

*If It's for My Daughter,
I'd Even Defeat*
2 *a Demon Lord*

CHIROLU

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"HMM?
WATIA?"

"HELLO,
MAYA. LA-
TI-NA," SAID
LATINA,
POINTING TO
HERSELF.

"YEAH,
SHE IS!
(MY
MAYA)"

"SHE
SURE IS
CUTE!
(MY
LATINA)"

1: The Young Girl Discusses Employment and Money

A year and a half had passed since Latina first started attending school at the temple of Asfar. The main topic of discussion at the Dancing Ocelot nowadays was the event the owners of the shop were anxiously awaiting.

In other words, Rita was pregnant.

When Dale gave his congratulations, he also asked, out of consideration for his landlords' growing family, "If you're going to have a kid... then is it about time for Latina and me to find a place of our own?"

Both of them gave the same sort of response.

"I don't care if *you* go, but leave Latina with us."

"Right, I want Latina to stay. I don't care what you do."

"Huh?"

"Don't you agree?" Rita said.

"Yeah, especially since Rita's going to be limited in how much time she can spend in the shop because she's pregnant now, and then she'll be busy with raising the kid. The place'd just plain grind to a halt without Latina around. Plus, I planned to have her help me out, too." Kenneth said all this to Dale as if it was totally natural.

"...So you guys have been working Latina hard?"

“Don’t put it that way. I’m paying her proper wages, after all.”

“What?”

This was Dale’s first time hearing this. As he sat there dumbfounded, Kenneth muttered, “Oh yeah, I never mentioned that...”

“We’ve got Latina hired as an official employee here. She’s still just a kid, so she can’t work nights. She’s not getting paid for that, but I’m giving her a fair wage,” said Kenneth proudly.

“Huh? But I’ve never seen Latina walking around with that sort of money,” Dale said, vaguely shaken.

“That’s because she’s got it in savings,” Kenneth replied casually.

It all started over half a year ago.

Latina came toddling up to Kenneth in her usual way, a troubled expression on her face.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?” asked Kenneth.

“Um, um... Latina has a request. Can you do something for Latina?” she asked, really hesitating and finding it hard to say.

“I won’t know until you ask.” Kenneth, somewhat perplexed, pressed her to keep talking.

“You see... Latina wants money.”

“Money? Do you want something? Why don’t you just ask Dale for it?” Kenneth asked, but Latina only looked more and more troubled.

“Dale gives Latina all sorts of things. And if she asks him, he

goes out and buys a lot of stuff, too. So if Latina says she wants money, she thinks he'll give her a lot of that as well... But he'd probably ask her what she was using it for."

That showed that she was well aware of how much Dale spoiled her. Hiding his astonishment, Kenneth kept on talking.

"Well, that's true... You've got everything you could want, right? So what are you thinking?"

"Latina wants to have money of her own," she said, looking somewhat troubled. It was clear that she wasn't particularly used to making requests. She wasn't greedy, after all, and she never threw tantrums either, so as long as it wasn't anything unreasonable, Kenneth wanted to grant her request. But he was hesitant; he wasn't sure whether it was okay to make a money-related decision without her dad knowing. That was why he wasn't able to agree immediately.

"Dale's always giving Latina lots of gifts, but she's never able to give *him* anything..." Latina explained.

"Hmm... Oh right, now that you mention it, Dale's birth month is coming up, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Latina wants to get him a present."

Latina looked up at Kenneth shyly, a slight smile on her face.

As always, she's...

This was no good. She was such a good kid, and with that cute face of hers added on top, it just wasn't fair. And considering her reason, he couldn't just go and get Dale's permission.

"So you wanna keep it a secret from Dale, huh...?"

"Wouldn't he be surprised and happy if we did? That would make Latina glad. Is that no good?" she asked, cutely tilting her

head as she always did. Kenneth was left pondering. Though he wasn't as bad as that doting idiot, Kenneth knew he had a tendency to be soft on the young girl.

"You're helping out as you learn cooking from me, right, Latina?"

"Yeah."

"If you're up for treating that as 'work' instead of just 'helping,' then I could pay you. How about that?"

"Is that alright? Latina's still just a kid..." Latina tilted her head once again at Kenneth's proposal. Her immediate concern about that showed how sharp she was.

"It's true that it may be a little soon. Normally, you'd start working as an apprentice after you're done learning the basics at school. The students who excel, though, can go on to higher learning."

"If it's as an apprentice, then Latina can work," replied Latina, nodding her head in understanding.

"Still, don't you want to continue on to advanced schooling, Latina?"

Kenneth had heard Dale brag over and over about just how much Latina excelled, and Kenneth understood that from watching Latina as well. She was incredibly skilled when it came to her studies, so it wouldn't be strange at all to see her continue on to advanced schooling.

"Well... Latina's a devil."

"That's true."

"She likes studying, and she thinks that when she becomes an adult, there will be all sorts of things she wants to do."

It appeared that she had come to grips with her own long lifespan, in her own way.

“Right now, Latina wants to learn all sorts of things from Kenneth. Her goal is to be able to make delicious meals like Kenneth does.”

“Well, I’ve got to give my all, too.”

“Hmm? Kenneth does, too?”

“Right. I’ve gotta work hard to stay your target.”

While thinking on what Kenneth meant, Latina puffed out her cheeks and sulked a bit.

“If Kenneth keeps trying his hardest, then it’ll be really hard for Latina to catch up to him.”

Even so, his little apprentice didn’t say that she’d give up or that it was impossible, which made Kenneth break out in a bright smile.

While thinking back on that time, Kenneth said, “After that, Latina gave you a birth month present, right? I thought for sure you’d figured it out then.”

“Latina sewed a handmade pouch for me. Now that you mention it, the materials and the embroidery thread weren’t cheap stuff.”

It was a little crude, but she’d sewn the small bag carefully, stitch by stitch. The brilliant decorative design reinforced the material, but also held Latina’s wish that it act as a protective charm.

“I was just so moved that I didn’t even think about it.”

“Oh right, you’re *you*.”

“What does that mean?”

He’d meant just what he’d said. Even though Kenneth hadn’t been there, he was sure that Dale had practically smothered Latina in a tight hug and spun about two or three times while praising her. It was easy to imagine.

The design held her wish that Dale would return safely from his frequent trips and dangerous work, but should he actually use the pouch? If he did and a magical beast or something snagged it, just how would Dale react? Kenneth figured he could probably imagine it, but he certainly didn’t want to.

“By the way, the apron I’m using now was a present from Latina, too.”

“I thought it was strangely cute...”

The apron itself was made from black cloth, but there was a bit of ocelot embroidery in the corner, most likely due to the shop’s name. From the looks of it, it seemed that Latina possessed a good bit of skill.

After letting out a sigh, Kenneth continued. “And so, I’ve been paying her ever since. I asked her what she was going to do with it, and she said she was saving it up because ‘everybody has things that they need,’ so I took her to the temple of Azraq.”

“So you’re saying Latina already has a safe, then?”

“Yeah.”

Azraq was the god who presided over commerce and currency. His temples handled the currency exchange between different countries as well as deposits and loans, making the temples effectively banks. Amongst those who held Azraq’s divine protection, many had the ability to confirm people’s identities, and therefore,

it was exceedingly difficult for a person to commit identity fraud and withdraw from someone else's account.

At the temples of Azraq were 'safes,' which were used for managing personal assets. People would deposit large sums of money and precious metals, which they could then manage numerically. In other words, safes basically served as both safe-deposit boxes and accounts, so no one kept their entire fortune in their house unless they lived far enough out in the country that there wasn't a temple nearby. And that was all the more true of adventurers, who lived by traveling from place to place. Although you could only withdraw actual possessions from the temple where you deposited them, you could withdraw money from any temple. Withdrawal was one of their primary services.

Thanks to the nature of their business, temples of Azraq were also famous for employing powerful private soldiers, second only to the combat-centric temples of Ahmar. It was a common joke that temples of Azraq were better protected than any local fortress, and that wasn't necessarily untrue.

"Latina sure is sharp. She asked me why it was alright to deposit money at a temple."

"Now that you mention it, I've never really discussed temples with her," said Dale with an understanding nod.

Agreeing with Dale, Kenneth added, "It seemed that way, so I explained them to her. I told her that people with divine protection couldn't commit any fraud in their work."

"Well, they can. They just mustn't get caught and judged for it. Though if they are, they'll lose their divine protection and be exiled."

The main reason temples could provide such highly public services was because "the gods firmly protected their own domain." Even the townsfolk didn't believe that everyone who served the

gods was virtuous, but they *did* believe in the gods' authority. While gods safeguarded those in their domain, they didn't forgive transgressors.

The gods granted lowly men the power known as divine protection, which was a fragment of a god's miraculous power and exceeded that of magic. The nature of that power was deeply connected to the god who granted it, and the divine protection Azraq bestowed allowed those who possessed it to identify others based on the liquids that composed the majority of a person's body.

If the divinely protected committed a transgression in their duties, they would lose that miraculous power. For example, even if one of Azraq's disciples were to be guilty of murder or rape, they wouldn't be judged for such actions. However, acts that involved tainting the fortunes of others, such as embezzlement and theft, would not be forgiven. If that crime were brought before the god, the disciple would lose their divine protection and given no quarter. When dealing with people, there was room for extenuating circumstances, but when it came to gods, such arguments held no weight.

The position of priest was only open to those who possessed divine protection; that meant that losing divine protection also led to being exiled from the temple. Put another way, priests held a greater degree of trust than others, at least when it came to their specific duties.

Dale's previous demand for judgment at the temple of Asfar was a privilege granted only to high-ranking priests, as it was an appeal to a god. Asfar sought from his disciples to "guide those seeking knowledge," and also to "lead those lost on the road of life." Therefore, the god would never forgive someone who abused and tried to deny a young girl who earnestly wanted to learn. As someone with the qualifications of a high priest, Dale knew that full well, even though he served a different god.

"So Kenneth, about how much does Latina have saved up

now?”

“It’s only been half a year, but considering how she is, don’t you think she’s already been able to save up enough for her own dowry?”

“Don’t bring stuff like that up, even just hypothetically! I won’t let her be anyone’s bride!” yelled Dale, completely serious. His eyes were a bit teary when he did.

2: The Young Girl Leaves on a Journey

Less than a month after it first became obvious that Rita was pregnant, spring was starting to arrive.

“Hmm... It’d be a pain to wear normal armor at this point...” Dale muttered to himself, his signature leather coat spread out before him.

Have I gotten a bit taller again...?

He wasn’t quite aware of it himself, but that was likely the case. His coat, which served as an excellent piece of armor, had gotten a little tight.

Thanks to coats being naturally loose-fitting, he was able to use various belts to adjust it here and there and had been able to wear it for years, but it seemed that had at last come to an end. It wasn’t bad enough to impede his movements, but considering his line of work, he wanted to avoid anything that would restrict him at all.

“I haven’t been back for a while, so should I have them make me a new one...?”

That choice was the beginning.

“To be honest, I wanted to wait until you were done with school, but I figured it’d be good to do it while Rita can still move around, so I sped up my plans,” Dale started out, before giving Latina a choice. “What do you want to do? It’ll be a bit of a long trip, but do you want to go with me? Or do you want to stay home?”

“It’s okay for Latina to come along?”

Seeing the surprise on Latina’s face, Dale wore a playful grin.

“This time it’s not for work, after all. There may still be some danger to it, though, so if you don’t want to, then I won’t force you. You can just hold down the fort if you want.”

“Latina wants to go. She wants to be with Dale,” she immediately replied, all smiles. She bounced right into Dale’s arms. “Latina will listen carefully to everything Dale says, so it won’t be dangerous!” Her expression was serious.

Having her say that before he could warn her, Dale couldn’t help but give a strained laugh.

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Because he needed to go to the capital at least once before their journey, Dale departed from Kreuz.

Normally, when Dale left, Latina would be depressed the entire time, but she didn’t seem that way at all now. After all, this trek to the capital was as part of the preparations for their coming journey, and her thoughts were entirely occupied by their trip. She just didn’t have any time left to feel down.

Dale typically traveled by foot, but this time he had gotten a small horse for the journey they would be taking together. This was out of consideration for Latina, who wasn’t used to traveling. She could ride it when she grew tired, and the horse would also help carry luggage.

Even so, it wasn’t as if it could carry a lot of weight. Latina packed every day while Dale was away, only to end up spreading everything out again. Today as well, Latina nodded in approval at the luggage laid out before her but seemed to realize something, sending her running down the stairs.

“Kenneth, can Latina take a knife with her?”

“Hmm? One for cooking?”

“Yeah.”

Latina had kicked off this conversation as soon as she saw Kenneth in the kitchen. The young girl always consulted with him about her ideas. Because she loved Dale so much, she seemed to exercise her own sort of discretion when it came to him. That’s why, with Kenneth being her mentor as well, Latina found him easy to talk to.

“I think Dale should be taking care of purchasing traveling clothes while he’s away at the capital, but...”

“Latina would like a knife that’d be easy for her to use.”

“Right... then how about buying one? If you put in a request with a craftsman, then you could have the grip made to your needs, at least. And then you could use it and get accustomed to it up until it’s time to head out.”

“Is it alright for Latina to spend money?”

“It’s your money, so of course you can use it to buy stuff for yourself,” Kenneth replied, then looked over his work station. He had a rough idea of how much work he needed to get done by tonight, and he figured he could justify a short break.

Kenneth peeked out into the shop and faced his wife, who was working in the same place as always.

“Rita, I’m going to head out to the eastern district with Latina for a bit.”

“Oh, is that so? Take care.”

“You be careful too, Rita.”

“It’s not like I’m sick or something. You’re worrying too much.”

After that exchange between husband and wife, Kenneth took off his apron and left the Dancing Ocelot together with Latina, who had returned from the attic with a pochette over her shoulder.

There was quite a difference in stride between the large-bodied Kenneth and the tiny Latina. Kenneth was walking at a fairly relaxed pace, but even so, sometimes a gap would open up between them, forcing Latina to run a little to catch up. *Pit, pat, pitter-pat, pit, pat, pitter-pat*. She looked like a little chick as she chased after him, not much different from when she had first come to Kreuz.

When they reached the craftsmen’s area of the Eastern district, Latina looked up at Kenneth, seeming to suddenly remember something.

“Um, Kenneth... Rudy said his dad was a blacksmith.”

“That redheaded kid? Oh right, he was Schmidt’s third child, wasn’t he? Well, he’s pretty skilled, I guess. Wanna go take a look?”

“Latina’s never been to a blacksmith before. Do they sell knives?”

“Well, the sort of stuff they make varies based on the workshop.”

The children passing by called out to Latina when they saw her, and they waved in her direction. Perhaps nervous due to the intimidating presence of Kenneth by her side, though, none of them came near. But even so, Latina waved back as always, and seeing that, Kenneth’s expression softened.

It seemed that Latina had many more friends in the eastern district than she did in the south.

“This is the place,” said Kenneth as he passed into the entrance of the well-established shop. If you weren’t feeling overly kind, you could even call it old-fashioned. That was the sort of establishment this smithy was.

Passing through the entrance, there was a show space that was a bit of a jumbled mess, with all sorts of swords lined up. At the spot where your eyes would naturally fall first, there were swords clearly of a higher quality than the other items being displayed. You could tell a lot about the owner of the shop from how he handled his wares.

“Wooooow, there are a lot of swords!”

“That’s Schmidt’s specialty, after all.”

As Latina glanced all about the shop, full of curiosity, Kenneth fell into his old habits and started spontaneously scrutinizing the weapons. He may have favored battleaxes back when he was an adventurer, but it wasn’t as if he never used swords. Just as he’d expected, the blades weren’t enough to call their maker a master, but they weren’t half-bad, either.

“This isn’t the sort of place you should bring a kid.”

Seeming to have realized their presence, a man with splendid red hair slowly came out of the back. Apparently, Latina understood just who her friend had gotten his hair color from, and she stared in wonder. After he said that single sentence to the two, the shop owner, who didn’t appear to be overly suited to dealing with customers, tried to head back into his workshop in the rear of the store. Surprised by this, Latina hurried over to the man.

“Hello. Um, Latina is friends with Rudy.”

Hearing her voice, the owner stopped and looked at Latina. He seemed somewhat surprised.

“With Rudolf?”

“That’s right. Nice to meet you.”

Latina faced him with a smile and politely gave a bow. She didn’t seem bothered in the least by the owner’s rude gaze, which almost seemed to be appraising her.

“Did you come to play with Rudolf?”

“No. Latina wants a knife. Did you have any that are the right size for her?”

“We don’t have any knives for kids. Something like that’d practically be a toy,” responded the owner with a bit of a rough look on his face, causing Latina to turn towards Kenneth with a troubled expression, seemingly seeking help. Kenneth patted Latina on the head and took over negotiations.

“This girl’s going to head out on a bit of a trip, so she wants a knife for the various tasks that’ll come up. Apparently she mainly wants to use it for cooking.”

“Is she your kid?”

“No. I’m just acting as her escort right now.”

The owner thought for a moment, and pointed towards his workshop.

“I don’t have any out front, but I’ve got plenty laying around in the back. You can take a look if you want.”

They followed after the owner into the workshop, and once more found a place with a palpable history to it. As someone absolutely brimming with curiosity, Latina was interested in every

nook and corner of the room. She started glancing about even more than before. It wasn't just the tools and implements she'd never seen before that caught her eye. Even the chunks of metal in the midst of being processed were enough to interest her. She was clearly so engrossed that she wasn't even watching where she stepped any more.

"Hey, Latina, it's dangerous around here, so watch where you're walking," said Kenneth, causing her to hurry over to his side.

In the corner of the workshop was a tabletop made from a thick board, with an even more cluttered pile of swords and daggers than what was in the front of the shop on top of it.

"Which one should Latina chose, Kenneth?"

"Let's see..."

As Latina poked at the handles of the various blades and tilted her head, she turned to Kenneth by her side and asked for help. As she had no eye for them, she didn't even know the basics of how to pick out a knife.

Kenneth picked a few knives of a reasonable size out of the mountain of blades, and started carefully comparing them. Shortly afterwards, he placed two of them in front of Latina.

"Now you just need to hold them and see which feels better to you."

"Right."

As Latina repeatedly grasped and released the handles with a serious look on her face, lively voices sounded from the back of the workshop. Looking over, she saw two boys and a girl arguing with one another as they headed in her direction.

"Just stop making a fuss about it and help out already, Rudy!"

“Why should I? It’s your turn today, bro!”

“He’s got other work to take care of!”

“That’s right! Unlike you, I’m actually busy.”

“You’re just blowing off helping dad again!”

If nothing else, they were certainly noisy. With their brilliant red hair, it was easy to tell they were related at a glance.

“Rudolf, your friend’s here.”

“Rudy!” Latina added after the owner’s call, and her high-pitched voice reverberated through the workshop to a surprising degree. The three siblings stopped arguing and all turned to look at her. Latina was waving back at them. Rudy looked utterly confused to see the young girl, and his elder brother and sister stood with their mouths hanging wide open in surprise.

Well of course they are. There aren’t really any girls as pretty as Latina in this part of town... Kenneth thought, taking everything in from a step back. Even though he’d grown accustomed to her cuteness because he saw her every day, it surprised even him every now and again.

Though she was still small compared to kids her own age, Latina had developed a good bit these past two years. She took good care of her platinum hair, and it now had a brilliant shine to it. Today she had some of it done up in a braid, while the rest flowed down her back. Her round, soft cheeks, her long-lashed grey eyes, and her pink lips all added to her cuteness.

Nowadays, there was no trace of the small girl who’d been wasting away when she first came to Kreuz. That pathetic-looking child had been given plenty of love and affection and was now a girl who wore a happy smile on her face.

“Wh-Why are you here, Latina?!”

As Rudy came running up to Latina in a panic, she tilted her head.

“Latina came to do some shopping. She wants a knife.”

“There’s no way you could handle the sort of stuff our place makes!”

Displeased by Rudy’s words, Latina puffed up her cheeks.

“Latina will be fine. They’re bigger than what she usually uses for cooking, but she needs one, so she’ll learn to use it.”

“Why do you need one?”

“Because Latina’s going on a journey.”

Rudy’s expression became one of pure shock. “A journey...? You’re leaving, Latina? Why?! Why is this happening so suddenly?!” Rudy exclaimed, grabbing Latina by the shoulders. Latina was clearly surprised.

“What’s wrong, Rudy?”

Rather than Latina, who was left blinking in confusion, it was Kenneth, a step removed from the situation, who first realized that there had been a misunderstanding.

“Latina, did you tell your friends you were going on a trip?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“You’d be worried if one of your friends suddenly said they were going away, right? You need to make sure to tell them.”

Nodding in understanding, Latina looked straight at Rudy. “Um, Rudy... Latina is going to Dale’s home village along with him. It’s a little far, so she won’t be back until summer’s over.”

