap, Tinaris! And I'll be heading to De Marl, so I can talk things over with your acquaintances, Marcus."

"Could you? Wait a while, then; I'll go write a letter."

It didn't go quite as I planned it, but we've been thinking of paving a road to the hot spring for the longest time anyway! I would love to make an herb garden

too, but that's just my personal wish... And it'll be pointless if, in the end, I can't keep living here. I can't just leave them with a garden they don't need...

"I think that's a great idea, Tinaris!" Merilia said, brimming with excitement.
"You came up with this trying to implement what we told you, right?"

"D-Dad's right though..."

"Yes, but you can do what you want even without a new building, right?"

"How?"

"This inn has a coffee corner with a counter. You can just put out a sign near the highway that says you're offering medicine, spices, and seasonings for sale. This'll get people who don't know about the inn to come, even if it's a bit off the beaten path. And then they'll learn about the inn in the process."

"True... Our first priority should be getting guests to come to us."

"Exactly. Supply and demand is the basis of all business." Merilia nodded.
"And it's up to us merchants to mediate for people with a demand with people who provide supply. And your medicine is definitely in demand, Tinaris! That sign will be your way of supplying it. For now, you can start with that. It's all about taking that first step!"

"R-Right!"

Just a sign could be enough... I might've been overthinking things. It can be as simple as making a basic sign. Oh, but I'll need ingredients to make spices and condiments...

But while I was lost in my reveries, none of us realized Nakona had left the room without us noticing.



"**NAKONA?** Nakona, where are you?!"

"Nakonaaaaaaaa!"

"Hey! Nakona! Where did you go?!"

"Nakonaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

She was gone! We only realized it after Dad finished writing his letter—

sloppily, with his left hand. Mister Giyaga brought up her absence after taking the letter. She was there just moments ago, but suddenly we couldn't find her in any of the rooms...

She wasn't familiar with the area yet, so going out without an escort was still dangerous. She could get lost.

"Dammit, why does that girl have to be so troublesome...?" Dad muttered nervously. "Sorry, Giyaga... Could you get everyone to help look for her?"

"Of course, you can count on us." Mister Giyaga smiled kindly. "What with the monsters loitering about recently, letting a child run around would be awful!"

"Thanks, I owe you... I'll go check around the mountain. Take care of Tina, would ya?"

"Of course, of course. Merilia wants to stay here with little Tina, right? Just let us know if Nakona comes back."

"Will do."

Yeah... Mister Giyaga did mention that monsters were seen around the mountain... Nakona, where did you go...? Why do girls your age have to be such attention seekers...?

"Tinaris, let's wait for everyone to come back at the inn, okay?" Merilia told me, taking me by the hand.

"Erm, can we go after I put the leftovers from the supreme antidote into bottles?"

"There's still some of it left over?"

"Yes. I figured I should have some on hand, since venomous snakes live around here."

"Really? Well, I guess you *do* live near a mountain... Could you make some supreme antipyretic next? There's a disease going around the kobold country in the demi-human continent. They call it speck fever, so they need something to deal with it. If a supreme antipyretic is too much to ask for, then any fever medicine you could make should help..."

"Fever medicine...? If low-grade antipyretic's good enough, I can make it right

away. It just needs water and Lilith flowers. Oh, but I'll need to head into the mountain to pick the flowers..."

"Oh... Well, drat. We could have asked your father to get some... Fine, I'll go then. I'll be right back, so wait inside the inn, all right?"

"Okay."

Speck fever... I've never heard of that disease. But I imagined epidemics must really scare the merchants.

Hm... I think I still have some spring water bottled up. Oh, right, Mister Giyaga gave me that pouch earlier. I can keep the bottles there instead of placing them in the pot. Glass bottles tend to shatter...

A Nyu Pouch... I can't help but want to use it. I should thank Mister Giyaga again for it later. Hehe... Looking at the tonic bottles lined up next to the supreme antidote makes me feel like I'm an adventurer now.

"...Ah!"

But as I carried my pot and staff from the lake back into the inn, I saw a flash of what looked like Nakona's back. She was running straight for the highway.

Wh-What... Wait, she was hiding the whole time?! But why?! Everyone ran off to look for her!

"Nakona! Wait!" I left my things behind and took off after her.

Oh, just stop...! You might be a kid, but there are some things you just can't do! If you have to cause trouble for someone, let it be your family. Even Mister Giyaga's out there looking for you...!

"Haa, aaah... W-Wait...!"

We were both kids, but she was eleven years old and I was six. I was no match for her stamina, but I couldn't give up.

You selfish little brat...I'll drag you to Dad and he'll scold you until you learn your lesson!

"Haa, aaah, aaah!"

How...is she...aaah...so fast...?! Hii, hii... My throat's so...dry... Aaah... it hurts!

"Haa, aaah... L-Leave me alone already!" she snapped back at me.

"Haa, hii, urgh...!"

"Wait, you sound like you're dying!"

By the time I caught up to her, my knees were shaking. Or, well, my whole body was shaking. *I thought my young body could handle the strain, but I guess I was wrong...*

"Why did you follow me...?! Why you, of all people?!"

"Ugh, aaah, phew!" I tried to answer, but I was still gasping for air.

"...A-Are you all right? C-C'mon, take a seat."

"Haa, haa, haa, haa!"

"F-Fine, I'll go get you some water... Stay put, okay?"

Like I have a choice...after all that running! I feel so dumb, going after you!

The girl I was chasing is looking after me... I guess that means she's kind at heart at least.

"Here you go." She came back, carrying water in her cupped hands.

"Th-Thanks..."

She did spill most of the water on the way back, but I can't complain. I drank the water from her hands, which refreshed me.

"Thanks, Nakona."

"D-Don't mention it..." she said awkwardly. "Why did you come after me anyway?"

"...I'm sorry. I just happened to be the one to see you... Dad...I mean, Marcus should be looking for you up on the mountain."

Nakona's expression was still displeased. I wanted to scold her, but I was still short on air... And she did bring me water. Also, the thought of her being all alone in the world with only her father to rely on did make me relate to her. She wasn't unlike how I was back in my old life. Though, I still felt that she was a little too spoiled...

"...You don't have to correct yourself," she mumbled.

"Huh?"

"I mean, you don't have a mom or dad, right? So call him 'Dad.' I mean...I do get it. Lashing out at you isn't right."

"...Nakona..."

"But I just...ugh! It pisses me off! I can't help but get angry! He's my daddy... I'm his daughter, but...what if Daddy doesn't want me anymore, just like Mommy doesn't?! Where do I go?!" Nakona clenched her teeth, tears welling in her eyes. "Why... Why was I even born...?!"

"Ah..."

She really is just a kid trying to cope with growing up. Hehe. She's becoming an adult... It's heartwarming...

I didn't mean to poke fun at or patronize her though. She was serious about what she said.

"...You really love Dad, don't you?"

"Th-That's not it... I mean, I do like him better than Mommy right now. But I think I like him as much as anyone likes their Daddy. I mean, I don't really know him that well."

"You don't?"

What does that mean? She doesn't know her father...?

Seeing my puzzled expression, Nakona crouched next to me, hugging her knees. She then buried her face into her lap as she muttered, "...Ever since I was born, Daddy was out fighting in wars. He was a knight vice-captain, so he had no choice, but... He was never in the country. He kept going from one expedition to another. He'd come back for a little while, but it was always late and when I was asleep. And then he'd go back to work again. He'd hardly talk to me or play..."

"I see..."

"Mommy was always angry at him and was only happy when she went out for parties in the castle... But she was never around, every day..."

I could only listen in silence. I felt bad for her.

"...I spent every day outside until sunset, playing with kids in the neighborhood, or learning how to swing a sword from the knights... And I just had to watch all the other kids get taken home by their parents..."