With that, Rudy more or less calmed back down. Realizing Latina’s big eyes were staring straight at him, he hurriedly backed away. “O-Oh... so you’re gonna come back?”

“Yeah. Latina will come back to Kreuz.”

Even though Rudy seemed to be awkwardly looking away, Latina smiled back at him.

“It looks like Latina got so excited for the trip that she forgot some stuff,” mumbled Latina in apology, and she looked up at Kenneth. “After we’re done shopping, could Latina stop by Chloe’s house?”

“I don’t mind. Just make sure you make it back before dark.”

After they’d finished talking, Latina brought the knife she had chosen to the owner, who was grinning from having watched all the commotion. She presented it to him, holding it carefully in both hands.

“Latina would like this knife. How much is it?”

“If it’s only this one, then you can just have it.”

Latina stopped and thought, apparently somewhat troubled by the owner’s words.

“Um... Latina wanted to spend her own money to make a purchase today. She’s always given things, so she wanted to earn something for herself.”

Her speech was, as always, a little awkward, but the owner nodded in understanding and gave her a price. Kenneth realized that it was quite a hefty discount, but it only showed on his face ever so slightly.

Latina pulled a wallet with elaborate flower embroidery on it out of her red pochette and started counting her coins with a serious expression on her face. She then thrust them out on her open palm, offering them to the owner.

“Your hands are awful small... Are you sure this isn’t too big for you?”

“Yeah, she’s a runt!”

Latina puffed out her cheeks, clearly displeased at the taunt Rudy added to his father’s concerns. “Latina will get bigger soon!”

After bringing his fist down on his youngest child’s head, the owner took hold of Latina’s small hand while accepting the payment.

“Does she still have some time before she heads out? If she’s got two or three days, then I could adjust the grip, at least a bit.”

“Right, if that’s how long it’ll take, then that should be fine. I was actually planning on asking you myself. Is that okay with you, Latina?”

Thinking a bit on what the two adults had said, Latina gave a quick nod. “Can Latina ask you to do that? She’d really appreciate it.”

Seeing that Latina was courteous in addition to being cute, Rudy’s siblings, who were standing a bit further away, looked at one another.

“She sure is polite...”

“It’s hard to imagine that she’s friends with stupid Rudy...”

“Still, he’s totally into—”

“Let’s drop it, at least for now.”

The pair were holding back laughter as they talked, but shortly after, Latina came up and started introducing herself. Based on how awkwardly they reacted, they certainly weren’t in any position to laugh at their younger brother. Their father couldn’t help but sigh.

After parting ways with Kenneth at Rudy’s house, Latina headed towards Chloe’s place. She’d once gotten lost in this same part of the eastern district, but she was now at least completely familiar with the way to her friends’ houses. Because she wasn’t allowed to go freely about the southern district out of concern for her safety, she may have been more knowledgeable about the lay of the land in this area.

“Latina will tell everyone else at the school. And when Dale gets back, he’ll explain the situation to the temple. Dale and the others say they’re not worried about Latina’s studies.”

“A trip, huh? They say it’s dangerous outside of town because there are bandits and magical beasts. Will you be alright?”

Chloe had been shocked at first, and when she finished hearing what Latina had to say from beginning to end, her initial con-

cern was for her friend's safety. Latina had replied immediately with a smile.

“Dale will be with Latina, so she'll be fine.”

“The customers at the shop said that Dale's really strong, too. They said not to tell Dale they said that, though,” Latina laughed.

Seeing her friend enjoying herself, Chloe stopped needlessly worrying. She was, of course, still concerned, but more than that, she wanted Latina to enjoy herself. After all, Chloe knew all too well just how sad Latina got each time she was left behind.

“Take care, Latina. I'll be looking forward to hearing all about your trip when you get back.”

Latina was struck with a good idea. “Latina will write letters! She'll be moving about so you may not get to respond to her, but she'll send a lot to Chloe!”

Latina broke out in a smile, and Chloe couldn't help but grin as well.

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Meanwhile, Dale had headed to the capital of Ausblick to get official permission from Duke Eldstedt to return to his home village. Because Dale was under contract with the duke, he couldn't leave his normal base, Kreuz, without notice. It wouldn't have been an issue if the trip was just for a few days, but the village was on the outskirts of Laband, far enough away that it would take several weeks just to get there. His itinerary had the round trip taking over a month. If he left without giving a report, it would raise unnecessary suspicion, and since he was dealing with one of the leading powers in the nation, that was something he wanted to avoid. That said, he'd already sent a letter on the matter to the duke, and there was no way that he'd refuse at this point. Even so thanks to their contract, it was essential that Dale

come in person to receive permission. Though he found it a pain and grumbled about it, it was also something he couldn't avoid.

Since it was personal business that brought him to the capital this time around, he couldn't have a flying dragon prepared for him, so he traveled on a horse he had rented from Kreuz. Dale was fairly skilled when it came to horse-riding.

It was supposed to be a minimum of three days by horse or a week by carriage to make it from Kreuz to the capital, but Dale ended up arriving in less than two days. Dale was a user of Earth magic, which was good for recovering stamina. While riding the horse all the while, he kept on periodically using healing magic on it. It was an efficient method that could only be employed by an excellent magic user, but it was rather cruel to the horse it was being performed on.

Even though he'd gotten in contact beforehand, it wasn't as though he could be granted an immediate audience with the duke, as he was a very busy man. When he was in the capital, Dale normally stayed in a room at Eldstedt's residence, but this time he ended up finding an inn, then headed out into town.

I've gotta prepare for the trip with Latina, too... Dale thought as he strolled along. It'd be good to get her a girlish cloak. Latina's fond of pinks and reds. I wouldn't want to get her anything too plain-looking. She'll be wearing it for a while, so I should get her something cute that she'll like. Should I get a magical device armor...? If it's enchanted, then it won't just be better at protecting her, it'll also be easier to keep clean. Yeah, if it's for Latina, then I should definitely splurge! That's the way to go!

Having come to that conclusion, he went looking around some shops. As one would expect from the country's capital, there was an even larger variety of goods on display than in Kreuz; Dale could tell that much just from the shops he happened to wander

into. There were plenty of expensive items, but they were also plenty worth the cost.

“I should get her a backpack... and just to be safe, it’d be good for her to have a rod to protect herself. And then...” he unconsciously muttered.

“Oh, is that you, Dale? What are you doing here? Work?” called out a woman’s voice that he recognized. Sure enough, when he turned around to look, he found a face that he was familiar with as well. With her abundant blond hair done up to show off the nape of her slender neck, it was clear that she was well aware of her own charms. There was also something rather seductive about her refined attire. Even though her clothing didn’t show much skin, other women would likely understand that it was the sort of design you couldn’t wear if you didn’t have confidence in your own proportions. That was the sort of woman the blue-eyed beauty who called out to Dale was.

“Helmine, huh?”

“I haven’t heard word of any work that’d get you called here, though. Did something good come your way?”

“I’m just here for a bit of shopping.”

It didn’t show on Dale’s face at all, but internally, he was sweating bullets. He wasn’t very good at dealing with her.

Helmine didn’t hesitate in the least to use her feminine charms as one of her weapons. In the past, this had led to some painful memories for Dale, which he definitely would have liked to forget. She was highly skilled as a magic user, and the two of them had worked together often in the past, but whether or not he could handle her was another matter entirely.

“Shopping?”

As Helmine stood before him with an alluring smile on her face, Dale strengthened his resolve. If it was for the sake of his cute, charming daughter, then he wanted to get the best items he possibly could. Though he could use magic, he specialized in physical attacks, so his eye for weapons and armor was limited to items meant for frontline warriors. He didn't have much confidence when it came to picking items suited to magic users, which is what Latina would need. Now that he'd run into a first-rate magic user, his best choice was to seek her advice.

It was all for Latina's sake. For cute, adorable Latina.

Dale faced Helmine's smile head-on.

"What luck, running into you here, Helmine. If you've got time, could you join me for a bit?"

"Oh my, you're inviting me somewhere? How rare."

"That's not true!"

"Well, I suppose I'll let it go, then," Helmine giggled, her laugh sounding like a bell; but to Dale's ears, it sounded more like the roar of a large beast. Regardless, though, Dale decided to give it his all, keeping the image of a smiling Latina in the back of his mind.

The principle god of Laband was Ahmar, the god of war. As a result, the country promoted the cultivation of martial arts and spells, so much so that it wouldn't lose in comparison to even a military dictatorship. Alongside that abundant national power, the king and lords employed rather impressive forces themselves.

Being the capital of such a country, Ausblick was of course overflowing with first-rate weapons and armor, as well as magical devices. The rows of shops had everything from stores with goods at entirely reasonable prices to ones that handled specialized items so costly that commoners couldn't even dream of purchas-

ing them. It was one such shop that Dale visited, accompanied by Helmine.

Apparently, out of the shops in Ausblick that primarily sold robes and the like, this was the one Helmine recommended most. Even though Dale wasn't overly familiar with the sorts of equipment magic users employed, he could still tell that the wares on display here had particularly elegant designs.

As they generally lacked the strength required to wear heavy armor, magic users usually preferred magic robes, which were enchanted with mana to increase their defense and evasion. That made them the optimal sort of gear for a young girl like Latina.

“Dale? Those sizes you’re looking at seem awfully small.”

“...One of my acquaintances asked me to buy something for his kid. I already said that, right?”

“Yeah, you did. But still, you seem to be really getting into it.”

Helmine's high-pitched laugh made Dale's smile twitch.

He only knew this because he'd heard it from Kenneth and Gregor, but apparently lately, when he was thinking about Latina, his sheer bliss tended to show on his face. She was currently his greatest “weakness.” He was doing his utmost to get through this without the vixen before him figuring that out.

Still, I just can't help it! This robe isn't bad, but I think this cape would look even cuter on Latina!

He was picking out items for Latina, so naturally, he kept imagining her wearing them. Right, imagining such things was unavoidable. As he thought about how Latina was so cute that anything would suit her, Dale's expression grew more and more obvious.

I'd thought about it before coming, but sure enough, it's different seeing them in person... This looks easier to move in, so I think it'd be much better... Hmm...

“That’s not bad, but if it’s for a kid, then this is what I’d recommend. The price is a little high, but it’s a high-quality item, and more importantly, it’s made so it’s hard to tell that it’s a magical device.”

Though Dale had been lost in his thoughts, Helmine’s voice brought him back to his senses. Looking her way, he saw that she was holding a cape simpler-looking than the one he held in his hands. Taking a look at it, he saw that the protective spell seemed to be etched into the lining. The material had a color that wasn’t unusual for a cloak, and it gave a somewhat subdued impression. But in exchange, the tone of the lining was vibrant, with the sort of design that seemed like what young girls would like.

“Giving a kid a magic robe to wear is like having them say, ‘Please kidnap me!’ It shows that they come from a rich family, after all. That’s why they have robes made like this, where you can’t tell what they are.”

“I see...”

“On the other hand, there are also ones that make it perfectly clear that they’re magical robes. Ones like that made for kids are usually worn by rich noble children. They’re like a declaration to everyone who sees them. ‘They’re still young, but this child has the ability to use magic,’ or, ‘Our family can afford to have even our children wear such luxurious items,’ things like that,” she said jokingly with a refined laugh, but there was also some bite behind it, speaking to her personality.

“You’re shopping for a young girl, right?”

“Why are you asking me that, all of the sudden...?” he asked back, carefully doing his best not to let his shock at the unex-

pected question show. But paying no heed to Dale's efforts, Helmine simply gave him amused smile.

“Well, you took what I just handed you without questioning it. If it were for a boy, then you'd want to avoid such a cute lining, right?”

She'd easily tricked the information out of him. A cold sweat dripped down Dale's back.

By the time he had Helmine help pick out a rod for a magic user, he would likely have leaked all sorts of information, aside from, perhaps, Latina's name.



Helmine hadn't said that herself, and Dale didn't ask her. But he couldn't help but think that was the case.

Dale was a little reluctant when it came to purchasing a rod.

The rods that magic users often used weren't for casting magic itself, but instead aided in controlling mana and designating an area of effect, both of which were crucial to casting spells. When it came to magic, it was important to try to cast it over only the range that was necessary; doing that maximized mana consumption efficiency. Therefore, these rods and rings, which were pricey, were important weapons for those like Helmine who made their living as magic users.

When it came to rods that came in children's sizes, though, only ones meant for training were available. Compared to those meant for full-fledged magic users, they were noticeably weaker when it came to correcting control. Otherwise, Dale wouldn't have needed a custom-made item, and unfortunately, he had no time to place such an order.

Wanting to get the best for Latina, Dale rather reluctantly compromised and decided to buy the cutest, most expensive training rod.

With that, the shopping was at an end.

"See you later, Dale. Next time we meet, you'll have to introduce me to this cute little magic user who has you so out of sorts, alright? As a fellow magic user, I'm definitely interested in a girl that young who can manage to cast magic."

Seeing off Helmine as she left with a wave, Dale couldn't help but question himself. He'd certainly been able to carry out his shopping better than he would have on his own, but for some reason, he couldn't quite bring himself to say that he'd made the right decision in asking Helmine to help. He felt a sort of sense of

defeat as well.

Having received permission from the duke for his trip to his home village, Dale got on his horse once more and returned to Kreuz. Because he pushed the horse so hard, he ended up paying the owner extra.

The horse Dale had gotten for the trip was grazing behind the Dancing Ocelot. Since Latina loved animals, it seemed that she had been taking care of it while Dale was away. Dale had chosen a small one because that was enough to carry their luggage and because he didn't want anything serious to happen if Latina fell off, since she wasn't used to riding horses.

The morning of their departure, Latina was happily twirling about the Dancing Ocelot, showing off her traveling clothes. Her camel-colored cape was a high-class item enchanted with mana. Kenneth sighed when he saw that Dale had bought her such a thing, since it was so high-quality that it would have made a novice adventurer cry bitter tears if they saw it.

Dale had been worried about purchasing the rod, but when Latina gave it a try, he saw that there was no issue. Latina had an excellent talent for mana control to begin with. Since she could manage even without a tool, the low amount of assistance provided by a training rod was plenty for her. Because it was ultimately for self-defense rather than proper combat, it made sense to go with a child-sized one that was easy to handle.

She'd ordered the leather boots on her feet as soon as the trip was decided, and she'd been wearing them ever since, so she had already worn them in.

She had the bare necessities in the rucksack on her back, and at the back of her waist, she wore a red leather scabbard with her knife inside. Holding her magic rod with a tiny glittering stone atop it, Latina stood proudly, completely ready to go.

Rudy's father had thrown in the scabbard for the knife she'd bought for free. The white-threaded embroidery on the red leather had a somewhat cute design to it. It seemed he'd made it with what a young girl like Latina would like in mind.

She was in shorts, which was unusual for her, but they maximized ease of movement and didn't hurt her cuteness in the least.

Awash with excitement, she looked up at Kenneth and gave him a report.

"Dale packed magical devices in the luggage. There's one in the canteen, and there's a magical device for starting fires, too!"

"...Just how much did you spend?"

"It's fine! It's no exaggeration to call water and fire magical devices essentials when you're going on a trip," Dale retorted, but the expression on his face was a little strained. He was aware that he'd gone overboard spoiling Latina.

"Latina, magical devices are expensive. You shouldn't show them off to others too much, since that can be dangerous."

Hearing Kenneth's warning, Latina immediately nodded.

"Latina knows. She'll put them back away."

"Also, you should at least, at the bare minimum, keep the food and medicine in your rucksack. You can keep the rest of the luggage on the horse, but you need that stuff on your person in case something happens."

"Right. Latina understands."

"By the way, Latina, are you taking any money with you?"

"She has it in the bottom of her bag. Just a bit, though," she said, pointing to the small pouch attached to her belt. Latina had

sewed it herself to use on the trip. She used thick, high-quality cloth and colored thread to make the girlish piece. As she'd become more skilled, Latina had grown fond of embroidering the accessories she'd made, but she went with just a small ocelot design on this pouch. Along with the small amount of money, she also put a comb and some candy inside as well. Even the contents were quite girlish.

"Rita told her to, so Latina stitched it into the inside of her clothes as well."

Without needing to be told, Latina had her rucksack under her cape. That was the right thing to do when it came to guarding against pickpockets.

Dale and Kenneth exchanged a glance, both thinking how level-headed the young girl was.

"Take care, Dale. There are all sorts of things to watch out for with Latina along."

Kenneth felt the need to voice this concern because her charming outfit and accessories only served to accentuate the girl's natural cuteness. Even putting aside the fact that she was a devil with broken horns, it wouldn't be strange at all for some low-lives to set their sights on her. There was just that much danger surrounding the young girl.

"Latina really is cute, after all," Dale responded. It almost seemed like he was bragging. He wasn't wrong, but that somehow still got on Kenneth's nerves.

"Latina, you be careful, okay? And Dale, you make it back safe, too. Don't do anything that'd make Latina cry," Rita said as she pat the young girl's head. Dale agreed, finding that much obvious.

"Well, yeah! If anything happens to me, then I can't protect Latina," responded Dale, without even a hint of hesitation.

“Well then, we’re off!”

“Take care!”

As Rita and Kenneth saw them go with smiles on their faces, the devil girl set off, waving her hand vigorously.

It was a calm and tranquil spring day when Dale and Latina set off on their journey.

†

Kreuz’s eastern district was connected to the highway. If you followed that north, you’d pass a large river and eventually arrive at a port. If you instead traveled south down the highway, you’d reach the capital. That was why Kreuz had become such an important distribution point.

Before they left, Dale told Latina that their first destination was the ocean. However, Dale headed for the southern gate and then proceeded southwest. The ocean was in a completely different direction. Realizing that, Latina looked up at Dale with a puzzled expression on her face.

“Dale? Why are we going this way?”

“I’ve got no clue when I’m going to take you out of town next... so do you want to go visit his grave? If that’s too much for you, then we don’t have to.”

With those words, Latina realized what was in this direction.

“The forest where Latina first met Dale is this way?”

“That’s right. There are lots of magical beasts, so it’s dangerous, but... I’ve checked it out countless times since then, and I found the shortest route there from outside the forest. I’ll be sure to keep you safe, too.”

As soon as Dale said that, Latina gripped his hand tightly. “Thank you, Dale.”

“Hmm?” Dale was clearly puzzled as to why he was suddenly being thanked.

“Dale went to Rag’s grave a lot of times, right? Latina knew that she needed to go, so thank you.”

There was no pain or sadness in Latina’s expression. She just pointed a gentle, tiny smile Dale’s way.

“Latina will go to the grave. She needs to tell Rag how happy she is now.”

“I see...”

Relieved by Latina’s calm expression, Dale smiled as well.

The forest the two were heading towards was to the southwest of Kreuz. Apparently, it did have an official name, but the people who lived in town just called it things like “the evil forest” or “the forest of darkness.” It was the only forest near Kreuz, so they didn’t need to worry about being really specific. People called the forest things like that because it was inhabited by a great many magical beasts, making it the domain of creatures other than man. There were a great number of animals there as well, so it could be thought of as an abundant area capable of supporting many creatures.

“Magical beasts” was a general term for creatures with an abundance of mana, and it included things like bugs and lizards, as well. Non-biological entities were classified as “magical beings” instead. Outside of mana, magical beasts’ ways of life had many points in common with normal animals, so places with many animals were also places with many magical beasts.

Dale didn’t enter the forest right away, but instead circled

around it. Occasionally, he noticed the presence of animals, but none of them attacked.

“Hmm, I think it was around here...” Dale grumbled to himself before rattling off a quick spell. As Earth magic was his specialty, he never lost his bearings.

While pulling on the reins of the horse, he gestured Latina over to his side.

“We’re entering the forest now. I know you’re aware that there are all sorts of dangerous creatures like magical beasts in there, but be sure to be careful, alright?”

“Alright. Latina won’t leave Dale’s side.” She gave a nod and seemed pretty fired up, a serious expression on her face.

That was when Dale learned of Latina’s ability to sense things that would do her harm.

After walking for a while, Latina suddenly stopped, and her gaze darted about their surroundings. With her wariness showing openly on her face, her line of sight fixed onto a single spot. She had attached her rod to her rucksack so it wouldn’t get in the way while walking, but now she held it firmly in both hands and was standing at the ready.

“What is it, Lati—” Dale abruptly stopped talking. He also sensed it. There were several presences moving about, far beyond where she was looking.

More than that, though, it was the fact that Latina had realized it first that shocked him. They were so far away that even Dale, a first-rate adventurer, had only noticed because his attention was pointed in that direction. Normally, he wouldn’t have even picked up on it.

“You knew there were magical beasts that way...?”

“Yeah.” Latina nodded without hesitation. “Latina knows that it’s ‘dangerous.’ When she was here before, at times like this, she’d run and hide right away.”

“That’s amazing. How do you know?”

“Latina doesn’t understand it. She just does. Rag often said that Latina is ‘protected by fate.’”

Is it divine protection...? But I don’t sense that from Latina at all... as he thought that, he focused on the situation at hand. Right now, he needed to leverage this advantage by taking the initiative. Switching gears, he swung out his left arm with practiced ease. The sound of a stopper releasing resounded from his gauntlet-shaped magical device, and it unfolded. In the blink of an eye, it had turned into a small-scale crossbow.

Dale’s gauntlet was a magical device that served as a weapon, using mana to heighten its abilities. It was able to make arrows out of mana and fire them. There was no need to worry about running out of arrows, it took no time to reload, and unlike magic, it didn’t require the time needed to recite a spell. Of course, each firing of the weapon used up mana, and unlike magic, its power couldn’t be freely adjusted. It wasn’t an all-purpose tool, but as long-range attacks had been a weakness for Dale because of his magical attributes, the bow had become his indispensable partner.

Dale wore a sword and was quite skilled at using it, and because of that, people tended to think of him as a fighter who specialized in close-range battle, but his true specialty was archery. His skills shined best when he was handling a long-range weapon.

He took in a single breath and held it, and in the next instant, he fired off a volley of mana arrows. Two of the rapidly fired arrows moved precisely through the gaps between the trees and pierced the still rather far-off magical beasts, which were big-cat

types out hunting prey. The mana arrows may have been small, but they packed more of a punch than you may expect. Having been struck between the eyes, one of the beasts collapsed deep in the dense greenery. The other arrow pierced the creature by its side. It seemed to have missed the beast's vitals, so it thrashed about in anguish. When they saw their allies felled by an attack, the rest of the pack grew agitated, and from their movements, Dale was able to figure out the number remaining as well as their positions. From there, his task was simple.

It would be nearly impossible for the beasts to close the gap between them and dodge Dale's volleys all the while. The enemy may have had the advantage in terms of numbers, but the outcome of this battle had effectively been determined before it even began.

Even though it was their first time fighting together, it was clear that Latina's ability was a good match for Dale. By making the first move from such a great distance, Dale was able to put the archery attacks that were his true specialty to great use.

A forest is an environment that offers a quite a lot of cover, so of course not all the arrows hit their mark. However, Dale was able to use his bow with his left arm alone, yet another advantage of it being a magical device. He held his longsword with his open, dominant hand, meaning he could also easily handle close-range combat at the same time.

That wasn't all. Today, Dale had the support of Latina's magic as well. She may not have been accustomed to using it in combat, but her control was good enough to impress even him.

Before they'd left on the trip, Dale had Latina learn defensive-wall magic to protect herself. Thanks to her quick thinking, she was able to use it to actively support Dale.

When they ended up in a skirmish with frog-like magical beasts, she was able to put that to great use. These were the same

creatures Dale had once accepted a request to exterminate, which had led to him meeting Latina. When he saw the beasts clustered together and blocking their path, a look of disgust crossed his face. He remembered the horrible smell from their bodily fluids and the mucus they spat out. It hadn't been all that difficult to wipe them out before, but even so, Dale was left wondering how to deal with them.

“What’s wrong, Dale?”

“Hmm... Well, I don’t really want to fight them up close...” Yet there were too many of them; it would be inefficient to try to take them out with his bow. Furthermore, their slimy skin made the mana arrows even less effective.

“Latina wishes she could use attack magic.”

“No, you should be thinking of protecting yourself, first and foremost.”

Latina was still just a child, so it’d be for the best if she didn’t have to learn how to take a life. Dale also didn’t want her to have to carry the weight such an action brought with it. That remained true even if they were just talking about animals and magical beasts. As her father, that’s what Dale thought. That was why he’d only taught her the one attack spell from *that* incident. In essence, it was a Dark magic meant for applying pressure to an enemy at close range.

Seeing the menacing magical beasts spread out in their path, Latina looked up at Dale and tilted her head.

“Why is up close bad?”

“Their bodily fluids and stuff stink terribly.”

“Is that so?” Latina tilted her head again at Dale’s response. “If that’s all, then Latina thinks she can manage.”

“Huh?”

As Dale stood confused, Latina pointed her rod at him.

“Oh light that rains down from the heavens, grant this request by my name, become a shield to ward away all misfortune and protect this body. <<Magical wall>>”

The gentle light emanating from Latina’s rod enveloped the whole of Dale’s body.

“Now the shield is surrounding all of Dale’s body. It won’t last for too long, but it should be enough for now.”

She made it sound easy, but this spell was meant to create a simple magic shield. It most definitely wasn’t meant to make an “armor” like this. But thanks to Latina’s excellent control, she was able to spread the magic’s range of effect over Dale’s entire body.

She did it like it was nothing special, but magic users the world over would probably weep if you called this “normal”...

As Dale brought his sword down over and over, the number of frogs steadily decreased. The beasts opened their mouths wide and spat out their mucus as a group, but it was stopped by an invisible wall and simply fell to the ground. This only obstructed Dale’s vision for a moment, and it didn’t hinder his assault in the least. The wall of mana seemed to help reduce the smell as well. Looking back, however, Dale found that Latina was standing a fair distance farther back than she had been at the start of the battle. The stench had apparently reached her, and it must have been worse than Dale thought.

If I end up stinking, will Latina not want to be near me...?

That thought proved to be a powerful mental blow.

He had to avoid that at all costs.

Dale skillfully finished off the magical beasts like he was taking care of a simple chore. It wasn't long at all until he trampled down the final creature, slicing his blade through it.



When Latina's surrounded by that light when she's casting magic, her cuteness is practically divine.

His doting, slack-jawed expression as he brought down his sword was ridiculous enough that he was glad Latina was so far away right now. Even Dale's calmness and composure had a limit.

When they reached their destination, it was silent and tranquil. The white megalith had been exposed to the wind and rain, and now it seemed to stand out even more than it had before.

Latina approached it and slid her tiny hand along the stone. The mature expression she occasionally showed appeared on her face. It was almost as if she was holding back her tears and swallowing down her sadness. It was an expression that told of her past, which was filled with more than what a young child should have to bear.

Latina brought her forehead to the stone.

“** , ** , **** , ***** , *****”

The words slipping out of her mouth were too complex for Dale to follow.

“*** , ***** . ** , ***** , *****”

Latina continued on, not stopping even for a second. She remained in that position and continued to talk to the man who was now in the grasp of his eternal slumber.

“Latina is sorry she took so long, Dale,” Latina said after a while, looking up at him as she apologized.

Dale had been keeping watch over the area while Latina visited the grave. He smiled in response and gently pat her on the

head.

“You had a ton you wanted to tell him, right? A lot has happened, after all.”

“Yeah, a whole lot...”

Latina looked like she was about to tear up, but Dale smiled at her and pat her on the head once more.

“Latina told him a lot. That she’s happy, and that she’s alright now.”

Dale thought that someday, he’d like to hear her talk about her birth father. If the day came when she was able to speak about such things calmly, would she tell him? He wondered about that.

Latina slid her hand along the stone again, seeming reluctant to leave. But then, she waved her hand as if to say goodbye. With that as a signal, the two turned around and started walking out of the forest.

Now that I think about it, I haven’t heard Latina mention her mother even once...

When they exited the forest, Dale had Latina ride on the horse.

As part of the tenacious devil race, she still had stamina left to spare in spite of what her delicate appearance may have suggested. But even so, Dale didn’t want to push her on the first day.

“It’s so high!” said Latina. Her voice didn’t have a hint of fear in it, only abundantly apparent glee.

“I guess we’ll be camping tonight... Tomorrow we’ll arrive at a post town, so we’ll stay there then.”

If Dale were alone, then he may have pushed himself to keep moving forward, but this time around, he’d made the itinerary

with some leeway to it. He had no intention of moving with Latina at night, when it was more dangerous, but he also didn't plan to stick to camping day in and day out.

"Latina is fine with sleeping outside. And since Dale is with her, she feels safe," Latina said with a smile, once more causing a goofy expression to appear on Dale's face.

In a way, these two were strongly attached to one another.

Latina seemed to be in an exceptionally good mood.

♪"Hmm, hmm, hmm" Latina hummed from atop the horse. As she swayed a bit along with the rhythm, it made for a truly cute sight. As always, though, she remained somewhat out of tune. It wasn't bad enough to be called full-on dissonance, but Dale couldn't help but admire the way that it made him feel strangely relaxed. As the sound of the horse's hooves clip-clopping over and over again echoed through the tranquil scenery, Latina's humming continued on for a while longer.

I feel like I've heard that song somewhere before, but it's so off that I just can't place it...

The answer to the musical quiz in Dale's mind remained a mystery.

They'd taken quite a detour, but as they returned to the highway, they started seeing more and more travelers. As the highway connected the port to the capital, most of them were merchants. Only a few of them carried their hefty luggage on their backs; the majority loaded up their wares into carriages instead.

"Woaaaaow!" Latina said in admiration as they passed by a caravan of merchants. She'd seen merchants and their caravans in Kreuz before, but it was far more impressive seeing them in

motion like this. There were armed people both on foot and horseback accompanying the countless large carriages, stationed all around them. With her mouth hanging wide open, Latina's gaze was filled with the caravan as far as her eyes could see, stretching out to the ends of the highway.

"There are a lot of adventurers, too."

"Guarding caravans like that is a pretty usual sort of job."

Whenever Latina noticed anything at all about the carriages, she'd point at it and report it to Dale. She seemed to be completely enraptured by the group. As Dale slowed down his steps, he answered her questions. Apparently, all of this was novel to the young girl. From atop the horse her gaze darted about, sometimes to such a degree that she turned around completely.

Looking at her now, it may be good to let her ride on the horse even before she gets tired...

Latina may have been a sharp young girl, but there was no guarantee that she wouldn't grow dizzy. That was especially true now, when her attention was being drawn all over the place.

"Dale, it's a big river!" Latina reported loudly as she pointed. Although the horse she rode was small, Latina's vantage point was still higher than normal when she was atop it, and she seemed to enjoy being able to see farther because of it. As she saw the sparkling surface of the water, the joy in her voice was palpable.

"Right. The river north of Kreuz continues all the way up here."

"How are we going to cross it?"

"There's a big bridge, so we're going to have to pay a toll to go across. It's not small enough to walk across, and it's quicker to

use the bridge than to look for a boat to take us to the other side.”

“What’s a ‘bridge’?”

Every now and again, Latina wouldn’t know something that Dale found perfectly obvious.

“It’ll be quicker to see it than for me to explain. It’ll come into view soon.”

There were also rivers near Kreuz, and they were always filled with ships carrying cargo.

Here, there were many boats moored at the riverbank, and numerous people were working there. As this place was near both the highway and Kreuz, they were loading and unloading cargo.

It’s to be expected that wherever people gather, merchants will gather as well, aiming to sell them things, and there were numerous stalls set up here, which made it almost look like a small town. There was even lodging set up for laborers, but there were no full-fledged inns. Rather than stopping here, travelers who had come this far would likely continue farther on and all the way to Kreuz, so there simply wasn’t a demand for actual inns.

The bridge spanning this large river filled with coming and going boats was made of stone and had tall arches so as not to obstruct ship traffic. It was excellently designed, combining beautiful curves with firm construction and making for a splendid piece of architecture.

“It’s big...”

“This is a bridge. It’s made so you can cross over the river.”

“It’s amazing!”

Latina was clearly excited. Apparently, this really was her first time seeing a bridge.

Then Latina really did come from the other side of that forest... She crossed the mountain range to get here, huh? If she'd come towards Kreuz from the ocean, then she would have seen the bridge plenty.

Even while he was being charmed by Latina's cute reaction, Dale was able to calmly think through this much.

Farther past the forest, there was a rugged mountain range. On paper, the land past that point was part of Laband, but there weren't any towns out there. After all, such a mountainous region made for harsh and inconvenient land, and there were even more magical beasts living there than there were in Kreuz's forest. Adventurers would head up into those lands to search for rare materials or to build up experience, but Dale had never heard of anyone building a settlement there. However, if you kept going past the mountains, you'd come up against the border for the greatest stronghold for the devil race, the country ruled by the First Demon Lord. It wasn't like it would have been impossible for Latina to have come that way.

"Dale, Latina wants to walk on her own. Is that alright?" Latina asked as they were lined up to pay their toll to the bridge-keeper. Dale lifted her down off the horse, and she started practically prancing along. No matter how you looked at it, she was clearly in high spirits.

"Here you go!" said Latina, handing over the coin that Dale had given her. The girl may have been mature for her age, but she looked rather childish just then. As they passed by after being inspected, they stepped onto the bridge, which felt even more massive than it did when seen from far away.

"Wooooow!" shouted Latina cheerfully as she spun about, looking over her surroundings from on top of the bridge.

"Hey, Latina, if you stop suddenly like that, then it'll be a problem for the people behind us."

“Ah, Latina’s sorry,” the young girl earnestly apologized, faced forward, and started walking. But even so, her cheerful prancing didn’t lessen at all. Dale took Latina’s hand with a smile, led her to the edge of the bridge, and looked down.

“Wow! It’s really, really amazing!” Latina shouted joyfully once again as she looked down at the flowing river far below. Her voice only grew more excited as a ship passed right beneath her. As Latina happily observed the people onboard the cargo-laden ship, Dale looked quite satisfied as well.

Continuing on like that, they crossed over the bridge and headed north along the highway. Around when the sun started setting, Dale stepped off the road a bit and into the shadows of the dense forest, where he surveyed the surrounding area.

“Dale?”

“We’ll camp around here tonight.”

“Already? But it’s still light out,” Latina asked. She looked confused, but Dale answered back with a smile.

“If we waited until it was dark, then we couldn’t get everything prepared, right? But in exchange, we’ll get up early tomorrow.”

From what Dale could tell, there weren’t large magical beasts or anything of the sort about. When he’d checked the ground and the area around them, though, he had found animal tracks and droppings. The forest was only so dense, so he figured that at the most there were just little animals and the small carnivores that preyed on them.

Dale tied the horse’s reins to a nearby tree, took the luggage off of it, and let it rest. It started grazing on the nearby grass. Dale would need to remember to prepare plenty of drinking water with his magic.

“I’m going to gather up some firewood. You wait here, Latina. And definitely don’t go wandering off on your own, alright?”

“Right!” responded Latina seriously with a nod.

“If anything happens, call for me right away. I’m not going to go that far.”

“Got it. Latina will be fine.”

After seeing off a concerned-looking Dale, Latina started rummaging about the luggage. She brought out a small, sturdy pot she’d gotten from Kenneth.

“Latina should use the things that’ll spoil easily. The dried meats and vegetables will be fine, so those can be saved for later.”

While mumbling the notes she’d been given, she found the bag containing what she was looking for. When Kenneth was preparing the food, she’d been by his side, listening to everything. She knew exactly where everything was. With a serious look on her face, she checked things over and pulled out what she needed.

“Latina shouldn’t waste anything. She must only use what she needs,” said Latina, repeating what Kenneth had taught her.

During this journey, Latina was trying to make one of her dreams come true. To that end, she’d done a great deal of preparing and practicing.

“Latina hopes she can make Dale say it’s tasty,” Latina said, enthusiastically pulling out her knife.

When Dale returned with firewood, Latina had created a stone oven, set up the pot above it, and was now chopping up potatoes and placing them in the pot. Seeing Dale in shock, as he didn’t remember teaching her any of this, Latina called out, “Dale, is this alright? Kenneth taught Latina how. He said to place the pot on top of stones like this when they’re around. Does it look okay?”

“Yeah. You even made sure to make a vent. Kenneth taught you, huh...?”

“Yeah! Latina practiced. Um, Latina will make dinner, okay?!” Latina declared.

One of her dreams was to make a meal for Dale. One of her modest (yet still important) goals for this trip was to show off the results of her practice and make that dream come true.

Latina resumed her cooking. She was a little nervous, but as she'd repeated these actions countless times, meaning they remained in her muscle memory, there was no danger in her handling of the knife. She'd explicitly practiced chopping up potatoes and dumping them directly into a pot precisely for the purpose of cooking outdoors. Normally when she cooked at the Dancing Ocelot, she used a cutting board. But when preparing food on a journey, it was important to use the minimum of tools necessary and to limit the amount of washing needed. Her master, Kenneth, had taught her that as well. During the breaks in his work, he'd taught Latina recipes and cooking tips for her journey, along with things like how to prepare an oven with stones. While Dale was away at the capital, the back yard of the Ocelot had become filled with stone ovens of all sizes. Thanks to that practice, Latina was able to carry out her work swiftly.

Once she finished cutting the potatoes, Latina pulled a magical device out of her rucksack and filled the pot with water. Taking the firewood from Dale, she placed it inside her stone oven. She'd already prepared a heaping pile of dead grass inside. Using the other magical device, she ignited this kindling. She'd constructed it well, so the fire spread to the firewood without an issue.

After watching all of this, Dale was relieved and decided to entrust the cooking to Latina. He racked his brain, thinking how to prepare their campsite so it was the most comfortable. He was fine, but if Latina were to roll over onto a rock or something in her sleep, she'd definitely find it unpleasant. He needed to do

everything he could to make sure Latina could rest even a little easier, since she wasn't used to camping. She did once survive in a forest, but that was a different matter entirely.

After the potatoes, Latina added sausage to the pot, making for a soup with a better taste than if she just used plain old meat. Next, she got out a small container. Inside were dried herbs, which she carefully added to the soup as well. The seasoning added, she gave it a taste, which was followed by a single nod of her head.

Now finished with the soup, Latina pulled out a paper-wrapped package. Inside was normal bread, so it had to be eaten quickly, before it went stale. Latina wiped off her knife and cut into the bread, a look of concentration on her face. She stabbed it with a large fork meant for cooking and held it out over the fire. Finally, she added cheese to the bread and cooked it further. When the cheese had gotten nice and gooey, Latina turned and faced Dale, who was tidying up the luggage.

“Dinner's ready, Dale.”

“Right.”

The soup had been made from extremely simple ingredients, but when it came to adventurers out camping, it wasn't rare at all for them to be satisfied with just eating dried meats and hard bread.

Seeing Latina carry out her cooking so nimbly and in such a short time, Dale was honestly impressed.

Latina poured two bowls of soup out of the pot and handed Dale the bread.

“Latina will be full just from the potatoes, so the bread is only for Dale.”

“I see.”

Dale scooped out a spoonful of soup and put it in his mouth.

“It’s good.”

“Really?”

Seeming quite happy to be praised by Dale, Latina took a bite of her portion. Especially when she was eating, the girl reminded Dale of a small animal nibbling away at a meal. She was simply too cute.

“I thought the same back when I was in a party with Kenneth too, but trips really are more pleasant when you’re with someone who’s good at cooking.”

“When Dale was with Kenneth?”

“Yeah.”

Latina seemed absolutely overjoyed at Dale’s words.

“Kenneth’s food is still tastier, though. Latina needs to keep trying even harder!” Latina said enthusiastically, which made Dale to break out in a smile.

“At the very least, it’s a whole lot better than anything I can make. Just like you asked, you’ll be in charge of cooking during the trip, Latina.”

“Right! She’ll give it her all!” she responded with a beaming smile.

Latina was also fast at cleaning up. By the time dinner was done, the sun had already set. As they were eating, the gradated sunset had turned into a pure-black sky, with only the lights of the stars remaining.

As she listened to the crackling of the fire, Latina started to drift off. She'd been quite worked up, but she still wasn't used to traveling, so of course, she'd ended up growing tired.

Dale smiled and stroked Latina's hair.

"Don't push yourself. We're going to get up early tomorrow, so go ahead and go to sleep."

"Mmnn... nuh...? What about Dale...?"

"I'll take a nap, too. It'll be fine, so don't worry."

"...Right. Goodnight, Dale..."

Wrapped in a blanket and lying on her side, Latina soon started snoring. Dale had long since grown used to hearing this somewhat out-of-tune sound. With a peaceful expression on his face, he watched over Latina as she slept.

This was a trip with just the two of them. He couldn't stay up and keep watch all night. As he had grown accustomed to doing, Dale left his sword by his side where it would be easy to grab and, still sitting up, he closed his eyes. He was so used to traveling that he'd be able wake up immediately if he sensed anything out of place.

Because Latina was by his side, it ended up being a very peaceful night for Dale. Fortunately, nothing showed up to interrupt their sleep before the morning sun rose. Still, Dale occasionally woke up to rekindle the dying campfire because although it was early spring, the night was still cold. It wouldn't do to have Latina freeze.

When Dale woke up in the morning, the first thing he did was look over at Latina. She was still sleeping soundly. It would seem that she was able to fall asleep pretty much anywhere. It was the

same back at the Dancing Ocelot when she took her naps.