Her life was harder than I thought...

My life's been full of ups and downs from the moment I was reborn, but after Marcus picked me up, and I came to the inn, everything was pretty peaceful. The only real problem was the lingering mystery of what the Stone of Daybreak was. That and Grandma and Grandpa passing away, but that's just life. And they passed away with their faces far more serene than the father in my past life did... They looked satisfied with their lives.

Nakona lived with her mother, but she was still neglected... It sounded awful.

"What did you do about food?"

"...Mommy always left me money. Instead of making me food... So, I had the knights take me to a dining hall or a pub to eat... Looking back on it, they weren't knights that worked with Daddy. They were all from the Crimson Knights... Mommy was probably going out with the captain of the Crimson Knights even back then... That's why his knights looked after me..."

That sounded like a complicated story... But leaving your lover's child with your subordinates was...bad. On a physical level. *She'd have been much better off with Marcus...*

"Actually..."

"Y-Yes?"

"I think the captain of the Crimson Knights was married. At the time."

"...I think I've heard that, yes."

"I looked into it, and apparently, he married the former captain's daughter to inherit the role."

"Erm, then that's..."

"A political marriage, yeah. But even if he doesn't love the woman he

married, it doesn't mean he can just hit on someone else's wife!"

"Y-Yes! I totally agree!"

"Right?! That's just common sense...! But Mommy just let him flirt with her! Why did she even marry Daddy to begin with?! I mean, I was angry at Daddy for never being around too! He just left us behind and went to play in his stupid wars! Just wars and wars all the time! It's like war was the only thing he cared about!"

"U-Uh..."

I don't think he liked going to war...

Wars were one thing I didn't really research much about. All I really knew was that there was a country called Edesa Kura that insisted mankind was a superior race and invaded the demi-human continent. An alliance of human countries led by De Marl tried to stop their ambitions.

De Marl made an alliance with the elven, dwarven, and other demi-human countries, becoming a center of trade. But even among the demi-humans, there were races like the lizardmen and ogres who insisted their species was the strongest and rejected contact with mankind. In fact, they even attacked humans on sight!

Those circumstances placed the world in a state of temporary chaos, but De Marl advocated peace and was able to quell the hostilities. De Marl sounded like a lovely country, and that was the ideal Marcus fought for. I thought it was a good thing.

Obviously, I felt bad for Nakona, who was neglected because of that, but...

"...I think you were pretty lucky, Nakona."

"How come?"

"I mean, you can just go and meet your Mom and Dad if you want... But me, I..."

The first woman I saw in this world. She had golden hair, blue eyes, and a scarlet jewel embedded in her forehead. That was the mother that gave birth to me, and the brown-eyed man with the mustache next to her must have been my

father. They sent me down the river with tears in their eyes...

They likely ran into some kind of inevitable circumstances... But even so, they abandoned me. Where could they be now?

"Don't you have any clues about them?" Nakona asked me. "I mean, the parents who abandoned you..."

"Um, I have this."

"What's that?"

I held up a pendant. Dad turned the gray stone he found me with into this pendant. I called it gray, but it wasn't the same as a pebble. It had a glassy texture and was sheen with a unique shade of gray.

The Mythical Beast that saved me and had Marcus adopt me called it a pact stone. But he also said it's only valuable for those who have made the pact... But since they left this stone with me, it must have some kind of meaning.

"I think they're dead. My real parents," I confided in her.

"Dead...?"

"It's just a feeling, but...I can kind of tell...they're not alive..."

This stone was like gray glass. It must have been because...it didn't belong to me. And if that was the case...I got the feeling this wasn't the stone's natural color. It was cold to the touch, and even if I closed my fingers around it, it felt as if the warmth was leaving my hand.

It looked like a stagnant-colored pebble the size of my thumb, but I could tell it was more than just that. And something inside me told me clearly... *Those people are gone.*

If they were alive, I'd have quite a bit to complain about... But for some reason, the feelings flooding into me brought with them a surety that I'd never see them.

"...No..." Nakona clasped a hand over her mouth.

"So that's why... Your mother and father are still alive... You can meet them again, if you want... So, don't say those kinds of things."

That was the face everyone showed me when I said my parents passed away. “I’m sorry,” they’d say. “I didn’t mean it like that,” they’d say... And start being needlessly considerate. And I could never tell if that consideration came from genuine kindness or from regret at having stumbled into an awkward situation.

But you, both of your parents are still alive... You can still repay them for everything. And I’m jealous of that. Your mother may have betrayed you, but she didn’t abandon you; she still took you with her when she left. She was so occupied with herself she ended up neglecting you, but she’s only human too...

You’ll probably get it when you’re a little older. Especially when it comes to romantic feelings. Not that I’m one to talk about that... Ahaha...

“...Yeah... You’re right.”

“...Let’s head back then.”

“Yeah, let’s go home. I should tell Daddy I’m sorry.”

“Yes. I’ll apologize with you.”

“...By the way, why are you always so polite?”

“Pardon?”

I mean, that’s because I’m...

“If you’re Daddy’s daughter, that means you’re my sister. So stop that. It’s gross. We’re family, so you don’t have to be so tense and formal.”

“Erm, but...”

“Oh, right, I’m older than you, and you became Daddy’s daughter later. So I’m the big sister, right? Right! So you can call me big sis! I’m giving you special permission.”

“E-Er...”

Th-This is going a bit too fast! How do you open up to someone that quickly?! And big sis? I can’t call you that, I’m twenty years old mentally! No way! I can’t!

“...Oh yeah, what was your name again?” she asked.

“T-Tinaris.”

“Okay, Tina, then!”

And she's so flippant. What is this childish quality...?!

“...And, um...” She then spoke up, scratching her cheek awkwardly.

“Yes?”

“...Do you know how to get back home?”

Upon hearing her ask something that made her fail as the older sister, I decided I'd just keep calling her Nakona. But I was all for going back home. I looked around, but apparently, we were in the woods.

“...Where are we?” I asked aloud.

“Don't tell me you don't know either.”

“Er...”

The sun was still high in the sky, but we were surrounded by the woods. Looking around, I couldn't spot a road, and the inn wasn't in sight either.

This is bad... There could be bigbears and boars in the woods... And Mister Giyaga mentioned those monsters too.

“...By the way, where did you get that water from...?” I asked Nakona wearily.

“Over there.” She pointed at a trickle of water flowing between the rocks.

“Spring water...”

If we could follow it back to the river, we might find our way back to the lake...

“Let's trace back this stream...”

“Wait! I just heard something weird!” Nakona said, her expression turning severe.

“Huh?”

A weird noise...?

Smash, crunch, crunch...

She's right... I can hear something. It's creepy... Are there bears fighting out

there or something? But it sounds like it's coming closer...

"Watch out!" Nakona called out, lunging at me.

"Aaah!"

Nakona pushed me down, and the moment we landed on the ground, something black and elongated passed above our heads. It looked like it was coated with black fog and was large enough to mow down the trees. As Nakona and I fearfully looked up, it reared its head to look at us.

It was a red-eyed creature, with a long, black tongue slithering out of its mouth. It had an elongated body wider than any of the surrounding tree trunks, and its black body was covered in smoke-like fog.

At first, I thought it was familiar, but then I realized that it was an entirely different kind of creature than the black beast that saved me when I was a baby.

"I-It can't be..." I stuttered through chattering teeth.

"H-Huh...?" Nakona eyed me fearfully.

This wasn't an animal. Nakona and I were both frozen in place by the ominous, sinister feel of its presence. It was a snake-shaped...monster.

Yeah, this is probably a monster...

It was the first time I'd ever seen one, but some part of me could tell.

I couldn't begin to guess what it was thinking as it watched us, staying still. But it probably...wouldn't let us go peacefully, would it...?

"Shaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"Ah!"

It was said monsters attack and kill anything alive. And having decided that we counted as living beings, the monster opened its mouth as wide as it could and aggressively lunged at us. There was nowhere to run.

But then, Nakona covered my body with hers.

Y-You idiot, no, don't! Why would you do that for me?!

“Gatling!”

“Hissssssssss!”

My eyes widened in shock as the sound of gunfire boomed in my ears. A large man in dark-blue armor rushed over and stood between the snake and us. Everything was happening so quickly I couldn’t keep up!

But I did notice the man was holding what looked like a gun in his hands. *I didn’t know this world had guns!*



"Phew... You all right, girls?"

"You're..."

"We can talk later. I have to fend him off. Stay by my side, got it?"

"...Y-Yes."

The armored man had a skull-shaped helmet, and upon closer inspection, his dark-blue armor was scraggy, rugged, and scary-looking. He looked like some kind of cartoon character... And, well, like a bad guy, honestly.

Still, I knew well enough to listen to what he had to say. The monster was by far the biggest threat.

"*Gyshaaaaaaaaaa!*"

"Tch...!"

Snakes are exceedingly agile creatures. I wasn't all that knowledgeable about animals, but I'd seen documentaries about animals on TV, and snakes could move very quickly when hunting prey. That seemed to apply to this serpent monster too, as it rapidly slithered between the trees.

The man spread his legs, stabilizing his posture as he raised his palms in the direction of the serpent, as if preparing to catch it. The snake slithered around freely while the man struggled to aim at it, moving his palm in the direction the serpent was moving in.

But upon closer inspection, I noticed part of the knight's leg armor seemed to be damaged...

No, it's melting! He's hurt!

"Ah..." I opened my mouth, but I realized now wasn't the right time to speak up.

At first, it looked like the serpent was retreating, but before we knew it, it had slithered around behind us. The knight twisted his body and fired a ball of light from his palm. It missed its mark, mowing down the trees instead. It was powerful, but it couldn't defeat the monster if it didn't hit...!

"Ah...!" My eyes widened in realization.

No, he couldn't defeat it! Because that monster's body was full of Kathra! The moment it dies, it would release all that Kathra into the air, turning everything around it into monsters. *So, if that knight defeats it now...*

The two of us fell into stunned silence. We finally realized just how dangerous the situation really was. We would either be killed by that monster... Or the knight might kill that monster by mistake, becoming a monster himself. *The only scenario we all walk away from here alive is one where the knight repels the monster.*

Each time the serpent moved, the knight had to adjust his aim. The knight seemed to be adept at fighting from a distance, but it was hard to settle his sights on a target that moved this fast. Which meant this was a bad match for him...

Is he waiting for help? Reinforcements, maybe...? Because things aren't going to get better... Isn't there something I can do to help!?

"Haa, haa..." The knight started gasping for air.

Something was wrong. His breathing was gradually becoming labored. Meanwhile, the serpent was slithering around us, closing the distance little by little. The knight fired a bolt of light, which it dodged by moving away. It was a cycle with no end in sight. But something was wrong. It was like the serpent was waiting for something...

"Ugh!"

The knight fell to one knee, as if withstanding pain. Was he hurt...? He was bleeding... And given how much blood he lost, it made sense...

Wait... Blood?

"Ah!"

There was purple fluid melting the armor on his leg!

Is that venom...? Of course it's venom! It's a serpent monster!

"Are you poisoned, sir?!"

"Ugh... Yeah. It's embarrassing to admit it, but... That thing weakened me and it's waiting for me to fall over... You two should run away..."

"N-No...!" Nakona's face clouded over with despair.

...Yeah... If you knew this might happen, you wouldn't have insisted on hiding from everyone...

"Don't you have any other knights working with you?" I asked him.

"They're all dead," he replied bitterly.

"Oh no..."

"I'm sorry... As a knight of De Marl, I don't want you to see me be so... pathetic. But I'll cut open a path. So you two, run and head for the highway. There should be an inn to the east of here."

"But what about you...?"

"I was looking for the right place to die. And if I can save two little girls from dying, then it's a good way to go... Now listen...I'll give you the signal to run, so wait until then..."

Wh-What is he saying?! A place to die?! Huh?! Why? Why is everyone in this world like this?! Why do they all have to be so pessimistic?!

"Stop screwing around..." I muttered under my breath.

"Huh?"

"What?"

The knight and Nakona eyed me oddly for a moment.

"...Mister, take this!" I said, taking one of the supreme antidotes I made that morning out of my pouch.

"...That color... Is that a supreme antidote?!" The knight turned to look at me in surprise.

The serpent didn't ignore that opening. It lunged toward the knight, who fired at it to push it back. It really was keeping its distance until the knight collapsed from the poison!

What a nasty creature...! Too bad for you though. I still need to repay my debt to Dad...and the black beast that saved me when I was a baby... I can't die again until I do! I refuse to die with that regret!

"I'm not sure about its effect, but I had it Appraised using magic, and they said its quality is ideal. Try it!"

"Why do you have something like this...?"

"...I'll distract it!" I said resolutely. "Take that chance to purge the venom and heal your wound!"

"Are you mad, girl?! Don't be reckless; that's a monster!"

"I'll do it!" Nakona rose to her feet.

The girl who stood there wasn't the same one who was shaking from fear and about to burst into tears of despair just moments ago. She clenched her fists and glared at the monster.

"I am Nakona Ril! My father is Marcus Ril, former vice-captain of De Marl's Azure Knights! I won't be careless! I'm not very experienced, so I think the most I can buy you is thirty seconds!"

"...You're...Marcus' daughter?!" the knight asked, surprised.

Wait...Dad has a last name?!

It wasn't a trivial detail, nor was it obvious. From what I knew, only people who ranked very highly in a country had last names. But then again, he was a vice-captain, so it made sense he would have one...

"I'm going back to Daddy, so get out of my way, you monster!" Nakona shouted at it.

"Shaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!" The monster screeched as it slithered toward Nakona.

Nakona jumped to the side as it went after her.

"Mister!" I said, stuffing two bottles into his hands.

After a moment of contemplation, he looked as Nakona bolted away and shook his head. Accepting the bottles, he took off his helmet's lower section, uncorked them, and gulped down the two tonics at once.



"TINA! Nakona!"

“Daddy!”

“Dad!”

After walking along the highway for a few minutes, we found the road back to the inn. The knight followed us, dragging his injured left leg. He put on his strange helmet again as he headed with us toward the inn.

He was our guest for today, it seemed. As the inn came into view, we found Dad running toward us as Giyaga’s group stood in front of our house and waved.

Our big adventure, which lasted less than an hour, came to an end. But for how short it was, relief still flooded me.

Ah, it’s over...

Nakona dove into Dad’s chest. He embraced her and then kept running to meet me.

“Tina! You’re back too! Thank goodness...!”

“...Yes, I’m back...” I said awkwardly.

He crouched down in front of me and hugged me along with Nakona. Thinking back on it, I had to admit that it really was a small miracle neither of us got hurt, given what happened. But looking at Dad, who was crying with relief, all of that felt oddly inconsequential. All the tension in our bodies and the shackles binding our hearts loosened... The entire day left me exhausted.

“I’m sorry I made you worry,” Nakona said.

“You better be, because you have no idea how worried I was... Dammit! I thought I was going to go crazy! It felt like the end of the world...! I’m so glad you two are safe! Aah, Gods of De Marl... You have my thanks...!”

His left arm shivered. He held us so tightly, it almost hurt. *But his embrace is so warm and caring too. Is this what it means to have a real “dad?”*

Thinking back on it, I couldn’t recall my father in my past life ever hugging me. Marcus would always pat me on the head, but when he hugged me like this, it was somehow...different. It made me feel like this really was Dad...