Then, Dale checked on the campfire. Perhaps that was the wrong order to do things, but Latina took precedence over everything else. Dale had already decided that much, even if only unconsciously.

“Wake up, Latina...”

He had trouble bringing himself to wake up Latina when she was sleeping so peacefully, but he reached out and began gently shaking her. Latina started to stir.

“Hnghaahh... Dale...?”

“What is it?”

After Dale responded to her calling out his name from inside the blanket, she popped her head out and thought for a bit, still visibly half-asleep.

“Hnghaaawn...”

After an exaggerated blink of her eyes, she roused herself awake. She seemed to be *really* sleepy. Latina shot up suddenly and clung tightly to Dale.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Latina?”

“Latina was startled. Dale always sleeps next to her,” she said, adding in a giggle and a shy smile. “Ah, Latina is on a trip!”

“That’s right,” Dale replied with a smile, holding Latina tight.

Perhaps because of her past, Latina got to the point every now and again that she desperately didn’t want to be alone. Even when she was left back home, she wouldn’t ask for special attention, but outside of such times, she’d want to be by his side like this.

Dale didn't find it unpleasant in the least, so he let her do as she wished. Though with that said, he had no intention of overlooking Latina being pampered like this by anyone else. He was just that much of a doting fool.

Latina got up, folded up her blanket, and started preparing breakfast. She warmed up some bread for each of them over the bonfire, then laid a slice of cheese over each piece. It was a simple affair, but keeping in mind that it was made by Latina made it taste all the better to Dale.

"Today, we're going to keep on going down the highway until we hit a post town. If you get tired or your legs start hurting or anything, then tell me right away."

"Right. Latina understands."

"We should still be good on supplies. I'll leave you in charge of monitoring our food situation, Latina. If there's anything we need, then let me know as soon as you can."

"It's alright for Latina to handle it?!"

Dale looked at the surprised Latina with a serious expression.

"You don't want me to handle everything, right, Latina? You want to take care of whatever tasks you can yourself, don't you?"

"Yeah... how did you know?"

"Well, I know because it has to do with you, of course," Dale said with a laugh. The serious and earnest young girl had a spirit of self-reliance beyond what her age would imply. Dale wouldn't do anything as reckless or irresponsible as leaving everything to her from the start, but he was fully aware of just how much she could handle. And with her cleverness, if you taught her something, then she'd surely understand it.

"You're my partner during this trip, Latina."

“Right. Latina wants to do whatever she can manage.”

Seeing Latina’s motivation-filled smile, Dale had something of a strange feeling. Just how much would she grow during this trip? That’s what occupied his thoughts.

It’d be nice if Latina would rely on me at least a little while longer...

While half of him was happy to see her grow, another part was full of selfish feelings.

They put out the campfire, loaded the luggage back onto the horse, and started walking down the highway again.

Today was another gentle day with lovely weather.

There were some slight ups and downs to the path, but the highway heading towards the port made for an easy walk. As it was an important road for carrying goods from foreign nations into the capital, it underwent periodic maintenance. If you looked about now, you could see people working to repair the holes opened in the road by the travelers constantly walking it.

“Hey, Dale, Chloe was worried about robbers and stuff. Are they really around?”

“Well, it’s a route that a lot of carriages loaded with valuables pass through, so yes, there are robbers around. But we’re still close to Kreuz, so there shouldn’t be many.”

“Really?”

“If a search got put out, then they’d be swarmed by adventurers in no time at all. It’s not rare at all for robbers to end up ruined by adventurers, but normally they’d make their move in a place where it’d be hard for them to be followed.”

Their conversation continued on as they walked, with the

sound of the horse's footsteps resounding all the while.

"It may be a bit dangerous past the post town we'll be staying in... I've heard that robbers pop up every now and again out that way."

"Will we be alright?"

"Yeah. I'll be sure to protect you, Latina. Are you worried?"

"As long as Dale's around, Latina will be fine."

As Latina gave him beaming smile that showed she trusted him from the bottom of her heart, Dale smiled back.

It'd be easier to just kill them all, honestly. If I were to let loose some attack magic, they couldn't do a thing about it. It'd be harder to hold back. But I don't want to show Latina anything too cruel...

Dale's thoughts at the moment were a bit disturbing.

Oh, but if they were to point a weapon at Latina, I may end up going berserk.

Despite what he was thinking, Dale's expression remained bright and loving. Adding his gentle patting of Latina's head, it was a perfect example of how you couldn't tell what someone was thinking just by looking at them.

Because Latina had generally been limited to traveling around the town of Kreuz, the outside world seemed almost impossibly vast. The scenery didn't seem special to Dale at all, but to Latina's eyes, it was something different entirely. It was much the same when they reached the top of the highway's gentle slope and their field of view immediately widened. Latina shouted joyfully and looked all about.

In the distance was a far-off, hazy-blue mountain range, before which was a sprawl of forests and plains. Even closer was farmland full of wheat and similar crops. A refreshing breeze suddenly blew up against them.

“Wow! It’s so wide!”

“Really? I guess so... Hey Latina, you see over there, way in the distance? That’s the town we’ll be staying in tonight.”

“Wooooow!”

In her excitement, Latina seemed to be trying to look out even a little bit farther. She placed her hand over her eyes like a visor and leaped up and down. Her platinum hair, which was done up in two pigtails, swung all about as it reflecting the sunlight.

“Don’t get too worked up, alright? You’ll tire yourself out before we reach the town.”

“Right!” she replied energetically from Dale’s side.

With some periodic breaks along the way, they reached the town before the sun set, as scheduled.

The post town of Haase was a small one, and it didn’t compare to Kreuz in the least. As you could imagine from its surroundings, its primary business was agriculture, and it was supported by the prosperity of nearby Kreuz. Because it was alongside the highway, it also flourished as a relay station, with everything from high-class inns aimed at wealthy merchants to cheap ones that jammed countless people into a single room.

As Dale had heard, much like in Kreuz, you needed to pay a gatekeeper to pass through the walls that surrounded the town.

Normally, Dale would be fine sleeping at any inn, but this time, he had Latina with him, so he was thinking he’d like to go with a place that felt safe and had better amenities.

“It sure is different from Kreuz. Even the houses feel different.”

“This place is still pretty bustling, though. My home village is way out in the country, so I’m sure you’ll be shocked...”

The houses in Haase were generally subdued. There were hardly any walls painted the way they were in Kreuz. The roofs were indeed red as you’d expect of Laband, but perhaps due to using a different type of paint, they were a much duller shade, which made the town have a somewhat rustic feel.

Dale ended up settling on a mid-ranked inn with a stable. He took the luggage off of their horse and went inside. Latina was looking all over the place the entire time, unable to settle down.

Dale approached the rather strong-looking proprietress manning the inn and asked, “Do you have any rooms?”

“Yeah. Do you just need one?”

“That’ll be fine. Also, we’d like to use the stable. And could we get some water and feed for our horse?”

“That’ll cost extra.”

“Got it.”

Taking the key the proprietress handed him, Dale called for Latina. Apparently, she’d been absorbed in taking in her surroundings while Dale carried out this exchange.

Just like the Dancing Ocelot, the first floor of this inn was a restaurant, while the second floor had rooms for guests. Dale and Latina’s room was in the corner of the second floor. The view from the room certainly wasn’t half bad; with the windows open, you could see out past the walls surrounding the town. The rooms farther in likely would’ve been safer, but that seemed trivial compared to Latina’s smiling face.

The proprietress may not have been overly courteous, but the room was tidy, and it wasn't such a bad inn, all things considered. There was some space aside from that occupied by the two beds, and overall, it was fairly large.

Dale dropped the luggage in the corner, removed his gauntlet, and took off his coat. Seeing that, Latina took the rucksack off her back and her knife off her waist. She bounced a little, suddenly feeling lighter.

“Um, Dale...”

“I know you may want to go out for a walk, but you'd better not. We're going to be walking plenty tomorrow, too.”

Latina was clearly surprised at being cut off before she could even ask.

“I get how you feel, wanting to see everything. But we're going to pass through a lot of towns on our trip. You need to rest up properly when you get the chance.”

“...Right.” Latina nodded her head and looked depressed.

Dale let out a sigh. He didn't want to make her feel that way, but he knew that she was so worked up that if he let her, she'd go running all over until she collapsed. He needed to drive the point home here at the start.

“But in exchange, once we make it to the port town of Qualle, we'll do some sightseeing. Just be patient until then, alright?”

Latina's expression brightened. Dale was such a doting idiot, he just couldn't leave her depressed like that.

Though it was just a mid-ranking inn, it did have a tub, and after a nice, warm bath, Latina was now sitting at a table, cheerfully looking over a menu.

“What do you want to eat, Latina?”

“Latina wants to eat something she’s never had before. Kenneth said that eating all sorts of things from all over would help her learn.”

“Yeah, that was definitely true for Kenneth...”

Still, was this girl really aiming to be a full-fledged chef? Dale got the feeling she was putting more and more effort towards cooking and food.

Well, I could never tell if Kenneth was an adventurer or a chef, so I guess she’s like her master in that regard...

The face of his “big bro,” who was also Latina’s teacher, came to Dale’s mind as he drank down some ale, which wasn’t usual for him.

“Hmm... Hmm...?”

Latina had been pondering her choices as she looked at the menu, and she eventually decided on a dish combining grilled vegetables with fritters. As there wasn’t much of anything novel on the menu, she decided she wanted to eat fresh vegetables from the nearby farms.

Dale went with plain, grilled chicken for his meal. Because Haase was in a wheat-producing region, a heaping basket full of bread was brought out with the meals, and the two could eat as much of it as they wanted.

“Hmm...”

“What is it, Latina?” Dale asked, confused at seeing Latina making a troubled face as she chewed.

“These vegetables... should’ve been cooked a little more slowly and carefully,” she replied with a tilted head. “They would be

tastier that way.”

That certainly exceeded Dale’s expectations. “I see... so you can tell all that?”

“It’s because Kenneth taught her. These are tasty, though.”

There was a slight bitterness to them, but Latina nodded contentedly as she happily ate the fritters made from fresh sprouts harvested in early spring and cooked with younger palates in mind.

Latina may be even more skilled at cooking than I thought...

As the girl thoroughly chewed the bread to check how it tasted, Dale was once more reminded of the great potential she possessed.

After dinner, Latina returned to the room first, while Dale took his turn in the bath. When he got back to the room, Latina had a small notebook in front of her and was enthusiastically writing something in it. When Dale tried to take a peek, she went to hide it in a panic. That’s how he realized what it was.

“Is that a diary?”

“Latina’s writing what happens on the trip. It’s embarrassing, so don’t look.”

“I see. Sorry. So you’re writing things that it’d be bad for me to see, then?”

“It’s embarrassing, so you can’t look.”

Dale pushed her further, but Latina simply shook her head. This was rare for Latina, who almost never told Dale she didn’t want to him to do something.

That just makes me more interested...

Just what had she written? And what had she written about *him*? No wait, what would he do if she didn't write about him at all? That would be absolutely heartrending. But if he forced her to show him and she ended up hating him, then he'd probably never recover.

After thinking things like that, Dale changed gears and went around checking the locks in the room. As he'd said to Latina, it was important to rest when you had the chance, and last night, he'd only managed naps. He couldn't let himself get so tired that he couldn't cope with it.

When Dale got into his bed after checking the room, Latina looked a bit panicked. She came running over and quickly tapped Dale through.

"Dale, Dale. Um..."

"Hmm?"

"Can Latina sleep next to Dale?"

"Is it because we always sleep together?"

Because Dale replied to Latina with another question, she thought a bit before responding.

"Latina's a little scared when she wakes up in an unfamiliar place. But she'll feel safe if Dale's by her side."

"I see... And you're not used to going on trips. That's sure to have you anxious."

Satisfied, Dale slowly sat up and looked around. The beds in this inn were meant for a single person, so it was a little tight for two people to sleep together in one of them. The bed in their room in Kreuz was a good bit wider in comparison.

"Then I guess I should take this chance to teach you <<Gravity

Reduction>>). I'll chant it slowly, so listen carefully. It's pretty convenient, so learning it is sure to come in handy."

Dale stood beside the other bed, and slowly, carefully recited the spell.

"Oh darkness and shadows, I order you by my name, cut loose the bonds to the celestial bodies. <<Gravity Reduction>>"

He placed his hand on the bed. Thanks to the magic lowering its weight, he was able to easily lift it. Taking care not to make any loud noises, he lined it up perfectly with the other bed.

"The heights are a little different, but is this alright?"

"Yes. Thank you, Dale!"

With a joyful smile on her face, Latina slipped into the other bed. Seeing her so happy, Dale smiled as well.

It might not just be Latina... I think I might be more comfortable this way, too... Dale thought before slipping off to sleep, so close to Latina that he could feel the warmth of her body.

3: The Young Girl Visits a Port Town

After departing from Haase, Dale and Latina camped out several times and passed through a number of other post towns before finally arriving at the port town of Qualle. The appearance of Qualle differed from the towns that they'd visited up until now. While the roofs were still a brilliant red, the walls of the buildings were plastered white and had a vivid blue design drawn on them. This was because the people here sought the protection of not just the principal god of Laband, Ahmar, but also the god who governed business and the sea, Azraq. In addition to this peculiarity, the salt water-scented town of Qualle was known for its beautiful, vibrant, and unique scenery, which drew many tourists.

"It's the ocean!" Latina yelled out joyfully, the sea entering her view as soon as they came into Qualle. "Dale, Dale! It's the ocean! Can we go?!"

"Calm down, Latina. We need to rent a room first to drop off our luggage," Dale said with a strained laugh. He then pointed at their trip companion, who was currently at Latina's side.

"We need to let this guy rest, too."

"That's true... Sorry, Blau," said Latina, stroking the tip of the horse's nose. Apparently, she had named the horse without Dale knowing it. The plan had been to part with it when the trip was over, but Dale suddenly realized that Latina could end up getting attached before then. What would he do if she ended up crying?

Dale ended up settling on a slightly more expensive inn than what they'd stayed in up until now. In exchange for that higher fee, the inn offered an additional layer of security. Each room

used a magical device key, so it was well known as an inn that prided itself on safety. Unlike the other places they had stayed, this meant they had a guarantee that their luggage would be relatively secure if they left it there as they went out and about.

The plan was to stay in Qualle for three days.

This was around the point when their exhaustion would start to show. After Qualle, they'd be traveling mountain trails, so their journey would get steadily harsher. Because of that, Dale wanted to let Latina completely recharge. And since they were on a trip, he wanted to let her do some sightseeing, too. Those reasons were why he made his decision to stay that long.

Dale dumped the luggage in the room and removed his gauntlet. He left his coat and longsword as they were, though. When he looked at Latina, he saw that she had removed her rucksack and knife. Thanks to her methodical nature, she was sure to leave them in the corner, out of the way.

"Hey, Dale, can Latina send a letter to Kreuz from here?"

"There's regular service to and from here, so it should be fine."

"Then later on, Latina will write letters to Chloe and Rita," Latina cheerfully declared, and Dale mischievously grinned in return.

"We'll have to explore Qualle so you can write about it, then."

"Right!"

It had been quite some time since Dale had gone sightseeing himself. He went on trips fairly frequently, but that was generally for work. It was refreshing to get to travel for pleasure. But most importantly, with Latina by his side and completely overjoyed by being on this journey, Dale was, of course, in high spirits, too.

The pair hurriedly headed out for a stroll around town. They'd

walked quite a bit on their way to Qualle, but Latina didn't seem tired in the least. She had a greater stamina than her slender build would imply, so she didn't complain at all about being tired or her legs hurting, though Dale was admittedly walking slower to match her stride.

The scenery in Qualle was rather unique, and that wasn't just due to its buildings. As a portal to foreign nations, the town had the atmosphere of being somewhere outside of Laband.

Its uniqueness was even also apparent from looking at the people walking about town. Every now and again, Dale and Latina would pass by someone whose looks, speech, and even attire differed from those of this nation. Dale silently watched over Latina as she stared at such people. Sometimes, she stopped and even turned around completely.

They passed through the center of Qualle and arrived at the port itself.

“Wooooow...” Latina exclaimed with her mouth hanging wide open.

Dale blissfully watched her. He felt so glad to see her react this way; it was truly worth having brought her. He almost wanted to openly pat himself on the back.

As the sunlight glittering on the horizon reflected in Latina's sparkling eyes, a merchant ship entered the port.

“It's amazing, Dale! Where did that ship come from?”

“Hmm... You see the flag hanging there? That's the crest of...”

The country that Dale mentioned was a large one to the west. It seemed Latina had heard of it, as she nodded her head in understanding.

“That's a far-off country, isn't it?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“It’s amazing! It’s all so new to Latina!”

As Latina leaned out to better view the ship, Dale gently supported her so she wouldn’t fall. From the way he took such care, it was clear that he was already a splendid father.

Latina seemed like she’d never grow tired of looking at the ship, but at lunchtime, she accepted that it was time to move on.

At Latina’s request, they headed towards the marketplace, where the rows of shops had their competing wares lined up under large overhangs. Lively voices calling out filled the air, and as one would expect from a port town, it was the abundant seafood that stood out most.

Fish from the ocean were also sold in Kreuz, but because of the associated shipping fees, they were so expensive that your average citizen rarely ever got to taste them. The variety on display here was so vast that Kreuz couldn’t compare, and it made for quite a spectacle to see the seafood lined up like it was.

“There are a lot of fish!” Latina exclaimed, her eyes open wide as she walked by and looked at everything for sale. There were an abundance of different shapes when it came to sea creatures. When she came across a massive, flat fish laid out on the ground, Latina leaped up in surprise, but a moment later, she was hurrying over to the next shop.

“Wooow... How do you eat this?” Latina asked with a tilted head, looking at a sea urchin covered in hard spikes.

“You eat the insides.”

“Ooh...”

Apparently, the urchin was still alive, as the spikes were slowly moving. Latina nodded along, completely captivated by it.

As she looked into the bucket next to it, she stopped moving entirely. Curious, Dale looked in himself and found that it was filled with a large number of bivalves. Latina watched as some of them stuck out their siphons. She moved to stick her hand into the bucket, but since the creatures were being sold, she thought better of it and decided not to, instead settling for putting her hands on its rim. When the bivalves started shooting out water from their siphons with a *pshew pshew*, Dale prepared himself to be here for quite some time.

It was a little later than they had planned, but they ended up settling on a restaurant for lunch. They had no choice but to eat at a shop in the marketplace, since they couldn't help but want to have some seafood after seeing so much on display.

"Dale gave Latina a fish when she first met him."

Latina was clearly enjoying herself as she grilled up a variety of seafood and skillfully salted it at the personal grill at their table.

"That's right."

Even when she flipped the fish over with tongs, they showed no sign of falling apart, and they looked truly savory and delicious. Dale smiled as he watched over Latina carefully paying attention to how the heat was being applied.

"Today, Latina will give Dale fish that she grilled. Eat up, alright?"

"Yeah. Go ahead and keep on grilling them. If you're the one preparing them, then I'm going to want to eat a ton!" He was clearly his normal self today, as always.

Having eaten their fill at the restaurant, they resumed their stroll through the marketplace.

As you moved away from the port, the number of shops focusing on seafood decreased. In exchange, there were more shops full of all sorts of goods from other countries. Amongst the shops, was one showing off fabrics lined up like a pallet of various spices, all with designs clearly different from the sensibilities of what you'd see in Laband. If you looked into a shop selling bowls, you'd find ones with unique and vivid designs carefully painted on them.

In a way, all of these jumbled and assorted pieces made this town a "foreign nation" overflowing with goods from various other countries. Travelers, foreigners, and merchants all came and went here, and the peculiar atmosphere made for a truly extraordinary world all its own.

All throughout their stroll, Latina's eyes were absolutely gleaming. The curious and energetic girl couldn't help but have her attention captured by each and every thing here.

With a smile on his face, Dale called out, "Latina."

"What is it?"

"There's a lot of people about, and I don't want you to get lost. Give me your hand."

Latina held out her tiny hand, and Dale grasped it firmly. She was a bit surprised at first, but once she got over that, she looked up at Dale with a smile. The two continued their walk about the town, holding hands and occasionally exchanging a happy glance at one another.

Once they were done looking around, they returned to the inn. They pulled their nice clothes out of their luggage and got changed. While the place they were going for dinner may not have been a five-star restaurant, it was still clearly a grade higher than the cheap eateries they usually visited. It had been recommended to them by employees of the inn when they had asked

around. Set up so you could enjoy fresh seafood while listening to their in-house band perform, the restaurant gave you a special dining experience beyond what their prices would imply, and their seafood dishes were good enough to satisfy even residents of a port town like this.

As always, Latina wore her cape because the night air was too cold for her, but underneath she wore a pink dress she was fond of. She'd been sticking to shorts that were easy to move around in for a while, so right now, she looked even cuter than usual. Furthermore, she had her hair done up in her beloved lace ribbons. It was clear that her expectations were high.