My Dad...

“Tinaris! There you are!”

“I’m so glad you’re so safe!”

“Yes, thank goodness...! Wait... Huuuuuh?!” Merilia screamed.

Everyone else looked in the direction she was pointing and took a staggering step back. There stood the knight in blue armor... And yeah, looking at him now, he would look pretty scary at first.

“You’re... Is that you, Lico...?!” Dad asked him, surprised.

“It’s been a while, Marcus.”

Huh? He knows Dad...? He did say he’s a knight from De Marl...

Dad slowly let go of Nakona and me and rose to his feet. As he did, with his back to the sunset, the knight removed his helmet with a metal clicking sound. And then I saw his face, which I didn’t pay any attention to earlier because I was so caught up with the situation...!

“Aah...!”

“Eeep...!”

Me and Nakona... No, me and everyone else present, except for Dad, let out a startled gasp. Because half of the knight’s exposed face was covered by his long, bluish-purple hair. But as the wind gently brushed his forelocks aside, it revealed that the right half of his face was burned off and didn’t have any skin... The right side of his lips was gone as well, exposing his teeth and gums...

Aaaaaaaaaah...!

“Oooh, Licorice! It really has been a while!” Dad said with a smile. “You said you’d go get us some booze and never came back. I was sure you died or something!”

“Yeah, well...” the disfigured knight responded tiredly. “There were some problems with my divorce papers, see... A lot happened...”

“Ah... Oh, I see... So that’s what happened... I guess we both got the short end of the stick with that one, huh...? Ahaha...”

"We sure did..."

"Ahaha... Haha..."

...What is this weird atmosphere?!

"...Do you know this person, Marcus?" Mister Giyaga asked Dad.

"Sure do! You probably know the name. One of De Marl's state alchemists. Captain of the Ebony Knights, an order focused on using alchemy for offensive purposes, Licorice Avide. One of my old colleagues."

"Wh-What....?" Mister Giyaga stuttered.

"A state alchemist...?!" I whispered.

"Name's Licorice. Licorice Avide."

A state alchemist... An alchemist recognized by a country, as the name implies. There are only a handful of alchemists like that in general—maybe one or two in every country! Even larger countries like De Marl and Edesa Kura had less than five! And this person is...one of them?! Really?!

"Huuuuuh?!"

"Wait, did you just say Licorice?" Mister Giyaga eyed the knight in shock.
"You're a woman?!"

"Huh? What? What?!" Nakona exclaimed.

A woman?!

I was just as surprised as Nakona. This was a woman!? *And I called her "Mister" the whole time?! Whaaaat?!* It wasn't just that the big bulky armor hid the fact this was a lady. She was also about as tall as Dad!

"And your last name is Avide?!" Nakona continued. "But Avide is! Dad, wait, isn't Avide the same last name as the Crimson Knights' captain...?!"

"Y-Yeah... Licorice is Rondered's, erm...well, his ex-wife."

"Huuuuuuuuuuuh?!"

"What?!"

That was probably the most shocked I've ever been—both in my past life and

this one.



“HERE you go.”

“Thanks. Your daughter’s tonic did a good job though. I should be good to return to my trek tomorrow.”

“Really? That’s good to hear...” I said.

After dinner, we sat at the coffee corner, where Dad gave Miss Licorice the fifth dose of tonic. We only had low-grade tonics handy, since I didn’t have ingredients for a medium-grade one. So we compensated by giving several doses of low-grade tonic to heal her wounds.

The supreme antidote completely got rid of the poison, making the spot where the serpent bit her an ordinary wound. She took off her armor, which revealed she was, indeed, quite the large woman... *A giantess, if I can call her that.*

She was taller than Dad, and everything from her shoulder width to her buttocks and breasts were larger than most. The right part of her face was covered by her hair, and the flesh was red and festered, while she lacked the skin around her mouth. Her lips, and part of her gums, were missing too... *What could have done this to her?*

She gulped down five doses of low-grade tonic, also known as the healing salve... But the wounds to her face showed no signs of recovering...

“Looks like it’ll leave a scar ...” Dad said, fixing a gaze on her leg.

“Meh, I don’t care. What’s one more scar at this point, eh?”

“Yeah, I suppose. Scars are a source of pride for a knight, but uh...”

“It really doesn’t matter. I live on my own anyway.”

A heavy silence hung between us, but the woman simply laughed. We still couldn’t believe that Dad’s ex-wife, Nakona’s mother, decided to remarry this lady’s ex-husband! It was such a mess, I had no idea where to even begin untangling it! Dad might have felt the urge to apologize, but it was her ex-husband that took away his wife to begin with!

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! What am I even supposed to say here?! What is this messed-up situation?!

"Hm, Miss Licorice," I asked, groping for a way to move the conversation along. "You're an alchemist, right?!"

Yes, that's a good one! I've been meaning to ask that!

Dad mentioned she was an alchemist. A state alchemist, acknowledged by a country! Talking to such an impressive person was an honor. I hoped she could tell me things I didn't know about alchemy!

"Yeah, I am. What about it?"

"W-Well, actually, I'm studying alchemy. Could you teach me a few things?"

"...That supreme antidote and the tonics from earlier—I think Marcus said you made those...?"

"Ain't she amazing? My little girl's a genius!"

"Dad, can you stay out of this for a bit?"

...Seriously, even Nakona's keeping quiet out of consideration. Read the mood!

"Yeah, if she can make a supreme antidote, she's a genius when it comes to patience. I couldn't make something like this."

"...You couldn't?"

"You're an alchemical apothecary, right? Well, I'm an alchemist. You know how those two are different, right?"

"...Alchemical apothecaries use alchemy to concoct medicine... And alchemists use it to make other things. Right?"

"Right. Alchemists are broadly divided into two branches. One uses the craft to make medicine and food. Those are alchemical apothecaries. Everyone else is just called alchemists. Well, there are a lot of different branches within alchemy too... I'm considered an offensive alchemist. The kind that's specialized in using alchemy in combat. So, you and I operate on different systems of alchemy."

"O-Oh... I see..."

It was a roundabout way of saying no. Which kind of stung. But it did explain

her fighting style in the forest and the way she shot orbs of light. She produced the sound of gunfire despite not holding a normal firearm. That must have been done with alchemy. It was different from magic, something that was closer to science.

But I wasn't sure how she actually fought. That must have been the difference between an alchemical apothecary and an alchemist.

"I probably can't answer your questions. But if you want to ask me anyway, I'll answer what I can."

"Ah...! Th-Thank you! Then, erm..."

There's so much I want to ask, but...

"What's the highest an alchemist can aspire to?"

Stories I've heard in my past life about alchemy often mentioned the Philosopher's Stone, but... Mister Giyaga made it sound like the supreme tonic was actually the highest achievement. *But maybe alchemical apothecaries have a different objective they can reach?*

"It depends on the person," Licorice replied.

"...That makes sense," I mumbled.

Well, that was an obvious answer.

"Then do you know how to create a supreme tonic? From what I hear, it's been made before, but... The recipe is very vague..."

"A method to make the supreme tonic hasn't been established. There are reports of a few successful cases, but they weren't transmuted using the same recipe or by the same method. Saikorea has records of the recipes those successful cases used, but from what I hear, none of those recipes have produced a second successful sample."

"Really...?"

"Alchemical recipes are only considered successful when they always produce the desired result. So the supreme tonic is considered an illusory concoction—one that doesn't have a recipe. Still, alchemical experiments come with dangers. Establishing a new recipe no one's made before requires both skill and

guts. Otherwise, you'd end up blowing half your face off in the middle of an experiment. Like me."

H-Half my face...

Dad did mention an acquaintance who burned their face off using alchemy... He was talking about Licorice.

"I...I understand."

"Now then, girls, go to bed," Dad told us. "It's time for us to have some adult time."

"What does that mean?!" Nakona hurried to her feet.

That sounded kind of pervy!

Or so I thought, but Dad took out five bottles of liquor. Nakona stared at him with an utterly exasperated expression.

Y-Yeah...I know what you're thinking...

"...All right. Yeah. I'm tired. We went through a lot today. Good night!" she said, storming out of the room theatrically.

"Good night, Dad. Miss Licorice, thanks for all your help today."

"Yeah. Same here."

"Good night. Sweet dreams, Tina."

Nakona probably picked up on the clue. And it made sense. *With a day like this, he'd need a drink, wouldn't he...?* I went up the stairs to the second floor, where I found Nakona heaving a deep sigh.

"So awkwaaaard!" she exclaimed. "I can't believe she was Mommy's lover's ex-wife... It feels so weird..."

"Y-Yes... She did not seem to care about it much though..."

"I told you to stop talking like that," she snapped at me for falling back into a polite way of speaking.

"S-Sorry."

"...Still, I thought we were gonna die back there."

"Yes... I mean, y-yeah."

"But you're a big part of why we're safe. Thanks, Tina."

"No, not at all... You were pretty amazing too, Nakona. The way you just stood up to that monster..."

"C'mon, call me 'big sis.' Where do you get off just calling me Nakona, huh?"

"Erm... B-But it feels weird calling you that..." I said, fidgeting.

"I'm five years older than you!" She insisted.

"Well, yes, but... Aaaah..."

She started squishing my cheeks.

Ugh... I know a kid's cheeks are soft and squishy, but... Aaah, cut it oooooout!

"...I was really scared," Nakona said, letting go of me and shivering at the memory.

...Yeah. I can imagine.

She was still only an eleven-year-old girl. I was surprised she could even bring herself to say and do what she did back there. True, she was only distracting it, but it was still a monster.

In the end, Licorice's attack blew off the monster's tail, forcing it to run away... But if she wasn't there, we wouldn't be fooling around like this now.

"I understand what you meant back there. I really am blessed. Mommy and Daddy are still alive, and I can still meet them if I want."

"Yeah."

"...Say, what do you think I should do? Go back to De Marl or..."

Should she stay with Dad or go back to her mother, who had remarried? Well, I was more of a mommy's girl, so my first thought was to tell her to go be with her mother, but...

"...I think you should go wherever you want to be. Both me and Dad are on your side no matter what you choose."

"...Really?"

“Yeah.”

“Hey, let’s sleep in the same bed tonight!”

“What?”

“C’mon, it’s...you know, to celebrate the fact we became sisters,” she said, gripping my hands tightly.

So she said, but I got the feeling she was so scared from what happened earlier today that she didn’t want to sleep alone.

Hehehe... Guess I have to, huh...?

“Sure.”

I was pretty scared too, so...let’s sleep in the same bed tonight...Big Sis.

♣My Daughters Are So Cute

I first met my ex-wife in a dining hall in De Marl.

She was working there when she approached me saying she fell in love with me at first sight. That was the first time I'd ever been confessed to, and we quickly got married.

Looking back at it now, I married her without thinking things through. I was young and got married in the heat of the moment. She was pretty and quite popular in the area, so the idea of landing a woman like her left me on Cloud Nine.

After a successful campaign, I'd return to a celebration at the castle. She always liked those kinds of parties. I fought for my life, and having returned safely, I wanted to celebrate my victory. I loved those parties too, and I was glad to see her gleefully join me for these occasions.

But she wouldn't dance or drink with me at all. She'd instead go to Rondered, the slightly younger, then vice-captain of the Crimson Knights. I'd go over to her and comment on it, but she'd simply insist that "This is a party" and stay where she was. And I thought she had a point. That this was a place of celebration. That putting my jealousy on display during a time of joy would be shameful and go against what chivalry stood for.

That was what I kept telling myself.

"I'm pretty sure Ronde hates me."

"Lico, isn't it time you put the bottle away? We've got work tomorrow."

"What? Is Lico getting plastered again? Do it in the Ebony Knights' barracks, would ya? You're in the Azure Knights' barracks right now, ya know?"

"...Now listen here, Dir! Ronde already made plans for his last leave without me again! I knew it... He only married me because Dad made him! *Nnnngh!*"

The large woman lying prostrate on the table weeping was Licorice Avide. She

cried bitterly, refusing to let go of the bottle and scattering booze and tears all over Dir's work desk. She was a bothersome guest—that much was certain—but she only acted this way because she truly loved Rondered. We couldn't help but feel for her.

You had to wonder what Rondered's issue was, given how smitten she was with him. I mean, sure, she was a large woman... Her height, shoulders, and back were nearly larger than mine. But that also meant her breasts and behind were nice and plump.

And then there was the matter of how she blew half her face off in an alchemy experiment...but the left side of her face was fine. She was a beauty, all in all...albeit, a very large-bodied one.

And she came from a good family too. House Avide had served De Marl since the country's founding. Honestly, she was so impressive I felt like it only made sense to ignore her large physique and burned face.

"She's a sweet maiden at heart."

"She sure is."

This was Dir's conclusion after joining her drinking bout.



SO when my real daughter showed up and informed me her mother was cheating on me, my mind flashed back to those times.

Oh, how could this be, Gods of De Marl? Kelt remarried with Rondered? True, she was the exact opposite of Licorice. She was a petite, cute, fine woman. The kind of girl one felt inclined to protect.

...But it makes sense. They spent so much time together during those parties...

I couldn't immediately believe what happened. Licorice's heartbroken expression came to mind. For whatever reason, Rondered never seemed to like me. I didn't want to think that his marrying Kelt was a way of shoving it in my face, but...I couldn't imagine him showing Nakona any love, seeing as she was my daughter.

Nakona ran away from Rondered's house because she didn't like it there, and

I wanted to respect that. That was my way of atoning for never giving her any attention when I was a knight. I wanted to give her the care she deserved going forward to make up for it. And I had Tina too, so I would need to keep a good eye on both of them.

But no sooner had I come to that decision did the two of them disappear.

“Tinaaaaa! Nakonaaaaaa! Where are you?!”

“They’re little girls. I can’t imagine they got too far...”

“*Tch...*”

The day after Nakona showed up, Tina successfully transmuted a supreme antidote. And after that, Nakona disappeared. And while I was up the mountain looking for her, Tina disappeared too.

What in the world is going on...?! It couldn’t be... The monsters going around these parts didn’t get them, did they...?

“Tina! Nakona! Answer me! Please!” I shouted as loud as my throat would let me, but they weren’t in sight.

Aaah... Gods of De Marl... Keep those girls safe... Why? Why now? I finally decided I would keep my family safe! No... Please... Gods of De Marl, if I lose those girls, I’ll...I’ll have nothing left! They’re all I have to live for!

Hearing that Kelt chose that man didn’t fill me with the kind of anger I’d have felt when I was younger. And that was because I had the girls... They were the most important thing to me now.

“*Ngh!*”

The sun was beginning to set. Dusk hour. At this point, I was prepared to look for them even if it ran the risk of running into a monster. But just as that thought crossed my mind, three figures approached the inn.

Aaah... Ah!

“Tina! Nakona!”

“Daddy!”

“Dad!”

I hugged Nakona, who jumped into my chest, and hurried over to Tina, who ran after her.

Aaah... They're warm... They're alive!

"Tina! You're back too! Thank goodness...!"

"...Yes, I'm back..."

They're fine... They're alive... Thank goodness...

I was so worried it almost made me sick to my stomach. I was so happy to see them safe and sound...

"I'm sorry I made you worry."