She normally wore her pouch with the ocelot design on her belt, but now she had it across her chest with a long string and was using it like a purse.

As Latina spun about taking in the whole of the hotel room, her skirt and hair spun out in an arc along with her.

“Don’t get too worked up, Latina.”

“Right. Latina’s just excited about the restaurant.”

Dale was dressed up more than usual as well, wearing a neatly pressed shirt and pants. He did have a knife at his hip, but that was because it would be dangerous to go out completely unarmed. This knife, which he always had on him while on trips and work, saw more use for odd jobs than actual combat.

“It’d be terrible if you got kidnapped, so don’t leave my side, no matter what!” Dale said as he opened the door to the inn, looking back at Latina behind him.

No matter how Dale looked at her, Latina was just so cute that he just couldn’t help but worry. Dale could even see an otherwise upright citizen succumbing to temptation if they saw such an adorable girl. He was terribly concerned about such things.

On the off chance that Latina got kidnapped, Dale would find her, even if he had to look under each and every blade of grass the world over to do so. And if he leveled a town or two in the process, that'd make it all the easier to search. The culprit, of course, wouldn't get off lightly, either. Dale would make anyone who laid a hand on Latina experience the very depths of hell itself.

He found himself lost in thoughts like that. That's just how concerned he was.

"Um, Dale... is it alright if we hold hands, then?" Latina quietly requested.

Dale responded immediately. As he grasped her hand with his own, Latina cheerfully smiled. The sun had finished setting, and the pair walked side by side, awash in the darkness of night. In such dim light, the town of Qualle felt even more unusual than it had at noon. The vivid red of the roofs were dulled by the darkness, and the white walls looked pale blue. The patterns that were spread across the walls throughout town were now so dark that they almost appeared black. Here and there, though, the colors regained their original hues in the light leaking from the houses. But the edges were a pale haze before melting once more into the blue world of the night. It was almost as if the town had sunk into the depths of the ocean, like some underwater city out of a fairy-tale. It was a truly fantastical scene.

"They say that Qualle looks its most beautiful right after the sun sets."

"Amazing..."

Perhaps overwhelmed by the wonderful sight, Latina almost whispered those words. It was as if she was worried this ephemeral world would crumble away if she spoke too loudly. She stood silently in admiration, her eyes sparkling, and just then, the flow of people passing stopped, allowing the pair the luxury of

having this beautiful scenery all to themselves for a little while.

After passing through the quiet, blue town, they arrived at the restaurant, the Silent Seagull, whose theme differed entirely from its name.

It felt like yet another completely separate world unto itself. The moment Dale and Latina opened the door, they were awash in such dazzling light that it almost made them forget it was night. It was packed with people, both customers enjoying the food as well as uniform-clad employees clad bustling about. On a raised stage in the center of it all, there were musicians playing a gentle, brilliant melody.

“Wooooow...” said Latina, temporarily enraptured by the enthusiasm of the people inside and the flow of music. Her cheeks were rosy, and her eyes were sparkling. While she was holding back her urge to start hopping all about for now, Dale could tell how excited she was as he stood by her side. He could hardly keep from smiling himself.

Apparently, the little princess wanted to act gracefully to match how dressed up she was. While being led to the table, she was even better behaved than usual, not even letting her gaze dart all about like she normally would. As she sat down and acted just a bit prim, she looked even cuter. She was just so charming that Dale couldn't help but go slack jawed. Perhaps he didn't quite meet the qualifications to serve as a lady's escort.

At the cheap restaurants that Dale and Latina usually frequented, all of the food was usually served together on one big plate. But here at the Silent Seagull, each dish was arranged in a gorgeous, tasteful manner and served on its own platter, which excited Latina greatly.

Latina gazed at the péla placed before her, enthusiastically trying to decide how to approach it. The young girl couldn't eat a large amount of food, so she'd made her choices from the menu

very carefully. If she could, she'd like to try all sorts of different hors d'oeuvres and main dishes. She was even interested in the food in front of Dale, too. But she understood that if she ate too much now, she wouldn't make it to dessert.

The scales were fried up with the pale pink skin still attached, making for a truly interesting texture. Just what was the flavor of the orange-colored sauce, which seemed to be made from citrus?

As Dale put his fork into the fish, which had been cooked to be nice and flakey, Latina was paying even more careful attention than usual. Dale came and went from the duke's estate because of his job, so he'd picked up basic manners. When he wanted to, he could conduct himself properly when dining, thanks to having at least a little worldly wisdom. Having never seen him act this way before, Latina seemed to have realized that this was a precious chance to observe proper dining etiquette, even though Dale wasn't explaining anything to her. While glancing intermittently at Dale, she mimicked his movements.

Dale, of course, realized what she was doing, so he took deliberate care to make sure he served as a proper model. Due to his pride as her father, however, he made sure not to let it show on his face that he was putting in such effort.

Once Latina finished her soup filled with the flavors of the ocean and her whitefish péla, a dessert that was also exquisitely presented was carried out before her. The plate had several pieces of cake on it, adorned with carefully cut slices of fruit and sauces of the same colors.

"Woaaaaow..." Latina let out happily while taking care to make sure she wasn't too loud. She was absolutely spellbound, and she gazed at the various pieces atop the plate with the tip of her fork wavering slightly, uncertain where to start. As she settled on her first bite, sliced it off, and put it in her mouth, she looked overjoyed. Meanwhile, Dale stuck with a simple flavored ice. He wouldn't go so far as to say that he disliked such things, but he

didn't eat anything really sweet very often. Honestly, the look on Latina's face was the true dessert here for him. Seeing her so blissful soothed his soul. She was just too cute. That alone was more than worth the cost of the dinner. He'd have to be sure to thank the workers at the inn who had recommended this shop again.

Just then, the music suddenly shifted. The big change in melody made Dale turn his attention towards the stage. A single female musician was strumming a stringed instrument he'd never seen before. She had a purple cloth with an exotic air to it wrapped about her head, and the golden decorations hanging from it swayed back and forth with her movements. The flowing dress she wore over her slender body was also of a sort you didn't often see in Laband. She wore a necklace of large beads on a golden string around her neck.

This foreign-looking woman was playing a foreign-sounding melody. The quiet tune almost seemed to invite homesickness, and it blended in perfectly with the feel of some far-off nation that the town of Qualle had to it.

“Hey, Dale...”

Seeing him looking at the stage, Latina's attention was drawn that way as well, and she tilted her head a bit.

“What is it?”

“Is that woman a devil?”

“Why do you think that?”

The musician had the purple cloth wrapped about her head, so it was impossible to tell if she had horns, which were the devils' most identifying trait. Dale was unable to say one way or another.

Latina pointed and said, “That woman's bracelet is just like

Latina's."

Looking at the musician once more, he saw that the woman had a silver bracelet on her upper left arm. There was a shine coming off of the simple metal ornament, but it blended into her outfit so naturally that he didn't even notice it until Latina said something.

"You're right... It does look a lot like your bracelet."

Was there some deep meaning to that? Humans as a whole didn't know much about devils, so it was no surprise that he had no idea.

"Latina wonders what that bracelet is for..." Latina murmured with a sigh. "Rag told Latina to keep it with her. There's something written on the inside, too."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, but Latina doesn't know what it says. She left where she was born before she learned letters..."

Seeing her somewhat lonely smile, Dale made an immediate decision. He called over the waiter, and along with a tip, he also handed over a message for the musician. It told the name of the inn where they were staying and said that he'd like to meet up with her if she had the time. If she was open to it, then they may be able to hear about the devil race and perhaps even some information related to Latina herself.

Even though Dale had wanted to leave her with good memories of a delicious meal, shop, Latina looked to be sinking into depression as they left the restaurant. Holding hands, they took a detour on the way back to the inn and went for a nighttime walk, which Latina didn't often get to do. Just as Dale had hoped, the novelty swept the gloom away from the young girl's face.

Dale sighed in relief.

I want Latina to smile... thought Dale, a gentle smile on his own face.

Thus, their first day in Qualle came to a close.

†

The next morning, Dale awoke to the sound of rain. That may have actually been for the better, as it made for a good chance to have Latina rest up properly rather than running all about town. While eating breakfast down on the first floor, Dale told Latina they wouldn't be going out today, and she accepted it without putting up a fight.

The rain could be heard from their room, but it wasn't too much of a downpour, so Latina opened the window and looked out at the town of Qualle, which was now a hazy, light-grey color. Occasionally, she'd lean out a bit, seeming to have spotted something; at such times she'd stop and stare carefully at a single spot. She was quietly, calmly enjoying the day in her own way.

Dale took advantage of this chance to carry out a careful inspection of their luggage. It was essential that he not just examine their food supplies, but also made sure their tools were still in good working condition. He'd been putting it off when they camped out and had single-night stays at inns, so this was an important opportunity.

The pair didn't talk much, but they spent this calm, gentle, yet still plenty enjoyable time together in the same place, and after a simple lunch, they took a drowsy nap together, drifting off to the sound of the rain instead of a lullaby.

An answer to Dale's message arrived from the Silent Seagull after their nap, around when Latina was sitting with stationery in front of her and groaning a bit. There was too much she wanted

to write, and she couldn't possibly fit it all on the paper; she didn't know what to do.

After checking the card he was handed, Dale gave the messenger both a tip and a reply. "Well then, please tell her that we'll meet tomorrow afternoon, alright?"

"Very well."

After the messenger departed, Dale noticed Latina was by his side, looking up at him.

"Was that person from the restaurant yesterday?"

"Yeah. They delivered a message from that musician. She said could make time to see us tomorrow night before work starts. Looks like we'll be able to talk to her."

"Is she really a devil, then?"

"I didn't ask all that just yet. I just told her we wanted to talk about her silver bracelet, and she agreed. At the very least, we'll probably be able to hear something about any traditions that might be related to it."

Latina thought for a moment. "There's a lot that Latina doesn't know. She doesn't know anything about devils... Will she know by the time she's an adult?"

"I don't know anything, either. So we can learn together, right?"

"We'll both be learning?"

"Yeah, maybe."

The pair exchanged a smile.

But internally, Dale was thinking, *I've gotta make sure I know*

more than Latina... I can't slip up on that... He broke out in a sweat, secretly worried that if he wasn't careful, this sharp girl would end up passing him by. As her father, he couldn't let her get disillusioned, at least for a while longer. For a little more, at least.

Is this how Kenneth feels...? Now he really understood how his "big bro" felt struggling to come up with new recipes day in and day out.

After dinner on the first floor of the inn, Dale and Latina hurried to bed. At some point, the sound of raindrops ceased.

The next morning, the sky was still cloudy.

When they were preparing to head out to buy food and other perishables for their trip, Latina's eyes absolutely sparkled. She looked up at Dale, clearly filled to the brim with anticipation.

"Dale, Dale! Um, Latina wants to get fish."

"We can't take fresh fish with us, though."

"No, dried fish! There aren't many in Kreuz, but there are lots here! And Kenneth taught her how to prepare them!"

Normally a kid around her age would be interested in souvenirs and sundries, but he felt this was a very fitting declaration for Latina.

Well, I guess it's fine. Latina seems excited, after all.

Such concerns about what "normal" children liked were trivial when Dale saw Latina skip along joyfully as they walked.

Going around the marketplace, they stocked up on medicine and similar items. Because both Dale and Latina could use healing magic, they didn't need much for dealing with wounds, but such spells wouldn't work on illnesses. They needed to keep med-

icine for that on hand.

Just like Latina wanted, they ended up adding dried fish to their stock of rations. From now on, they'd be heading deeper and deeper into the mountains—truly inconvenient terrain. They wouldn't be able to restock their food as often as they had up until now, so it was crucial that they choose things that would last for quite some time.

Carrying what they'd purchased, they entered a cheap restaurant filled with locals for lunch. The bread and hearty seafood stew would have been plenty of food, but when they smelled the fried fish over on the next table, they made a last-minute addition to their order.

When Latina cut through the light breading, steam wafted up from the tender, white flesh. She wanted to eat it while it was still warm, so she stuffed her cheeks full of the piping-hot fish and had to puff the hot air out of her mouth over and over again.

“Looks like it's tasty!”

“It is!”

Latina was always eager to learn more about food, so after they were halfway through, Dale squeezed a lemon over the fish. If he'd done it at the beginning, it would have been too hard for her to tell the flavor of the dish itself.

After finishing their meal, they returned to the inn to drop off their bags. If they left now, they'd make it right on time.

When they arrived at the Silent Seagull once more, the lunch rush was over and there weren't many customers. The musician from the day before yesterday was seated in the corner. Rather than being showy or flashy, the woman gave off a cool, relaxed vibe. Unlike her stage attire, she was wearing an extremely ordinary shirt and long skirt. She had a round hat on her head, so it

was impossible to tell if she had horns or not.

She may have been on guard if Dale had come alone, but he'd brought Latina with him. The adorable little girl was a bit nervous, so she was half-hiding behind Dale, which was quite charming. The woman smiled when she saw her, and when she gestured, they sat down.

"Thanks so much for making time to talk to us. I'm Dale Reki."

"Oh, not at all. So, you have something you want to ask me?"

"Yeah. It's about that bracelet you've got on..." Dale said, looking straight at the silver bangle on her upper left arm.

With a gentle smile, the woman tilted her head. "It's nothing so unusual, is it?"

"Someone I know has something very similar, so I'd like to ask about where it came from—"

"Um...." Latina spoke up, cutting Dale off. "Latina's horns are broken, but she's a devil."

"Latina..."

"Oh, my..."

Both Dale and the woman looked at Latina with surprise. She parted her hair and showed the remains of her horns.

"But Latina's still just a kid, so there's a lot she doesn't know, and she'd like to learn."

Latina understood that Dale was trying to hide the truth because he was thinking of her wellbeing. But that's precisely why she felt the need to say it herself.

That truth was both disadvantageous and dangerous for

Latina. She was afraid that if the woman before her really was a devil, she may realize that Latina was marked as a criminal, which would earn her distaste. Dale had wanted to avoid that if he could, but it wasn't possible at this point, so he steeled himself for the worst.

“But why...? You're so young...”

“I don't know the specifics either.” It was Dale's turn to speak up. “I found her after her father died, and I've been taking care of her ever since. She was even younger then, and the only thing she had on her was a bracelet that looked like yours.”

“This is...” she muttered quietly, putting her hand on her hat. The shape was rather different than Latina's, but she did indeed have horns growing vertically from each temple. “This bracelet was something fathers gave their children back where I came from... the only country belonging to the devil race. It describes the owner's heritage.”

Sure enough, this woman was a devil. She gave her name as Glaros. Rather than being exiled like Latina, she left on her own on a journey to see the world, met and married a human man, and ended up settling down in this town.

“Can I ask you something?” said Glaros.

Dale nodded. “Yeah.”

“How much do you two know about devils?”

“Pretty much nothing, I'd say. She was just too young, so she apparently left her village before she learned much of anything,” Dale responded, and the woman nodded in understanding.



“I see... We devils don’t grow differently than humans when we’re children, so she’s about as young as she looks. I’ve never heard of someone having their horns broken at such a young age,” she said with a pained voice. It would seem that Latina’s circumstances were strange, even to a devil like Glaros. “I come from a country far to the southwest of here called Vassilios, which is ruled by the First Demon Lord. My hometown was on the outskirts of that nation, which is the greatest territory of the devils. Devils have villages spread the world over, but with a proper government ruling over it, Vassilios is the only one that can be called a country.”

“So demon lords really are the kings of the devils?”

“No. The First Demon Lord is the only one with a ‘kingdom’ like you humans have. The others don’t govern any nations,” Glaros replied. “In Vassilios, children are raised by their mothers. Unlike humans, devils don’t have any custom of men and women marrying and living together.”

This was the first time Dale had heard such a thing. He’d faced off against demon lords and the demons serving under them many times for work, but he’d never had a chance to learn about their lifestyles.

He looked Latina. It was hard to tell just what she was thinking, but she was clearly surprised.

“Still, it’s difficult for devils to have a child, so of course fathers want to celebrate the birth of their child as well. When that time comes, they give their child a bracelet with their name engraved on it along with a blessing.”

Glaros took off her bracelet and showed them the reverse side. Dale had never seen the symbols that were engraved there before.

“This is devil script... It’s pretty different compared to human

letters, right? It says here, ‘My name is Korydallos, and I gift this to my beloved child Glaros. I pray that much happiness comes her way.’ Korydallos is my father’s name, and then this is my name, Glaros. And this part is the blessing,” she explained, pointing to the letters as she read them.

Latina stared intently, trying to take it all in. Dale called over an employee of the Silent Seagull and borrowed a pen and paper. With a serious expression on her face, Latina copied down the writing off of the bracelet.

“Is what’s written on the bracelets all the same?” the girl asked as paused in her writing.

“Well, the blessing may vary a bit regionally. But there shouldn’t be too much of a difference.”

“Latina sees,” said the young girl with a nod, before comparing what she’d transcribed to the bracelet itself. After a bit, she started writing on the corner of the paper, a worried look on her face.

“Latina, what’s that?”

“Latina thinks that what was written on her bracelet was like this. Maybe it’s Rag’s name...”

“Could I see?”

After staring at the paper Latina handed her and thinking for a bit, Glaros wrote down something next to Latina’s writing.

“Was it like this, perhaps? This is ‘Smaragdi,’ which is a word meaning a ‘green stone.’”

“Smaragdi... is that Rag’s name?” Latina asked, tilting her head at the word she hadn’t heard before.

“Probably,” replied Glaros with a nod.

“Devils sometimes have their kids refer to them by shortened versions of their names. That may have been the case with your father, too.”

“So Latina was born in Vassilios, the country of the First Demon Lord, then?”

“That may be so. I’ve heard of big communities under the Third and Sixth Demon Lords, but they shouldn’t have any such customs. I only know what I heard from my mother, though.”

“The Third and Sixth Demon Lords?”

Latina was confused, so Dale provided a supplementary explanation.

“The Third Demon Lord is also known the ‘Demon Lord of the Sea.’ That’s apparently because he’s built up a symbiotic relationship with the merfolk out on the eastern frontier. The Sixth Demon Lord, meanwhile, is the ‘Demon Lord of the Giants.’ I hear he was part of a clan of especially large devils, and he has members of that same clan serving under him; he never settles down and always wanders all over instead.”

“Hmm...”

“That’s right. And outside of that, there are just small villages dotted all about. Even as a devil, I don’t know much about those,” Glaros said.

“So... there’s a First Demon Lord around, then?” Latina asked suddenly, jumping into the conversation.

“Huh? Well, if it’s the ‘country of the First Demon Lord,’ then... there must be, right?”

“Really? But the Second Demon Lord killed the First Demon Lord, didn’t he?” Latina said, tilting her head and looking confused. Dale looked over at Glaros, who gave a nod with a shocked

look on her face.

“I’m amazed you knew that, when you’re so young,” she said, sighing in admiration before continuing. “It happened before I left my village. The First Demon Lord was murdered by the Second Demon Lord, causing Vassilios to fall more or less into ruin, which gave me a good excuse to leave. That happened quite some time ago, though. Ever since, up through the present day, the First Demon Lord’s remaining demons and the temples have been maintaining government rule in his absence.”

“So then... Vassilios doesn’t have a demon lord right now?”

“Right. Unlike with human kings, demon lord isn’t a hereditary position.”

“*****, *****, ‘****’ ****” Latina muttered after hearing Glaros’s words. She spoke too quickly for Dale to pick up what she’d said, but Glaros gave a big nod.

“That’s right. It’s like how those called ‘heroes,’ who are beloved by the gods and overturn fate, appear for the other races. For us, when those who are chosen and protected by the gods appear, we call them demon lords.”

“So a new First Demon Lord...”

“If the gods judge that the time has come, we devils will crown a new king.”

After listening thus far, Dale let out a big sigh. “Humans really don’t know a thing about devils... To us, demon lords are just something to be feared.”

Glaros pointed a smile Dale’s way. “I suppose there’s no helping that. Vassilios is a closed-off country that doesn’t interact with other nations very often. But the Demon Lords of Calamity, on the other hand, get directly involved with those outside coun-

tries.”

“Demon Lords of Calamity?”

“I suppose you don’t hear that term much over here... That’s what we devils call the demon lords who have nothing but ill will and malice towards others.”

“So the Demon Lord of War, the Seventh Demon Lord, would be one?”

“Right. And then... there’s the Second Demon Lord, the king of death who loves annihilation and slaughter. The Fourth Demon Lord, an incarnation of disease and plague, is one as well. Even devils fear them and consider them dangerous.”

It was starting to get quite active around them, and they realized the Silent Seagull’s evening rush was fast approaching. More time seemed to have passed while they were talking than Dale thought.

“Oh my, it’s already this late? I’m terribly sorry, but I need to start getting ready for work soon.”