"You better be, because you have no idea how worried I was... Dammit! I thought I was going to go crazy! It felt like the end of the world...! I'm so glad you two are safe! Aah, Gods of De Marl... You have my thanks...!"

I was shaking nonstop and the tears wouldn't cease. I hadn't shown this much emotion since I became a knight. Perhaps I really was getting on in years.

But none of that mattered... The girls were fine... They were alive and that filled me with more joy than I could express. I really was relieved. I thanked the Gods of De Marl from the bottom of my heart and soul...and swore to myself that I would never let these two out of my sight again.

These girls were more precious than my own life. And they were back... Words couldn't express how grateful I was.

"Tinaris! There you areee!"

"I'm so glad you're so safe!"

"Yes, thank goodness...! Wait... Huuuuuh?!"

"Ah...!"

One of Giyaga's merchants, a woman called Merilia, let out a high-pitched scream. Everyone looked in the direction she was staring and let out a startled gasp. Everyone except me, Tina, and Nakona were shocked by the knight in blue armor standing before us.

Ooh...

"You're... Is that you, Lico...?!"

"It's been a while, Marcus."

I let go of Nakona and Tina and rose to my feet. The knight standing before me was dressed in distinctly unfeminine armor. With her back to the sunset, she took off her helmet and revealed her face. Her bluish-violet hair wavered in the wind.

"Aah...!"

"Eeeek...!"

The girls let out quiet screams... It made sense. I was the only one here who'd seen her face before. The forelocks of her hair grew long only on the right side, covering half of her face. And beneath them was her burned, mangled face. Licorice Avide.

It's been so long, old friend!

"Oooh, Licorice! It really has been a while! You said you'd go get us some booze and never came back. I was sure you died or something!"

"Yeah, well... There were some problems with my divorce papers, see... A lot happened..."

"Ah... Oh, I see... So that's what happened... I guess we both got the short end of the stick with that one, huh...? Ahaha..."

"We sure did..."

"Ahaha... Haha..."

Yeah... The joy of reuniting with an old friend made me forget. Me and her, we both... Well...

"...Do you know this person, Marcus?" Giyaga asked me.

"Sure do! You probably know the name. One of De Marl's state alchemists. Captain of the Ebony Knights, an order focused on using alchemy for offensive purposes, Licorice Avide. One of my old colleagues."

"Wh-What....?"

"A state alchemist...?!"

"Name's Licorice," Lico introduced herself, her left eye closed. "Licorice Avide."

She was one of De Marl's state alchemists, so her name was well-known. She was a much more famous knight than I ever was. I didn't expect to meet her in a place like mine.

"Huuuuuh?!"

"Wait, did you just say Licorice? You're a woman?!"

"Huh? What? What?!"



I poured some liquor into her cup. As promised, we shared a drink like the old days. We clinked our cups together and they chimed pleasantly. I had nothing refined like wine to offer, but Mount Rofola had melberry fruit, which could be refined into fruit ale. After taking a sip, Lico's eyes softened. Like I thought they would.

"You like it?" I asked.

"Mm, it's got a mild flavor to it. I'll always have a soft spot for De Marl's wine, but...it doesn't feel like this'll make me sick in the morning either."

"You always were a bad drunk."

She'd always complain when she was inebriated.

"...Where are your men?" I asked. "You wouldn't go hunting monsters on your own."

I didn't like beating around the bush, so I cut straight to the heart of the matter. Lico wouldn't have gone fighting a monster alone. Monsters required a much more cautious fighting style than dealing with humans. You mustn't kill a monster, since it would scatter Kathra into the air around it and turn any living being in the area into another one.

To that end, you had to push monsters back without killing them. Even Lico, as skilled a knight as she may be, wouldn't be strong enough to defeat a monster all on her own.

"...They all died," she said, frowning bitterly.

"...I see," I sighed.

Those who fight on the battlefield are prepared to face death. That applied all the more to those who led soldiers into battle. And Lico lacked that resolve. She wasn't so much a commander as she was a natural-born researcher. She wasn't suited for this.

"I was prepared to die... But your daughters saved me. I...I got to walk away alive."

"The Gods of De Marl decided you still have things to do on this mortal plane. Receive their blessing thankfully, I say."

"And what would they have me do?"

"I wouldn't know. But alchemists like you are hard to come by. They must want you to achieve something with your alchemy... But if you ask me, you ought to apologize to the families of your dead subordinates."

"...Yeah. They were one reason I survived this, no doubt about it. As a knight of De Marl, I should honor their deaths."

"So... There's something I'd like to ask..."

"About the monster, right?"

When it came to dealing with monsters, the only option was to drive them away. But that didn't make the monster docile; it would keep rampaging, essentially becoming someone else's problem. Those things' instincts drove them to attack anything alive, and they always found their way to populated places.

So no matter how much one drove them off...

"It was a serpent monster. It apparently isn't native to these lands. It probably came here from the west... Research suggests that it might be one of the Ouroboros."

"Yeah, that's what I thought... How was it compared to other confirmed cases?"

"I dunno. But it was surprisingly big. The number of suppression missions has gone up compared to the last decade too. What the mages are saying about the Air's purity degrading might be true."

"Tsk..."

Some years ago...after Edesa Kura declared it would eradicate the demi-humans, the number of monster sightings seemed to have grown. Research was underway on the deadly poison Edesa Kura was forcing the people of the lands it conquered to develop... But even back when I was a knight, the research seemed to point to the theory that this was Camilla—the Primal Evil—rendered into material form.

Just what are those maniacs trying to do...? I wondered as I poured another glass of liquor and gulped it down.

"So the number of monster sightings growing means things are getting worse..."

"Sad to say, but it's likely... Still, as hard as chasing them away might be, it's a knight's duty to do it."

"True."

"...But honestly, it's becoming too much for De Marl's knights. We've been asking knights from other countries to pitch in, but even with their assistance, we're getting more subjugation requests than we have knights to send out... Edesa Kura's also upped the volume of its steel and iron imports. It looks like they're preparing for war while we have our hands full with the monsters."

"They want to start *another* war...?"

"I don't know what's pushing that country so far... Does the god Kura really want to see demi-human blood spilled that badly? Or is that just pretense, and they just want more land? We don't know what they're really after."

"Yeah. Never could read that country's intentions..."

Did they seriously believe that human superiority garbage? Were they really doing all these terrible things just to prove that asinine point? *It couldn't be anything that stupid...*

"...I just hope the legendary saint the demi-humans worship ends up being real," Lico said.

"Mm?"

"Haven't you heard of it? The Saint Akari-Berz."

"Oh, well, yeah, I've heard of it."

To protect the demi-human lands, De Marl formed an alliance with the elven and dwarven countries. To them, this Saint was akin to a god. The demi-humans that fought alongside me on my expeditions would often pray to the Saint for safety in combat.

Saint Akari-Berz.

It was an odd story. The Saint the demi-humans worshipped was apparently a human, just like us. She could wipe out monsters without killing them, using the power of the primal star, Stella. That power sublimated and purified all monsters, reverting them back to the creatures they once were.

...Having that kind of power would be a huge help for us too.

"But it's just a legend, right?"

"I mean, the elves and dwarves live much longer than we do and they worship this Saint. Not that I believe absolutely everything. I'm still a scientist, after all."

"I see."

So, this was just her complaining. In a different way than usual, maybe... But complaining was one of Lico's skills.

She wasn't exactly a combat fanatic, but when she got in the mood, she liked to fight... Or rather, she liked trying out her alchemical weapons. But even with her odd tendencies, Lico was struggling with all these subjugation requests.

"Can't you hire adventurers to help?"

"Not many adventurers are organized enough to pull off the strategies we use to fight monsters. And their fees build up fast."

"Yeah...you're right... And if Edesa Kura's about to launch another war, you can't be too occupied with just the monsters. Wish we could just send all the

monsters over to their territory..."

"Mm. Not a bad idea. I'll consider it when I go back to De Marl."

Huh? Isn't that really bad from an ethical standpoint?

I said it as a bit of black humor, but...maybe Lico was already drunk?

"Either way, at this rate, we might have no choice but to ask the demi-humans for help."

"...And the demi-humans aren't good at holding back..." I muttered.

"No, they're not..." Lico frowned.

That meant the monsters would grow in number. And that alone was a threat. But still, how did the monsters grow numerous enough to become too much for De Marl's knights to handle in just a few years?

No, no... I shouldn't think about it. Habits from when I was a knight die hard...

"Well, that's enough heavy stuff. Let's talk about something fun. How're Gildias and Dirbleu doing?"

"...Dir contracted a disease called Speck Fever in the demi-human continent. He's currently resting in Fei Lu."

"...Huh?!"

That's the first I heard of that! I have to go visit him. Dirbleu's an irreplaceable comrade!



"WHAT? Your superior from your time in the knights did?!"

"Yeah. I'll go ask Giyaga if he has some medium or high-grade antipyretics."

The next morning, I made the girls breakfast and left the house. Giyaga was going back to De Marl tomorrow... Fei Lu was a large country with good doctors and skilled apothecaries, but...

If he's a three days' ride away, I'd like to go and meet him...

To that end, I went to Giyaga's cottage, hoping he had some antipyretic I could take along...

"I'm sorry, but I only have low-grade antipyretic," Giyaga apologized.

"I guess you wouldn't have something like that just lying around..."

And that led me to ask Tina for help.

"Tina, I need to ask you something. Can you make antipyretic? I'd need a high-grade one or at least medium-grade..."

"I can make a medium-grade one! But I don't have the ingredients for a high-grade one..."

"What do you need for it?"

"Low-grade ones just need Lilith flowers and water, but medium-grade would require Alfis flowers and dry powdered Yujin grass. A high-grade one requires fever mushrooms and fermented moss."

I've never heard of any of these things. But I'm all the more impressed with Tina for memorizing the ingredients...

She really is a little genius.

"So what are you short on?"

"I don't have fever mushrooms or fermented moss. Alfis flowers and Yujin grass grow in Rofola, so I could pick some if I go to the mountain."

"Hm... Well, anything you make is guaranteed to be of good quality, so a medium-grade one should do just fine... Lico says drinking some antipyretic should be enough to cure him, and Fei Lu has good apothecaries."

"Yes, like Doctor Rob!"

"He's a doctor, not an apothecary."

"Yes, but he's a good doctor!"

"That he is."

I wasn't going to argue with her about Rob's skills, but the captain of the Azure Knights was going to need better facilities, stronger medicine, and a skilled doctor. *To that end, my meddling might be pointless, but...*

"You know what? Let's buy those ingredients from Giyaga. Think you could

make it that way, Tina?"

"Yes, I'll handle it! I'll supply you with an ideal, high-grade antipyretic for him!"

"R-Really?"

...When did this girl learn to speak like a merchant?

I didn't mind though. It was adorable in its own way. But it didn't feel like something a six-year-old would say... Though still, it was adorable... Very cute... And being cute meant it was fine.

"Then I'll go get those whatcha-ma-call-its from the mountain."

"You can't even remember what they're called! It's dangerous. You can't, Dad. Don't worry, I'll go pick them."

"Really? Sounds good! I'll come with you!" Nakona joined in on our conversation.

"Collecting ingredients, huh? I'd like to join in too," an unexpected voice chimed in.

"Hm?"

"Huh...?"

"Ah..."

Lico entered the room, clad in her suffocating armor.

She always was an inquisitive alchemist...

"Then I'm definitely going," Tina said. "I want to check my own ingredients!"

"Fine, I'll just close up the counter and tell Giyaga we'll be going out..."

I settled on all four of us going. I wasn't especially opposed to the idea, but I did need to ask for one thing...

"Lico, change into something lighter."

"No." She shook her head. "I fought a monster here just yesterday. It could still be hiding nearby."

I sighed. "Fine, watch our backs."

"Got it."

"The monster... Do you think it's still somewhere around here?" Tina asked.

"Yeah. It only ran away... Though if it took a shot from Lico's shotgun, I imagine it won't be moving around for a while."

For what it was worth, I had my sword sheathed at my waist. I had it strapped on my right side, not my left. I didn't know how well I'd be able to fight with just my left hand, but it was better than nothing.

Tina was unusually silent.

"Anxious?" I asked her.

"No..."

...Tinaris. You want to heal my arm, don't you?

She was always polite and didn't act the slightest bit like a child. But that's probably because she was bothered by the fact we're not blood-related. And it seemed like she always knew that we weren't. And, come to think of it, that was strange, since I'd never brought it up with her.

Pops or Ma might have told her at some point, but...it still seemed like Tina naturally knew she wasn't actually my daughter. And even despite that, Tina cared for me and wanted to go that far to help. Even though she shouldn't need to concern herself with that.

Aaah, this is no good... Thinking she cares this much makes me smile despite myself.

"I think there should be plants growing around here," I said as we reached a specific spot on the mountain.

"Ah! That's White Peach Grass! It's rare!"

"Oh. And that's a Walpurgis flower," Lico pointed out one of the flowers.

"Huh?! That's a rare ingredient! We have those flowers growing around here?!"

"Look, Tinaris, that's a White Wolf's Stone. If you crush it into powder, it should be an ingredient for heart medicine. Refining it is back-breaking work,

but even if you don't use it, the powder sells for good money."

"I'll take it with me!" Tina said excitedly.

"And that's Alfis flowers and the Yujin grass. With Alfis flowers, you just have to boil the flower. If you transmute it with water, it creates good anemia medicine. Might be useful once you get a little older. Study up on it."

"Thank you! I'll remember this!"

"Also, if you take Duana, Lilith, and Alfis flowers and mix them in with spring water, it should create headache medicine. Mixing Yujin grass with Yukari grass should produce disinfectant. Plus, if you use Yukari grass with either Mittel or Romary herbs and mix them in a flask, they should produce oil. That oil has a lot of uses and sells for high prices. You can use it to make shampoo, body soap, or face lotion."

"Wow! I should jot all of this down..."

I watched the two of them dubiously.

"Daddy?" Nakona looked at me curiously.

"O-Oh... No, it's just...the two of them sure are getting worked up."

"Hehe, yeah, they are. But it's fine that they get along... I mean, Lico looks kind of scary, but she's really nice... I can't believe the Crimson captain left someone as nice as her."

"Well, I agree with you on that, but..."

Lico's a good woman. She's earnest, and even with half her face mangled, she is still a maiden at heart. But...that man picked Kelt, so I can't very well say he has no eye for women.

"The way you said that makes me sound pretty bad too," I told Nakona.

"Well, yeah... But at least you're not choosing to remarry."

"You little... You say that after all the trouble you caused the other day?"

"No, like, I mean, it doesn't really matter to me anymore? Just talking to you like this is good enough for me."

"...Nakona..."

Was this because of the monster attack yesterday? She was probably so scared that it made her change her way of thinking... She'd gotten so mature.

"Were you scared yesterday?"

"Yeah, I was... But it made me think that I wanna get stronger... No, I'll definitely get stronger. I am your daughter, after all!"

"Nakona..."

"And I'm Tina's older sister too. I gotta stay by her side and keep her safe. I mean, I get the feeling that she doesn't so much want to be an apothecary as she just wants to fix your arm... She's a really good girl. I just can't match her, y'know?"

I couldn't believe this was the same Nakona that came to me a couple of days ago. It was...really astounding. And I was surprised Tina even talked to Nakona about that.