“Not at all, we really appreciate it. You told us even more than we could have hoped for,” Dale said, standing up from his seat and prompting Latina to as well. The young girl gave a small curtsy, and Glaros smiled back and gently pat her head. Latina’s gaze remained fixed on the devil woman.

“Come on, Latina, we’re going.”

“Right!”

Halfway through catching up to Dale as he headed for the Silent Seagull’s exit, Latina suddenly stopped, turned around, and returned to Glaros.

“Um... um... what happened to your husband...?”

Glaros stood silently for a moment and, after thinking on the young girl's words, she realized what exactly she was asking.

In a quiet voice, she told the truth. "He lived a long time for a human, and... I stayed with him until the very end."

Latina's breath caught, but she seemed to have been expecting that answer, so she managed to suppress her emotions. Latina threw out another question. "Did you have children...?"

"Unfortunately, devils aren't granted children often, and... when it's with members of another race, it becomes all the rarer," Glaros responded, once more patting the head of the young girl who was also living amongst humans. The woman knew full well that being a devil living amongst humans meant facing more hardships than just differing customs and appearances.

"Um, then... are you glad you met your husband?"

"...Yes," Glaros responded with a smile. That was precisely why she was still here in this port town, where she'd lived together with her husband, and why she still played the song he had loved so much. "I was definitely happy."

"Then that's good."

Latina put a smile on her face, clearly holding back her tears, and Glaros hugged her tight. Perhaps if she'd managed to have a child with her husband, she would have been able to hug them like this.

On their way back to the inn, Dale stared at Latina as she walked by his side. He didn't know what she had asked Glaros at the end of their visit, but she was gripping his hand tightly like it was a lifeline. It was as if she feared that if she let go, she'd end up lost. Her face was pointed down, and she wasn't taking in the sights of the town in the least.

And so Dale...

“Wah!” When she found herself suddenly looking in the opposite direction, Latina yelped in surprise and blinked her big grey eyes. Feeling like she was floating, she called out, “Dale?”

“Hmm?”

Dale had lifted Latina up and was holding her.

“Latina isn’t a baby. She can walk by herself.”

“You’ve gotten heavy...” He’d done this every day when she was younger, but it had been quite a while since he’d last done it. “You may not be a baby, but you should let me spoil you a bit more. You’re my cute, adorable, precious girl, after all.”

They kept on walking like that, Dale gently stroking Latina’s head all the while. Latina soon docilely placed her arm around Dale’s neck and clung to him. She really was accustomed to doing this.

Just by being lifted up like this, the scenery looked completely different to Latina, and when she looked down, the ground was farther away than it normally was, and she could only see the tips of her feet.

“Dale...”

“Hmm?”

Latina whispered quietly into his ear, her voice full of emotion. “Thank you for everything... Latina loves you.”

Just then, the first star of the night began twinkling through a gap in the clouds.

4: The Young Girl Visits a Beastman Village

It was early morning when the pair departed from Qualle. Thanks to the light cover of clouds remaining from the day before, it felt darker than it normally would at this time.

“What a shame. Normally you’d have a good view of the ocean from this highway.”

“Let’s look forward to seeing it on the way back.”

Their view was now of a grey sky divided by the horizon line from a dull-colored ocean. If the weather had been good, it surely would have been a breathtaking view. Even so, Latina didn’t seem disappointed at all. It was true that they’d be returning this way as well, so she was looking forward to seeing it then.

“We’re heading south from the ocean, but we’re taking a big detour, so it’s more like we’re heading east.”

“Why are we taking a detour?”

“There’s a real rugged mountain range spread out between Kreuz and my home village. If we headed in a straight line, we’d have to climb some steep mountains and cut through places where only animals live. There’d be no chance to rest, so I wouldn’t want to do it even if I were on my own.”

“Latina sees.”

“My home village is also in the mountains, so it’ll be all hilly paths from here on out... And we’re moving away from the capi-

tal, so it'll get more and more desolate, too..."

As they walked down the highway, there were still a fair number of travelers passing by, but around noon and the moment they split off onto a path towards the mountains, everyone disappeared. The road itself also became narrower and less maintained. It was incredibly easy to tell that they were heading towards a less populated area.

"Latina, do you want to ride on the horse?"

"Latina is still fine."

The young girl still seemed to be enjoying herself as they walked along.

As if to show that spring was arriving, small flowers were blossoming by the side of the road. Latina broke out in a happy smile when she spotted them.

It was then that Latina looked up, and light-pink flower petals filled her vision.

"Wooooow..."

She couldn't help but shout out in joy. The road was lined with trees filled with light-pink flowers in full bloom. The small blossoms overhead looked absolutely brilliant, contrasting with the grey sky that served as a backdrop. The flowers adorning the branches all the way to their tips extended towards the sky and the ground.

"It sure is spring... There's a village nearby, so somebody may have planted them..." Dale muttered, but it didn't reach Latina's ears. Right now, her gaze and attention were completely captured by the stunning blossoms in full bloom.

With a bit of a strained smile, Dale stopped walking. "Do you want to take a break, Latina?"

“Yeah!” Latina responded happily, just as he’d expected.

Dale tied the horse’s reins to a nearby tree and sat down at the side of the road. Latina did the same by his side. She looked up with sparkling eyes and followed the petals fluttering down.

Dale pulled out a package he’d had prepared at the inn. Latina at last noticed what he was doing when she heard the sound of him opening the paper. He held it out so she could get a good look at the sandwiches inside.

The two had eaten plenty of fish, Qualle’s specialty, while they were there, but it was hard to tell when they’d be able to eat such seafood like that again, so Dale had had this lunch prepared.

“Latina, which one do you want?”

“Umm... what about you, Dale?”

“I’m fine with whatever.”

After wavering for a while, Latina grabbed a sandwich filled with smoked fish and vegetables. Taking it in both hands, she bit into the corner. Dale started eating his as well, which was soaked in fish oil.

As the pair ate in silence, petals fluttered down around them.

Latina took a drink from the canteen to quench her thirst, watching Blau graze on grass all the while.

By the time Dale finished his second sandwich, Latina was still only halfway through her first. When the contents slipped out as she took a bite, a look of panic crossed on her face and she steadily pulled the slice of fish into her mouth. Each and every thing she did really was cute.

“That was tasty!”

“Oh yeah?”

“The flowers sure are pretty.”

They stayed a while longer even after they’d finished eating, enjoying the beautiful spring scenery. Until the time came to start moving again, Latina sat and stared at the blooming flowers.

Dale smiled when he saw a single light-pink petal clinging to Latina’s platinum hair; it was almost as if it didn’t want to part ways. He decided to wait a little longer before he told her it was there.

Blessed with good weather and nothing impeding their progress, their journey continued on smoothly. There may not have been any big towns along this small country road, but it wasn’t like there weren’t any travelers at all, and Dale knew that if they needed to, they could stop by a nearby village for a place to stay and to stock up on supplies. Even though he was an outsider, he could safely say that this wasn’t a dangerous area, and the villages around here also found visiting travelers an important source of income.

After staying at one such village, the pair arrived at a field of flowers. As if trying to usher in the arrival of spring, the plain beside the road was filled to the brim with wild blooms. The sight made Latina unconsciously to come to a halt. She may have been able to see flower beds and parks with blooming flowers back in Kreuz, but she’d never seen something like this before, where they absolutely filled her field of view.

“We can take a bit of a detour if you want.”

“Is it alright?”

“Just make sure you look out for snakes and stuff.”

“Alright!” Latina replied, immediately rushing into the field of flowers. In no time at all, everything below her torso was hidden by the brilliant blossoms. As she pranced about, the flowers swayed alongside her and petals danced into the air all around her. Seeing the cute and joyful Latina completely surrounded by flowers made for a whimsical scene that wouldn’t lose to any painting.

Yeah, definitely... Dale thought, wanting to give a firm nod. He could confidently declare that anyone would be charmed seeing Latina like this against such a backdrop. It was a real shame that he couldn’t capture this moment and keep it on hand. If he could, he’d flaunt Latina’s cuteness to every single person he met. Oblivious of Dale’s doting thoughts, Latina danced and pranced about the field.

A large butterfly fluttered by in front of Latina’s eyes. She stopped and watched for a while, seeing it off as it flew into the clear blue sky.

She was truly enjoying the trip. It also helped that it was spring, so felt cool and comfortable and there was brilliant scenery wherever you looked.

She’s so happy right now, maybe it’d be a good idea to take her somewhere again after we get back to Kreuz, Dale thought.

As they approached the mountains, the path steadily grew more slanted and the scenery started to change.

They entered a dense forest, but it wasn’t quite as gloomy as the one south of Kreuz. There may have been animals and magical beasts about, but they weren’t vicious enough to attack people. This was a forest that clearly saw frequent traffic.

“There’s a beastman village near here, so this area is pretty safe.”

“Beastman?”

“Ah, right, they’re pretty rare in Laband. I hear there are a lot of them farther out west, though. They’re friendly with humans, so mixed kids are pretty common between the two races, and plenty of them are adventurers, too.”

“Hmm...? Latina didn’t know that.”

“Well, there aren’t many in Kreuz. We should’ve passed by some in Qualle, though...”

Latina wore a slightly awkward expression on her face. She’d been so absorbed in looking at everything, but she’d managed to overlook something so important. You could say that that trait of hers was also what made it so easy for her to get lost.

The trees around them were covered in fresh new bright-green leaves.

Dale split from the road to a narrow path leading deeper into the forest. Thick foliage was at just the right height to smack Latina in the face, so he had her ride on the horse. The young girl’s gaze started to dart about again as she took in her surroundings; she was clearly restless. Dale had to stifle a laugh.

“Where are we going, Dale?”

“We’re going to stay at the beastman village for today. There aren’t any inns there, but I’m going to ask an acquaintance to let us stay with him.”

“Dale’s acquaintance? A friend?”

“He’s more of a relative of sorts rather than a friend... His mom is my dad’s second cousin.”

“Huh?”

Latina didn't quite grasp how they were related, so she tilted her head. Perhaps the concept of an extended family differed between humans and devils.

"It's like he's family of family."

"Hmm..." she said, still not quite understanding.

It was just about evening when they suddenly hit a forest clearing with a little village. It was smaller than not just the towns that they'd stopped at thus far, but the villages as well. It seemed like you could take in the whole of the village with a quick glance. Small houses with stone walls and unpainted wood roofs were huddled closely around a central plaza.

"Wow..."

"Looks like we made it before dark," Dale said with a sigh of relief. They headed towards the village entrance. Most towns were surrounded by walls to protect against magical beasts and intruders, but this village had a simple wooden fence around it instead. Of course, there was no sign of a gatekeeper at the entrance, either.

When they drew close, Latina was shocked as she saw one of the villagers who happened to pass by.

"Wow! Is that person a beastman?"

"That's right. Are you surprised, seeing one for the first time?"

Having heard their conversation, the beastman turned his fur-covered face turned their way.

"Are you visitors? How unusual."

"Yeah. We came to visit the Bündte family. Is it alright if we come in?"

“The Bündtes, huh?” Hearing the name Dale gave, he (from his attire, he was most likely an older male) nodded a few times in understanding. “Considering the time, they should be at their house. Do you need me to show you the way?”

“No, we’re good, thanks.”

As this conversation was taking place, Latina took a long, hard look at the beastman. Normally, staring like that would be rude, but her gaze was filled with nothing but pure curiosity. That was a special privilege reserved for young children, and they could do so without earning any animosity in return.

Beastmen had a rather unique appearance to them. In terms of physique, they didn’t look all that different from the other races. The biggest difference, which separated them even at a glance, was the fur that covered their entire body and varied in color based on the individual. Their faces were no exception and were also animalistic, their shape, most closely resembling those of dogs, though there was a touch of human as well. Add triangular ears to the top of their heads and tails to their behinds, and you had the basic traits of the race known as beastmen.

“Dale, you’re related to a beastman?” she asked, apparently questioning this after seeing a beastman for the first time.

Seeing Latina’s confusion, Dale pointed towards one of the houses in the village. “Look, that’s Bündte’s house... He’s a mix of human and beastman.”

“Mix?”

“Right. Humans and beastmen are close in nature, so they can have kids together. They’re born looking like humans, but with the ears and tails of beastmen.”

The seven races could all have children with one another, as genetically, they were largely similar. But when the races in ques-

tion vastly differed in terms of physical characteristics, the children would be born as one parent's race rather than a mix of both. For example, if a child was born to a merfolk mother and a human father, it could be either of those races. There was a greater tendency for the child to be born the mother's race in such situations, but it was by no means definite.

Outside of the race itself, though, the child would have a mix of both parents' traits; it wasn't as though they inherited none of the second parent's genetic information. Revisiting our example, it wouldn't be odd at all for the child to be a merfolk who looked like their father or a human who looked like their mother.

However, things were a little different when the races were genetically close: a "mix" could be born. For example, a child of a human and a beastman would look like a human with the ears and tail of a beastman, making for a mix of traits from both races. It was only in such cases, where offspring had traits of two races, that such children were referred to as "mixes."

Latina's attention was naturally drawn to the animal ears twitching before her very eyes as she listened to this explanation. Though they were relatives, it was only a distant relationship, so the man didn't look much like Dale. If they shared anything in common, it was the light brown tips on the black fur of the beastman's ears and tail.

"And so, that's the deal with guys like me," said the man with a wide grin.

"Still, Joseph... you've gotten even fatter, haven't you?"

The middle-aged man, a human and beastman mix by the name of Joseph Bündte, just kept on smiling, entirely unaffected by Dale's words. Both his arms and his belly were quite rotund, and his already thin eyes looked even more narrow thanks to his build. Triangular ears popped up straight out of his short-cut black hair.

“Thanks to how happy my life is, I just couldn’t help but plump up. Cute, don’t you think?” Joseph smiled with a grin that wouldn’t lose out to even a doting idiot like Dale.

He held a beastman toddler cradled in his arms. A poofy, black ball of fluff, this was the long-awaited first child of the Bündte family.

“I’m a human, so I’m not the best at telling when it comes to beastmen...” Dale muttered. Latina reached out and pet the sleeping toddler.

“She’s a real cute little girl!”

“She is, isn’t she!”

“Her eyes look like her mother’s, but her face looks like yours, Mr. Joseph.”

“Yeah, that’s right!

Dale felt conflicted seeing Joseph so satisfied.

“Um, Latina...?”

“Hmm?”

“You can tell beastmen apart?”

“Huh?” Latina tilted her head, confused by Dale’s question.

A human could maybe tell beastmen apart by their build or the color of their fur, but Dale found it hard to even tell if a beastman was a man or a woman by looking at their face.

“I mean, everyone looks different, right?”

“I see... so you can tell...”

With this unexpected development, Dale realized again just how amazing devils were. They were said to naturally possess amazing abilities, and it seemed that was no exaggeration.

“Your wife is really pretty.”

“Isn’t she?”

Joseph’s wife was a pure-blooded beastman. Dale thought her white fur was especially shiny and the way her hands and feet had a bit of light grey to them was unusual, but that was all. He frankly had no idea if she was beautiful or not.

“Still, Latina thinks that Maya will grow up to be more cute than beautiful,” Latina said with a smile. Dale, however, was unable to either agree or disagree. He was so clueless on the matter that when he’d first seen the baby’s black fur, he’d thought *she* might be a *he*.

“She’s really amazing...”

“You’ve got some nice fur yourself, little miss,” Joseph said, tousling Latina’s hair.

“So that’s the sort of thing that beastmen compliment...” Dale muttered to himself, grasping just how tricky communication between different cultures could be.



The small house that Joseph and his family lived in was at the northern end of the village. It had a simple, two-room layout with just a living and dining room, which was normal for these homes. The wood-based rooms were overflowing with a natural feel, and the living room had a single-board table at its center, with all sorts of other various items strewn about. Perhaps because it felt so lived in, it felt cozy and secure rather than uncomfortable.

“If you’re stopping off here, then you must be on your way back to your village, right?” Joseph asked Dale, who was in the process of giving Joseph’s wife, Ute, a bottle of wine from Kreuz and some dried fish from Qualle as gifts.

“Yeah.”

“Is your grandma still hanging in there?”

“Well, I haven’t heard anything about her dying, at least... In the last letter I got, it said she still seemed to be going strong and hadn’t even let my dad take over as head of the family.”

“‘Seemed to be,’ huh?”

“Yeah.”

Latina didn’t have much interest in the conversation the two men were having. Her focus was stuck on the sleeping Maya, as well as Ute, who was busy in the kitchen. Because she was in someone else’s house, Latina seemed to be holding herself back from asking to help, but it was obvious that she was immensely curious about the lifestyles of both beastmen and country folk. She sat there, sorely anxious, until Ute realized this and beckoned her over with a smile. Latina hurried over in an instant.

“Wooow...” Latina stared with big round eyes as Ute skillfully prepared some wild vegetables. “How do you eat this?”

“You usually just eat this part. Have you not seen one before?”

“There aren’t any mountains near Kreuz.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

Latina got to work, frequently glancing over to carefully watch Ute’s hands. Considering the girl was learning by example, Ute was shocked to see how well she was managing. She looked younger than she was, but she was more skilled than kids her own age when it came to housework.

Once she started helping, Latina didn’t want to sit still, so she restlessly scurried about behind Ute, looking for something to do.

Many women didn’t like others touching things in their own kitchen, but an exception could be made when it came to Latina. After all, she was just too charming as she worked away with a smile on her face.

Around when Dale and Joseph’s conversation moved to discussing the latest rumors from the capital, wooden plates and a pot filled with stew made from plenty of meat and herbs for flavor were placed on the table. It was also accompanied by some bread of a sort that wasn’t seen in Kreuz.

Maya had been sleeping soundly in Joseph’s arms, but her nose started to twitch, perhaps reacting to the smells. Her eyes, the same shade of green as her mother’s, shot open. After sitting absentmindedly for a moment, she looked shocked at having spotted strangers in her home.

Looking worried, she clung tight to Joseph. He nodded with satisfaction. “What do you think? Cute, isn’t she?”

“What are you saying? My kid’s pretty cute herself!” Not wanting to lose, Dale pointed at Latina as she carried in a bowl filled with the wild vegetables.

“Hmm?”

Latina stared, puzzled at having been suddenly thrust into the conversation.

†

“Hello, Maya. La-ti-na,” said Latina, pointing to herself.

“Hmm? Watia?”

“Nice to meet you!”

Maya was still feeling nervous during this exchange, but in no time at all, she was completely attached to Latina, and Latina was completely crazy about her, too.

During dinner, Latina ended up hovering over her and wiped Maya’s face when the toddler tried to bring a spoonful of stew to her mouth with still-unsteady hands. Latina seemed to take being someone’s “big sister” very seriously after always being the one helped by others back in Kreuz.

“She sure is cute! (My Latina)”

“Yeah, she is! (My Maya)”

The pair of men nodded in satisfaction to one another as they watched the two happy young girls interacting. Meanwhile, Ute just kept on eating and paying them no mind, so their foolishness lacked a straight man. As long as everyone was happy, there was no problem.

“Mrs. Ute, this stew is delicious. What meat did you use?”

“Wild boar. There are a lot of them around here.”

“Wow...”

Latina brought the spoon to her mouth and chewed on a big chunk of meat. The dish was made to emphasize the meat as its

main flavor, so herbs had only been used lightly for seasoning. Latina seemed to be truly enjoying her meal, but she was the one who ate the least amongst the group. Even Maya, who could still only manage baby talk, was eating as much as her, and Ute and Joseph were both eating more than Latina and Dale put together. Beastmen were generally big eaters.

“So, are you two leaving tomorrow?”

“That was the plan, but is something up?”

“The men from the village are all going out hunting tomorrow. If it goes well, then we’ll have plenty of extra meat, so we could give you some. You should leave after that.”

“Is it gonna be that large-scale of a hunt?”

Joseph nonchalantly replied, “We got a prophecy from the oracle of Banafsaj.”

The second she heard that, Latina shot straight up and dropped her spoon with a loud clatter. It was rare to see her act so ill-mannered.

“Latina...?”

“...”

She went still, her face pointed down towards the ground. She didn’t even respond to Dale calling her name. He had no idea what had brought on this sudden change.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing. Latina is fine.”

Even after being asked again, Latina kept her expression composed. She picked up her spoon once more and started eating in silence. For the rest of dinner, Latina didn’t say another word.

Latina remained silent even when they were preparing for bed in a corner of the living room. It may not have been the same as having a comfortable bed, but after many days of camping outside, it was nice to be able to rest in a warm place where they didn't need to worry about the weather or someone attacking them.

Wrapped up in a blanket, Latina placed her head up against Dale's back.

"Are you alright, Latina?"

"Latina is fine..."

Hearing her say that again, Dale let out a sigh. She really did take too much on herself, and she never complained about anything.