I...I'm just...I'm just so...

"You must be getting old, Daddy... Your tear ducts are working overtime."

"D-Don't say that out loud...!"



"**I'LL** be going, then. I should be back in a few days..."

"Don't worry. I'll keep your inn safe, or my name isn't Licorice Avide."

"Well, I guess I can set my mind at ease since you're here..."

"Miss Lico, please teach me a lot about alchemy until Dad comes back! Please!"

"All right. You can handle the cooking then. Because I won't be cooking anything!"

"Is that something to be proud of?" I asked her tiredly.

Come noon, I left for Fei Lu with one bottle of Tina's high-grade, ideal quality antipyretics in hand. Giyaga said he'd be making his way to De Marl tomorrow. I couldn't see him off, but next month, he'd be stopping by the inn again before setting out to the demi-human continent. By then, he would have sorted things

out with the contractor that would pave a road to the mountain's hot spring.

A hot spring...

I didn't know much about them, but Tina was pretty adamant about having one. The idea of being able to bathe in naturally hot water did seem appealing to me, but... Was it really something to be this obsessed over?

"Could you help me train while you're here, Miss Lico?" Nakona asked her.

"I don't mind, but...I'm not great when it comes to close combat. The caravan's guards might be better for that."

"I'm having them teach me too! But I want to learn how to fight like a knight."

"Do you, now...? Well, I think Marcus is best qualified for that then."

"Yeah. I'll have Daddy teach me when he comes back."

Nakona turned to look at me expectantly, as if waiting for affirmation.

Don't look at me like that.

...Nakona said she faced off against a monster. Even if only to just buy time. And she said she did it because she was my daughter, my own flesh and blood... Maybe that was why she was so hot-blooded? But, I supposed, learning self-defense wasn't a bad thing.

"You're really helping me out here, Lico, but shouldn't you go back to De Marl sooner rather than later?"

"Doing follow-up reconnaissance after repelling a monster is part of the mission. Should be fine even if I take my time. Besides, I'll have that Giyaga man deliver the report of what happened for me."

"Okay then. I guess you should keep an eye out for what the monsters are doing. But there's a lot of wild animals around here too, so do be careful. Even if they're not monsters, they can be dangerous."

"Hmph, who do you think you're talking to?" Lico cocked an eyebrow at me.

...Good point.

They didn't call her De Marl's Devil Knight for nothing.

"Be careful out there, Dad," Tina said.

"See you soon, Daddy!" Nakona pumped her fists enthusiastically. "And don't forget to get us presents!"

"Go on, already." Lico shooed me away.

"Right. I'm off."

I waved to my two adorable daughters and to Lico as I set out. My girls waved back at me.

Dirbleu... I'm sure you'll still be recovering from your disease, but, sorry... I'm going to have to gush about my little girls when I meet you.

I mean, both my daughters are just too cute!



♣Afterword

HELLO, everyone. My name is Kiri Komori. It's a pleasure to meet you all. Thank you very much for picking up *Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind Volume 1!*

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all of you who read this book: to the editors who helped make this release happen; to Yamigo, who drew the wonderful illustrations; to everyone involved in the production of the English version and, of course, to the family and friends who supported me every step of the way.

This series has already been completed on the novel uploading website *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, but I wrote "Me at Age Five" and "Can Never Let Your Guard Down" especially for this book. You will have plenty of new content to enjoy even if you've read the web novel version.

Incidentally, when I got the offer to have my series translated and published in English, I thought: "Really? You want to publish my baby? Even with all the fantasy jargon?" I was really surprised and nervous. But having received some reviews from readers abroad made me want to see people around the world enjoy this story.

I really do think this is an invaluable, wonderful opportunity I've happened upon. Having my work cross the language barrier and reach people across the globe... I think that's a truly lovely thing!

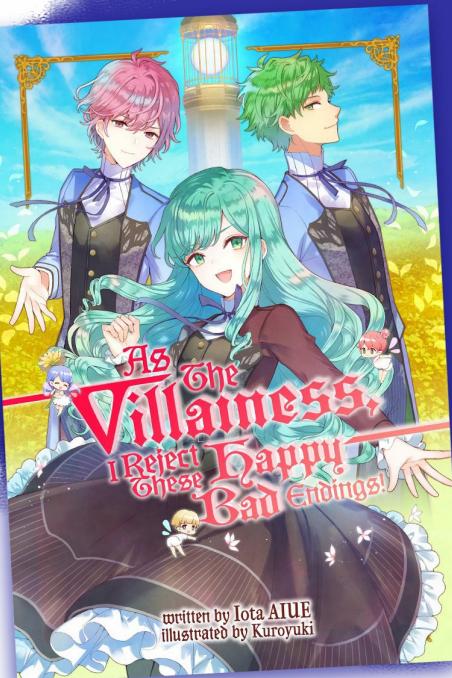
It'd be wonderful if more of my works could be translated in the future!

-Kiri Komori



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AS THE VILLAINESS, I REJECT THESE HAPPY-BAD ENDINGS!

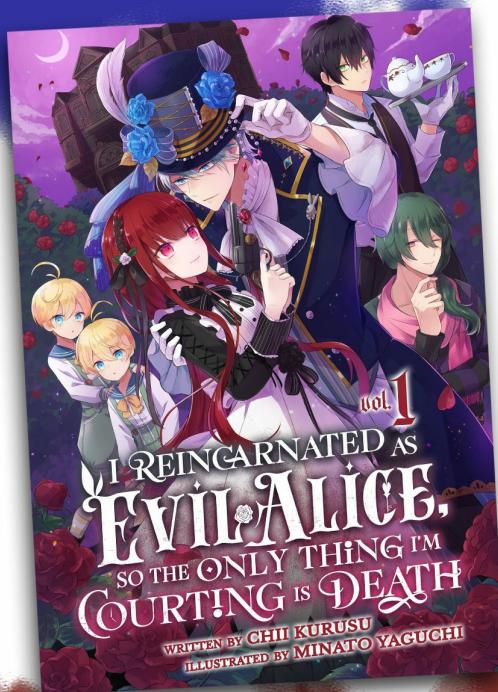
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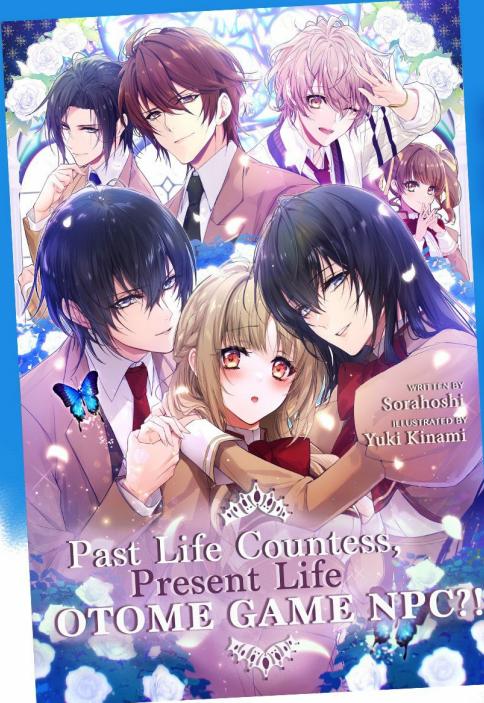
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PAST LIFE COUNTESS, PRESENT LIFE OTOME GAME NPC?!

STORY BY: SORAHOSHI
ILLUSTRATION BY: YUKI KINAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh dear, it seems I was reincarnated into a modern otome game from a fantasy world!

HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO MAKE A LOVE POTION!

STORY BY: EIKO MTSUHANA
ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT
VOL. 1 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, strait-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.



THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!