Dale turned around to face Latina and hugged her tight, blanket and all. They lay together like that, with Dale gently patting her back to soothe her.

"Dale?"

Dale smiled, pulling the blanket up over himself as well. Latina felt a sense of security having him at her side, and Dale was plenty aware of that. He wanted to be there to support her when she was worried.

Perhaps because those feelings had gotten across, Latina closed her eyes as she lay in Dale's arms and muttered, "Dale... will you stay with Latina?"

"Yeah."

"Then... Latina really is okay."

Dale watched over her silently as he waited for her to drift off, and the entire time, he thought about what could have frightened

her so much. Back when they'd first met, she'd often fall asleep gripping his clothes tightly, a manifestation of her unease. But lately, while she may have still asked to sleep by his side, she didn't cling to him as anxiously.

“Banafsaj...”

Latina had started acting strangely right after hearing that god's name.

Then maybe the reason she was driven out of her village was because...

There was no temple of Banafsaj in Kreuz. This was because temples were managed by those with divine protection, and Banafsaj's divine protection hardly ever appeared in humans. And so, as a town of humans, no such temple was ever built there. Humans also didn't worship Banafsaj much, and since they didn't often receive the god's blessing, he was more of a vague presence to them compared to the other gods.

However, that wasn't the case when it came to the other races.

Banafsaj's divine protection granted the unique power to catch glimpses of the future. What the user could see, though, was limited by how powerful their divine protection was. The ability to sense the weather and disasters was, of course, incredibly important to the races who had limited numbers, as such knowledge helped them protect themselves.

The words of a priest of Banafsaj held great weight, and for non-human races, that weight likely far eclipsed those of other gods' clerics. Naturally, though, no one would ever say so.

“Even a high priest can only vaguely read a person's future, though...” Dale gently stroked Latina's back over and over. “And there would be countless ways to interpret it, so it should be possible to oppose it... Why did the people from your village decide

your fate based on something so vague...?”

Dale’s whisper was full of pain and sadness, but in the silence of the night, there was no one to hear it.

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“Take care!”

“Feel free to get your hopes up!”

Seeing off Joseph in the morning mists, Latina clung tightly to Dale’s side.

It was still far earlier than when she normally woke up, but when Dale moved to get out of bed, Latina had leaped up in a hurry as well. Dale had let out a strained laugh, but he simply stroked Latina’s head without saying anything.

This entire time, she had stuck by Dale’s side, looking down at the ground. Latina normally liked to keep moving and was always running all about, but now she seemed like a whole different person. Usually, she also would have been excited by the wheat porridge Ute made for breakfast, as it was a recipe she never saw in Kreuz. But instead she’d silently, emotionlessly eaten her meal.

It was like she was hiding something, or couldn’t find something, or like she was holding her breath, waiting for something terrifying to pass by.

“Watia? Nummy?” It was the innocent smile of this toddler that changed the mood. She was holding her spoon out to Latina with a wide grin. Unfortunately, more than half of the contents spilled out when she did that, but Maya didn’t seem to mind.

“Maya... Yeah, it’s yummy.”

As Latina forced a smile, Maya blinked in confusion. And then, the toddler suddenly looked distressed.

“Watia, does it huwt? Does it?”

“...?!”

As Latina’s expression shifted to one of surprise, Maya broke out in tears.

“Does it huwt? Uh, uh, uh...”

“Maya?”

“Waaaaaaaaaah!”

Latina’s shock was now focused on Maya’s sudden outburst. Dale found it somehow refreshing to see Latina so flustered.

“Huh? Maya... what’s wrong?”

“Little ones like her are sensitive to the emotions of those around them.” Ute scooped up Maya with a practiced motion and started consoling her wailing child. Completely dazed, Latina wore a slightly troubled smile. “You should cry when you need to too, Latina. When it hurts, or you’re sad, or it’s scary. Adults don’t mind.”

Latina’s dumbfounded expression was now being swayed by a different emotion entirely. Her big eyes grew moist, and in no time at all, she was unable to hold it back anymore, and the tears started pouring out.

“Uh, uh...”

Dale stood silently by her side and pat her head as he always did, and Latina hugged him tight as she wept. The sound of the two girls crying went on for a while, echoing through the kitchen.

Maya was back to normal soon after she stopped crying, and she finished eating her breakfast, not caring that it was now cold. Latina apparently wasn’t able to end things so cleanly, so she

sipped at the herbal tea Ute had given her, her face still stained from tears.

Dale bowed to Ute, who had wordless put on tea and given Latina soft, clean tissues while waiting for her to calm down. “Thank you, and sorry for the trouble.”

“It’s no trouble at all. I don’t know what made her so afraid, but oftentimes having a good cry helps you feel better, right? She’s still so young, so she doesn’t need to push herself so hard.”

Dale found it hard to read beastman expressions, but from the tone of her voice, he figured that Ute was probably smiling.

“Mrs. Ute, Latina is sorry...” Latina said in apology.

“There’s nothing to apologize for. It’s kids’ jobs to cause trouble for us adults.”

Dale may have had trouble telling things about beastmen based on looks alone, but there was something he did know.

Joseph really did choose a good wife... Dale thought from the depths of his heart.

“Dale...”

“Hmm?”

“Latina was scared.”

“I see.”

Dale just silently took in her frail, wavering words.

“They... said that Latina was a bad child. So she can’t go back to where she was born... That’s what was prophesized...”

“Latina...”

“Latina’s family said it was wrong. That Latina wasn’t bad. But, but... Rag died because of Latina. It was because he went with her...” Latina’s eyes, pointed towards Dale, were once more filled with tears. Even so, she kept on talking. “Latina’s definitely a bad child, just like the prophecy said.”

“Latina, do you remember the details of that prophecy?”

After thinking on Dale’s question for a bit, Latina gave a small shake of her head. “Latina doesn’t know... The people around her said a lot, but she was just too scared...”

“I see. But your family said you weren’t bad, right?”

“Yeah.”

With a smile on his face, Dale gently placed his forehead against Latina’s.

“The ‘words of the gods’ are hard for people to understand, and that’s even truer of a high-level prophecy like reading a person’s fate. So I’d say your family’s statement that you’re not bad may be the right one.”

“Huh...?”

“At the very least, your family didn’t believe that prophecy, so that means that what it said wasn’t absolute.”

Latina looked truly shocked at what Dale had said. She’d never considered that possibility before. “Dale...”

“I probably know more about divine protection than you do. You don’t have any, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I do. It’s not from Banafsaj, but... I know full well what sort of thing divine protection really is.”

Latina smiled just a bit as she stared at him. “You’re like a god, Dale... You’re always helping Latina out. You give Latina a lot of what she wants... If it’s the gods that let Latina meet you, then maybe she doesn’t need to be so scared...”

Though Dale had divine protection, he wasn’t overly devout. But even so, he did occasionally feel like praying. For this girl to be happy. For her to grow up healthy. And if it was the gods who had let him meet her...

Latina finally calmed back down after noon. That was right around when the men who had gone out hunting returned, driving the whole village into a boisterous uproar. Drawn by the excitement, Dale and company headed to the village plaza to see the fruits of the hunt. Latina stood there holding hands with Maya, her mouth wide-open in amazement.

“Bowr!” Maya was pointing at the spoils of the day’s hunt.

“Boars sure are big...”

“Meet!”

“Do you like meat, Maya?”

“Yuh!”

It was incredibly calming, seeing the two young girls happily converse. After watching for a bit, Dale calmed right down.

“Latina.”

“Hmm?”

“Those are magical beasts. A normal boar would look like it was that thing’s baby in comparison.”

“Really?” She seemed truly surprised.

It was definitely better to correct the misunderstanding before Latina committed something false to memory. The beasts that were big enough to be compared to the surrounding houses were most certainly not regular boars. There were two of them lined up in the square, so it had definitely been a successful hunt.

Though its scope was limited, the divine protection of the oracle of Banafsaj allowed her to predict things that were dangerous to the village, and it would seem that this time around, she had sensed the presence of those magical beasts.

Boar-type magical beasts were frequently found nearby the village, so the people there often ate their meat. However, considering the beasts’ massive size, they were obviously dangerous. Because the oracle was able to help remove that danger before it struck, she was an incredibly important person.

In a daze, Latina watched over the beastmen carrying out their duties. They were about to start butchering the beasts. The intestines needed to be dealt with because they spoiled easily, and there was also the issue of the space the creatures were taking up, so the villagers needed to hurriedly get the meat sliced down into more manageable bits.

“You don’t find this grotesque?”

“Latina thinks this is also part of her studies, too.”

“I think you could just leave this sort of stuff to butchers... And these are just too big, so I’m not sure you’ll learn much from this anyway.”

“Hmm... that’s true.”

The carving knife one of the men was carrying honestly looked more like a two-handed great sword. Dale couldn’t imagine that

Latina would ever be able to handle such a thing, even after she had grown up. It was just too big for her.

“Watia, wet’s pway!” Maya was tugging on Latina’s hand.

This sight was commonplace to the toddler, so she didn’t seem to have any interest in it at all. Latina looked down at her and then started walking, looking completely satisfied.

“Dale?”

“Right, take care. Just don’t leave the village.”

“Okay!”

Maya continued to pull Latina along the entire time she was getting permission from Dale, and after they got the okay, the two girls went for a walk around the village.

The village may have been a small one, but even so, it was full of things that Latina had never seen before. And yet, she couldn’t pay careful attention to those things. After all, right now she was a “big sister,” so she couldn’t take her eyes off of little Maya. With that modest sense of duty in her heart, she chased after the young toddler, who was steadily pushing ahead.

Their activity ended up being a little too intense to call a walk, and by the time Maya lost interest, the girls’ hair and clothes were full of leaves and branches. Maya had chosen their route with great creativity.

“Sit still for a second, Maya, alright?”

“Yuh!”

Latina carefully removed the leaves embedded in the soft hair on Maya’s head. She needed to be careful not to pull too hard and hurt her.

While Latina enthusiastically carried out her task, her hands came into contact with Maya's fluffy fur. Being ticklish, the beastchild tilted her head as if trying to get away, but for some reason, Maya's head remained touching Latina's hands.

"It's so fluffy..."

Latina went ahead and buried her face in Maya's fur. It was soft and felt very nice to the touch.

"Watia?"

"You're so fluffy, Maya!"

"Heehee..."

Latina tried gently stroking Maya's head, her hand sinking into the soft fur. It felt even better than she'd imagined, so Latina got her fill of the fluff, running her hand through it to her heart's content. Maya didn't seem to dislike it at all, and she just kept giggling while twisting her body about like she was being tickled.

"Watia, fwuffy?"

"Fluffy!"

There wasn't any special meaning to this exchange, so they both broke out laughing.

Realizing that the fur under Maya's chin was especially soft, Latina started petting her there, and the girl giggled happily. Apparently, she was quite fond of having Latina pet her. Latina was also totally entranced by Maya's fluffy fur. Because she was still a toddler, Maya was still covered in downy fuzz, which had been diligently and lovingly maintained, a testament to her father's doting nature. She was at peak fluff capacity.

After getting over her ticklishness, Maya looked almost intoxicated. She turned over sleepily, positioning herself to be pet even

more. It was as if she was trying to say, “I leave it up to you.”

“Watia, pet, pet!”

“Here?”

“More!”

“Alright.”

“Heehee...”

Latina’s petting was enough to make a beastman her captive. It was at that instant that a glimpse of a new ability of Latina’s first showed itself.

It was midevening when a satisfied Maya and a tired, yet somehow accomplished-looking Latina returned, holding hands.

“Watia!” Even inside the house, Maya was on Latina’s heels. “Wet’s pway!”

Dale had been checking over the map, and naturally, this charming scene brought a peaceful expression to his face. “You seem to be pretty well liked, Latina.”

“Yeah. Latina is getting along well with Maya.”

The sight of Latina smiling and hugging the tiny Maya tight hit Dale so hard enough that he had a revelation: he should buy her a big stuffed animal as soon as they got back to Kreuz. Why hadn’t he gotten her one yet?

He hung his head in shame.

Such a cute item would pair well with cute Latina, and if he got one big enough to hug tightly, it’d surely help soothe her loneli-

ness when he was away. Where did they sell them...? No wait, even if they weren't available off the shelf, he could always put in a special order.

He looked up at the sky with a hopeful, beaming smile.

"Strange?" Maya asked, pointing at Dale and his exaggerated actions.

"Hmm? No, it's nothing. Dale acts like that every now and again," Latina responded.

It was a surprisingly severe assessment, but fortunately those words didn't reach Dale's ears.

When night fell, Maya also pulled Latina into her bed. Latina hesitated a bit, as she normally slept next to Dale. However, she didn't want to have regrets when she had to say goodbye when they left tomorrow morning.

Seeing Latina with her cherubic sleeping face and the fluffy Maya looking completely satisfied and sleeping cuddled together was almost too much for the two doting idiots.

The two girls had grown quite close, but the time did indeed come for them to say goodbye.

"Nooooooooooooooooo! Watia! Don't wanna!"

Maya's cries resounded through the early-morning beastman village. Pulled away from Latina and now tightly held in Joseph's arms, Maya was bawling her eyes out and thrashing, trying to escape.

"Nooooo! Maya hates Daddy! She wants Watia!"

It was impossible to tell just how much damage his beloved daughter's words inflicted on Joseph, but his triangular ears, normally pointed straight up, now drooped pathetically.

Dale looked at Latina standing at his side and saw her eyes were starting to grow a little moist in response to Maya's tears. She sniffled a bit.

"Go say goodbye. And that it's okay, we'll come again on our way back."

"Yeah..."

Looking downhearted, Latina approached Maya, and the toddler stretched her tiny arms out as hard as she could, struggling all the while.

"Watia! Watia!"

"Maya..." Latina looked like she was about to cry herself as she searched for words. "Take care, Maya... Latina will come to play again..."

"Watia..."

When Latina said that, Maya stopped crying and broke out in a smile and waved goodbye... or not.

"Nooooo! Maya wants Watia!!"

She just started crying even harder. There was no such thing as a toddler who could be persuaded so easily.

"Agh, geez! Just get out of here already! She'll give up eventually!" Joseph exclaimed, struggling to hold back his beloved daughter as she tried to escape.

"Nooooooooo! Watia! Watia!"

“If you wait for Maya to stop crying, it’ll be night. Take care and get going,” Ute calmly urged them along with a strained smile at her daughter’s lamentations.

“Well then... thanks for letting us stay with you. I’m thinking we’ll probably impose on you on the way back, too.”

“Got it. Take care.”

“Thank you so much... Maya, bye-bye,” Latina said with a quick bow of her head. Expecting her footsteps would grow heavy before too long, Dale had her ride on the horse.

“Get out of here already! Have a safe trip!”

With Joseph’s voice to their back, Dale took hold of the reins and started walking. Just as he’d expected, Latina kept turning back and looking at Maya. They could still hear the toddler’s cries even after they exited the village and could no longer see the Bündte family.

We’re probably bothering the neighbors...

Breaking out in a bit of a cold sweat, Dale walked along the narrow path through the forest. He decided not to look back at Latina, who was still sniffing a bit.

“Hopefully you’ll be able to play on the way back, too.”

“Yeah...”

She was feeling sad at having to part ways, so that was a nice thought for Latina.

While thinking such things, they walked through the forest with the light filtering through the trees and creating complex shadows on the ground.

Interlude: The Residents of Kreuz, While the Young Girl is Away

Dear Rita,

How are you? How is the baby in your belly? Are Kenneth and the customers doing okay, too?

Dale and I are doing very well. Dale says we're making good progress, too.

After we left Qualle, we visited a beastman village. We stayed at Dale's relative's house. I asked him what a relative was, and he taught me that it meant family of family. Dale has a lot of family.

A lot happened on the way here, too.

I saw a lot of trees with pink flowers blooming on them. It was very pretty, seeing the petals flutter down while Dale and I took a break and ate sandwiches. I wish you could see it, too. It'd be nice if they were in Kreuz as well. Also...

"Thank you," Rita said, checking the sender after receiving the letter from the deliveryman.

She signed for it. The young man, who looked like any normal adventurer aside from the moss-green bag over his shoulder, pointed a business-like smile her way. "Think nothing of it. I hope

you'll keep using our services in the future!"

That moss-green messenger bag and the emblem of a letter with wings on it were the trademarks of the largest delivery guild in the world.

Being a deliveryman was the primary occupation for those who possessed Center affinity but didn't have much power. They would use their magic to train and use birds to deliver letters. (The species varied based on the strength of the deliveryman's mana, with the stronger deliverymen even employing magical beasts.)

Towns the size of Kreuz and Qualle had branch offices from which you could have deliveries made over quite a wide area, though there were some restrictions. Small settlements like the beastman village, meanwhile, had to wait for a deliveryman to periodically visit.

Rita carefully opened up the envelope she'd received. It was quite thick, and inside there was a second envelope. It obviously cost postage to have a letter delivered, so Latina had sent letters for both Rita and Chloe together in order to save on the fee. She really was a practical girl.

"A letter came from Latina for Chloe, Kenneth. Could you take care of it when you head out for restocking?"

"Yeah, got it."

And that's how it was decided that Kenneth would take the letter to Chloe's house when he went to the eastern district for restocking.

"Looks like their trip is going smoothly... Well, they planned to take it slowly, right?"

"Where are they now?"

“It says they were at a beastman village, at least when this was written.”

“Oh right, Dale had a relative there. There aren’t many houses past that point, so of course he’d stop there, since he has Latina with him...” Taking a quick glance over the letter, Kenneth gave a single nod. “They’re going slower compared to if he went alone, of course, but... they’re going a lot quicker than we calculated before they left. Latina must be working really hard to keep up a good walking pace.”

Dale had worked with Kenneth to put together an itinerary before leaving on their trip. What they’d settled on would be no problem for someone with plenty of stamina and used to traveling, like Dale, but it was hard to guess how it would go with Latina accompanying him. That’s why Dale sought his “big bro’s” advice and used Kenneth’s experience from when he had taken jobs escorting people from town to town as a basis to schedule things out, and also why Dale had brought along plenty of rations and others supplies.

“Seems like Latina’s enjoying herself,” Rita said with a light chuckle while carefully reading through the letter. Normally, when she was dealing with documents for work, she’d be done reading this much in no time at all, but now she treated each and every word as incredibly precious. Seeing Rita like that, Kenneth broke out in a smile. “I didn’t think it’d get this quiet without Latina around.”

“You won’t be able to say that for too much longer,” Kenneth said, looking at his wife’s now visibly bulging stomach, and she responded with a smile.

“Latina will be a good big sister, don’t you think?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s pretty quiet in the shop, too.”

Kenneth let out a sigh. “Geez, those guys... That’s eating into our profits, right?”

“It’s like we’ve gone back to before Latina started helping out.” As Rita was in charge of managing the books, she let out a strained laugh.

When compared to the other shops in Kreuz that served as bases for adventurers, the Dancing Ocelot was peculiar in that the regulars were all veterans and those who marketed themselves based on how highly skilled they were. Newcomers tended to disappear pretty fast after coming face to face with them.

The adorable Latina had become something of a buffer between rookies and those intimidating regulars. In addition to Kenneth’s cooking and the cheap price of food, the cute young girl had become known as one of the shop’s selling points.

Ever since Latina left on her trip, though, the rookies had become more hesitant to visit, and the regulars stopped staying very long. Latina had contributed to the Dancing Ocelot’s sales through more than just her work.

“Dale changed when Latina first came here, but she had an awful big effect on the shop, too.”

“That’s true.”

“Maybe we could start letting Latina handle some cooking...”

“Then you could leave the midday rush to me.”

Rita smiled when Kenneth said that. “That time may come sooner than we think.”

As Latina continued to grow day by day, she was seeing and experiencing more and more and growing closer to adulthood. Kenneth and Rita were looking forward to seeing how she’d matured, as she was definitely becoming a splendid young lady.

...The journey has been really fun. But I'm really looking forward to telling you and Kenneth all about it. And I was really happy where you saw us off and said 'Take care.' I'm enjoying the trip so much because I know that when I say 'I'm back,' you'll be there to say 'Welcome home.'

I'll keep on listening to Dale, and won't forget what you warned me about. I'll make it back safely to Kreuz. Take care of yourself, Rita. And the baby, too. And please tell Kenneth and the customers to do the same.

Sincerely,

Latina

Rita carefully placed the letter from Latina back in the envelope and put it away in a drawer.

"You don't have to say something so silly..."

Of course she'd say, "Welcome home" when Latina returned.

"This is your place to return to, right?"

The young girl had come to think of this as the home she'd come back to.

"Take care..." Rita muttered quietly, reciting a prayer to the god she felt closest to.

†

At the entrance to their classroom in the temple of Asfar,

Chloe called this out to her friend, Sylvia.

“Sylvia, Latina sent a letter!”

“Hmm... Is she doing well?”

“Well, we’re talking about Latina, so it’s hard to tell, but I’d say she seems to be.”

Sylvia Fal had become friends with everyone after they’d started going to school. Since she got along so well with Chloe, she’d also become close to her best friend, Latina. Her father was a guardsman serving at the lord’s manner, so she lived in the upper-class residential area in the western district. However, she was rather relaxed by nature and had no problem being friends with the other two girls, who lived in the rougher parts of town.

Over half a month had passed since Latina left Kreuz. She’d be staying for a while once they reached their destination, so they wouldn’t see her again until around when the seasons changed. The girls would be able to send her letters once they reached Dale’s village, though. Chloe wasn’t very strong when it came to studying, nor was she much of a writer, but she decided to write some of what was going around Kreuz and the like to her friend.

I don’t want there to be all sorts of things that only Latina doesn’t know when she gets back, Chloe thought.

“She says after crossing the ocean, they visited a beastman village.”

“I’ve never seen a beastman in Kreuz. Adventurers who might be mixes come through every now and again, though.”

“I never saw any when I went to play at Latina’s place.”

“I see... I’d like to see one,” Sylvia said, and she looked like she was staring somewhere far-off.

Sylvia had been born with divine protection from Akhdar, the god of travelers, so she was predisposed to being curious about foreign lands. Those who had divine protection from Akhdar had an almost instinctual desire to visit worlds they hadn't seen and gather information they didn't know.

“Are you going to join the temple after you finish with school, Sylvia?”

“What should I do, I wonder...?” Sylvia was lost in thought in response to Chloe's question, resting her head upon her joined hands. “Joining the temple would be quickest, wouldn't it...? And I could study magic then, too.”

“You can use magic, Sylvia?”

“I learned that I have the aptitude, thanks to Latina.”

Because her friends were interested in magic, Latina had taught them the language of spells. Sure enough, most of them couldn't even manage the pronunciation, but Sylvia was one of the few that had a talent for it. Sylvia dreamed of someday going to the country of the devils, Vassilios, so Latina had taught her devil greetings and terms for everyday conversation rather than incantations.

“What about you, Chloe?”

“I'm gonna carry on the family business. I've been enjoying that sort of work a lot lately.”

“Then maybe I'll have you make me some clothes when we're adults...”

“Make it something expensive, then!”

While they talking, Rudy passed by.

“Chloe!” he yelled out and tossed a small black fragment at

her. Immediately realizing what that was, she hurriedly thrust out her hand to catch it so it wouldn't drop.

"Hey! Rudy, you idiot! What do you think you're doing?!"

"What? I did a good job, and I gave it back to you," said Rudy, tilting his head at Chloe's complaint.

"Wait, so you did it?"

"W-What? It was hard, and it was tough to use the machines, so I made sure to practice first. Is that a problem?" Feeling awkward, he looked away.

"What's that? A rock?" Sylvia asked, and Chloe opened her clenched hand.

The black fragment had clearly been carefully polished by machine. As the light hit it, it let off a warm shine. Chloe held up the small item, which had been processed with great care, and watched it reflect the light.

"It's pretty, isn't it? Latina gave it to me."

"Latina did?"

"Yeah. She said I could have it, since I'd treasure it."

"Why did Rudy have it?"

"I was wondering how to have it polished, and since he had files and stuff at his house, I asked him to do it." She was glad for that, but he was still overly cheeky, so Chloe shrugged her shoulders in exasperation. "People who can't be honest with their feelings sure are a pain, aren't they?"

"Boys really do all act like kids." They were able to talk like that because girls their age tended to be more mature than boys.

The item in question was the horn that Latina had broken off. Chloe had thought it was beautiful ever since she first saw it.



She couldn't help but feel frustrated and sad when Latina broke off such a pretty piece of herself. Not wanting to let it be thrown away like it was trash, she had asked Latina if she could have it. At first, Chloe had wanted to do something with it herself, but a devil's horn wasn't something a young girl without the proper tools could handle. She'd ended up asking for Rudy's help and having him process it for her.

"By the way, Rudy, what are you going to do after finishing school?" Chloe asked conversationally, not really meaning anything by it. She only asked because Rudy had butted in when she was discussing it with Sylvia.

"Wha... n-nothing... That has nothing to do with you, right?"

Seeing his overly suspicious reaction, the two girls looked at one another and grinned wide. They were like predators who had cornered their prey.

"Hmm... What are you thinking, I wonder...?"

"N-Nothing! What does it matter, anyway?!"

"Well, fine, but..."

"By the way, a letter from Latina arrived."

"W-W-Why are you bringing up Latina now?!"

"Huh? So you don't care about her, then?"

"That's not it...!"

"If you do, then you should just say so. Right?"

"Yeah!"

"...!"

Marcel and Anthony, who were watching from further away, exchanged subtle smiles at seeing Rudy let out this silent scream and stamp his feet.

“Chloe and Sylvia were going to corner him anyway, so he should’ve just given up from the start,” asserted Marcel with a calm expression.

“You can only do that if you understand what’s going on, though, Marcel...” replied Anthony with a smile.

“You’re going on to advanced schooling, right, Anthony?” Marcel asked, and Anthony gave a nod.

“That’s right.”

“So are you going to end up working for the lord, then?”

“It’d be best if I could do that just like my father. But I don’t know, it could be good to work at a trading company or something, too.”

Anthony’s father served as a low-level official at the lord’s residence. That connection gave him some advantages, but it wasn’t a hereditary position, so there was no guarantee that Anthony would be able to take up the same post as his father.

“Are you going to carry on your family’s bakery, Marcel?”

“I don’t have any reason to do something different, and I do love bread,” Marcel calmly replied.

The majority of children in Kreuz ended up carrying on the family business. Second and third children would have to look for other jobs, but kids rarely bothered choosing a different occupation from their parents.

“Rudy has a big brother, though...”

“Still, he was saying he was planning on being a blacksmith too up until just recently... I wonder what happened all of the sudden?”

The two nodded together.

“Is it Latina-related?”

“It must be.”

“He sure is easy to understand.”

“I wonder why Latina hasn’t caught on yet...”

“It’s because he’s always acting way too cold to her... In a way, it amazing how consistent he’s been.”

“It’s easy for us to tell, though.”

They both nodded their heads at the same time once again.

“He really is an idiot.”

“He sure is.”

“Hey, I can hear you guys!” yelled Rudy, on the verge of tears.

That very moment, the door to the classroom opened, and the teacher smiled at him with an unamused look in his eyes.

“Mr. Rudolf, the classroom is no place to make such a ruckus.”

“...!”

Coming back to his senses, Rudy looked around and saw his friends nonchalantly sitting in their seats.

He was rather clumsy by nature.

5: The Young Man Arrives at His Home Village

Dale was pushing the horse to run full-speed through the wooded mountain trail. Apparently, their assailants hadn't expected the small horse to break out into a full-on sprint with two riders, even if one was a child. That's why this unexpected maneuver proved successful.

After breaking through the surrounding enemies, Dale twisted his body around and fired off mana arrows to hold them back.

"Dale!"

"It's dangerous, so keep your head down! Just focus on making sure the magic doesn't cut out! <<Gravity Reduction>>"

Checking behind them, he found that the attackers were skillfully hiding their presence in the forest. Even with how perceptive Dale was, he couldn't say for certain that he sensed all of them.

"Damn!" Dale cursed, clearing away the incoming arrows with the longsword in his right hand. He didn't slow down long enough to make sure the projectiles had scattered to the ground. He was only able to pay attention to their pursuers in the first place because Latina was taking care of the magic. In addition to gravity control magic to ease the burden on the horse, Latina occasionally also used healing magic, allowing the beast to sprint full-speed along the mountain path with both of them on its back.

"I figured they'd be coming soon, but I didn't want to be right!"

“Dale!”

“Got it!”

Hearing Latina’s warning, Dale immediately jerked the reins to make the horse jump. He felt the bewilderment of the attackers chasing after them. They’d most likely constructed a pitfall or similar trap. A slight smile crossed Dale’s face, and he had to stop himself from yelling, “Serves you right!”

Dale wasn’t sure whether he would have realized the trap if Latina wasn’t with him. He did have strong powers of observation, but he didn’t have Latina’s special ability. He’d instructed her to tell him right away if she sensed a spot that felt different. It was alright if she was wrong, but this time was clearly a great success.

After the slope ended, the path went flat, and further along was a bare cliff of bedrock. There was nothing but rock to be seen to the left and right, but there was an opening in one spot: a tunnel carved right through it. If they could make it that far, they would be home free.

“I won’t fall for that!” Dale said to himself to psyche himself up. He brought the horse to a sudden stop. Latina’s body floated into the air from the inertia, but Dale used his own body to stop her from falling.

Just as he’d expected, the next instant magic caused boulders to fall and block the tunnel that was their only way forward.

“Are you idiots?! Seriously!”

He drove the horse forward again and started chanting a spell towards the sealed path.

“Oh you who belong to the earth, by my name, I order you shift according to my wishes. <<Ground transfiguration>>”

Rather than an attack, this simply shifted the land. But that was plenty. The obstacle in their way was soundlessly smashed to bits, which rained down along with a dense cloud of dust. Dale covered Latina by pulling his coat over her.

The cloud would also block the pursuers' field of vision.

Dale and Latina slipped through the tunnel, and the scenery opened up before them.

At that very instant, Dale screamed out, "...Damn hag! I told you it wasn't just me this time, didn't I?!"

The older woman facing the tunnel wore a troubled expression as she looked at Dale. "Hey now, you shouldn't call your grandma a 'damn hag.'"

"And you too, Mom! Did you seriously want to kill your son after seeing me for the first time in a while?!"

"Of course not... I just blocked the entrance a bit, right?"

"If your timing had been even a little bit off, then it wouldn't have been 'just' that!"

"Oh, my... it's not that big a deal..."

"That's right. We always do this much..."

"And you, Dad! You shouldn't have been shooting at us!" Dale criticized angrily, turning in the direction of the man's voice he'd heard.

"You fired at us too, didn't you...?" the voice replied quiet indifferently and without a hint of guilt. "We made sure to take off the arrowheads, you know..."

"You shouldn't have aimed at us in the first place! They still hurt even without the arrowhead, but you were still trying to hit

us!”

“Whatever.” There wasn’t even a shred of remorse in the man’s expression or voice.

As they carried on like that, the remaining pursuers at last caught up.

“You’re awful, Dale. We’re covered in dust.”

“Seriously, this is no way to start your first homecoming in a while...”

*“I’m awful?! **Me**?!”*

They were all Dale’s cousins and childhood friends.

“I mean, it was the village head’s orders.”

“Yeah.”

That’s how they responded to Dale’s criticism.

“You seem awfully worked up, considering how we always do this...” Dale’s father said. Then his gaze stopped on the young girl Dale had his arms wrapped around, and he stiffened. The action resembled those of his son, but right now no one pointed that out.

Latina’s round eyes had been darting around, and now she looked up at Dale, still clearly shocked.

“Dale... do you not get along with your family?”

“No, Latina, that’s...”

While Dale searched for words, the surprise that started with his father spread to everyone else.

“A girl?!” they all yelled out at once, causing Latina to jump.

“Wah?!” She narrowly avoided falling off of the horse.

“Well... Granny did say you’d be bringing someone along, but we all thought it’d be one of your fellow adventurers, like always,” Dale’s mother said with a smile. She looked troubled, but also like she was trying to dodge the issue as she waved her hands back and forth all the while.

“Um... Um... I’m Latina. Nice to meet you! Latina is looking forward to staying with you.”

“Oh my, you’re a cute one. Sorry for scaring you like that.”

“Seriously... what would you have done if Latina got hurt?”

“She had you to protect her...”

“Reflect on your actions already, please!”

Dale was walking alongside his parents. He’d gotten off the horse and was pulling the reins, while Latina remained riding. The polite young girl was apparently hesitant to introduce herself from that position. Dale’s parents didn’t seem to mind at all, though. Everyone else went off to clean up the various traps they’d set for Dale. After saying they’d come see him again later, they left. The village may have been remote, but it wasn’t as if visitors from outside never came, so it’d be too dangerous to leave things as they were.

The highway came to an end at the tunnel they’d passed through, which was the only way in and out of the village. The tunnel, carved by using Earth magic on the thick bedrock, was big enough that even large carriages could easily pass through it. And past it was this place, Dale’s home village.

Despite the limited access, the village itself was fairly large. It had a far stronger impact than any of the villages they’d stopped at so far on their journey. There was a path stretching from the

end of the highway and through the center of town, with buildings to the left and right of it. Looking about, there were fields made on the sloped land surrounding the village. And the whole of this space was encircled by mountains on all sides.

“That’s my house.”

“It’s big...”

“Well, it’s technically the head of the clan’s residence... it is pretty old, though.”

Latina was staring with her mouth wide open at the old mansion in the center of the village, which stood out as being noticeably bigger than the other buildings. Rather than feeling just old like Dale said, it felt like a building with a profound history to it.

“Why are the houses different from everywhere else?”

“Hmm...”

Latina asked this because there wasn’t a single building in the village with a red roof. Latina had grown used to thinking of roofs as being naturally red, so this felt quite out of place to her. Instead, the buildings, fitting of being out in the country, weren’t flashy at all and blended into the deep-green mountain backdrop. They were a dull, subdued color thanks to being exposed to the elements, but if you looked closely, each one had a metallic relief at the entrance, adorned with a single flower.

“It’s because our village worships Quirmizi.”

“Dale, didn’t you teach Latina before that Quirmizi is the god people pray to for the harvest, so there are small shrines and stuff for him everywhere?”

“Yeah. How should I put it...? Like how Laband primarily worships Ahmar, this village does the same for Quirmizi.”

“After all, there are a lot of folks in our village with divine protection from Quirmizi,” Dale’s mother added with a laugh. “And about half of the people here can use magic, though it’s mostly Earth attribute stuff.” Now she had a smile on her face.

“Welcome to the village of ‘the clan loved by the earth’!”

This village had no name. If the villagers ever had to give one, they used “Tislow,” but that didn’t belong to the village itself. Rather, Tislow was the name of the clan that lived there.

“So the people in our village don’t have last names, effectively. Everyone’s would be Tislow, so it’d be pointless here.”

“Hmm? But Dale, you always introduce yourself as ‘Dale Reki,’ don’t you?”

“Right, that’s the name of my role in the village. And it sounds good, so I use it as my last name outside the village, too. My ‘Reki’ is a title for ‘someone who goes out and fights.’ I don’t know the specifics, but I was told that in the old language of the clan, it holds that sort of meaning.”

Dale told Latina all of this in a room that used to be Dale’s in the mansion. His old furniture was gone and it’d been made into a guest room, but Dale easily settled back in. Latina had put down the luggage, taken off her knife, and then sat down and listened to what Dale had to say. He kept talking while he unpacked.

“Apparently, our clan ended up coming here from somewhere else a long while back. They settled down in these mountains, cleared the land, and made a village. As the name ‘the clan loved by the earth’ implies, we’ve always had plenty of folks with Quirmizi’s divine protection and the ability to use Earth magic. Clearing and cultivating land has always been something of a specialty for us.”

Earth magic was incredibly useful when it came to such tasks,

as well as construction and especially foundation work, and with many people who could use such magic, it naturally made such work even easier. Furthermore, despite being in far out, remote mountains, they didn't have to worry about construction supplies thanks to the numerous magic users. And since the Tislow clan had so many magic users, they were also accomplished when it came to large-scale linked magic.

The effect of the divine protection of Quirmizi, the god of the earth that people prayed to for an abundant harvest, was also great. Though it didn't apply to everyone with Quirmizi's divine protection, for some that power had a great effect on the production of crops. And for others, they had the power to rejuvenate the land. And so, as long as they didn't fail to cycle their crops, they could consistently reap abundant harvests.

At a glance, this country land deep in the mountains was inconvenient, but this was a place that made it easy for them to make great use of their abundant blessing from the gods, their divine protection. For their clan, there was no better place to live.

“And so, our clan's customs differ from those of Laband in a lot of ways. Taking off our shoes in our homes, for example.”

“Ah...” Latina said in understanding. She'd lived together with Dale, so she'd grown used to doing it. The thick, fluffy rug spread across the floor was also quite similar to the one in Dale's room back in Kreuz, so it didn't seem strange to Latina at all.

Having roughly finished with the luggage, Dale and Latina left the room and continued down the hallway, where the wood was polished to such a beautiful shine that you could see yourself on its surface.

“And it's deep in the mountains here, so it snows a lot in the winter. Well, anyway, that's apparently how my clan decided to settle down here. And so originally we started taking off our shoes in our homes because they'd always be covered in dirt and mud.”

Dale led the way, his footsteps echoing in the hall. Latina had on some soft, warm fur slippers, so her steps hardly made any sound at all. He stood for a while in front of the room that was their destination. Without even a single knock, he suddenly grabbed the knob and flung the door open.

The room wasn't at all extravagant, but you could tell at a glance just how nice it was. It faced south to let in plenty of the sunlight that was so precious in the snowy mountains, and it was furnished with an old but well-maintained fireplace. The rug on the floor had a complex design woven into it. The walls were decorated with splendid pelts and horns, trophies from the hunts undertaken by generations of the clan. And in the center of the room sat a single old lady smoking a pipe.

"So, what do you want, you old bat?"

"Oh, is that my stupid, cowardly grandson?"

The owner of the room, an old woman sitting in a dignified manner, was quite small. In fact, if you put her next to Latina, you might find that the young girl was actually taller. And yet, when you sat and faced her, her sense of presence was overwhelming. Combined with her bold personality, it was impossible to think of her as "small." This old woman had the air of a brave warrior about her.

She took a big puff on her pipe as if trying to provoke Dale.

"You...!" he said, clenching his fist in irritation. Latina blinked in surprise as she watched the old woman, then looked up at Dale with her big eyes.

"She's just like you, Dale..."

"Latina?!"

Dale was left dumbfounded at the abrupt statement, and

Latina walked up to the old woman.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Latina. Dale saved Latina, and now we live together. She thanks you for letting her rely on your kindness for the time being,” she said, adding in a bow in the midst of her introduction. It may not have precisely been proper manners, but it was full of sincerity and gave a good impression of the young girl.

“Hmm...”

“Ma’am, are you Dale’s grandma?”

“That’s right... You seem to have your act together a lot more than that idiot grandson of mine, young lady.”

“Dale is really nice to Latina, and he teaches her a lot. He isn’t an ‘idiot,’” Latina declared, not flinching in the least before the intimidating woman and even adding in a small puff of her cheeks. “Latina thinks that you shouldn’t say bad things about Dale, even if you are his grandma.”

After saying that, she turned around. “And Dale, you shouldn’t say bad things about your grandma, either.”

The young girl passed judgment on both parties involved.

The grandmother and grandson stared at one another, a sulking Latina between them.

“Even your sulky look’s cute, Latina!”

“Yeah.”

“Latina’s adorable, isn’t she?”

“Where did you find this girl?”

“I picked her up.”

“You occasionally do find something good.”

Latina had seen through to the truth of the matter right at the start. They really were alike, which was precisely why they ended up fighting so often, and they probably had roughly the same boiling point when it came to things they found cute.

“Do you want some candy, young lady?” the old woman asked. She pulled amber-colored candy out of the drawer by her side and beckoned Latina closer.

“Don’t bribe her with food!” Dale yelled, trying to stop her.

“Candy?”

Dale knew all too well that if he allowed his grandmother to “attack” like this even once, Latina would inevitably fall. He knew what to expect afterwards, too.

“I’m telling you not to! Latina’s *my* kid!” Dale said, holding Latina from behind. He looked like a cat with its fur standing up as it tried to protect its kitten.

“What’re you saying? You don’t even have a wife,” his grandmother replied with a scornful laugh.

“Hmm?” Latina tilted her head, sensing a shift in the mood between the two of them.

“Here, say ‘ah.’”

“Ah?”

“Latina!”

The innocent young girl opened her mouth as she was told, and a piece of candy flew in. It was a sharp, precise throw that you wouldn’t think a woman Dale’s grandmother’s age could make, and she paid no heed to Dale’s attempts to obstruct her. In

the aftermath of this mere moment of battle, Latina's cheeks puffed up like a squirrel's.

"Is it tasty?"

"It is," said Latina with a nod.

"Latina, don't take candy from strangers!"

"Huh?! Dale's grandma is a 'stranger'?!"

"Don't pay him any mind. He's just a brat throwing a fit."

"Huh?"

"Don't listen to what this old hag says!"



“Huh? Huh?”

“You listened to me properly back when you were a kid, too!”

“And the me you see now is the result of that.” He turned to Latina. “Do you get it?”

“Not really. Do you and your grandma get along?” Latina asked, not able to comprehend the relationship between this grandmother and grandson.

“More or less.”

“Yeah.”

The pair replied with the same sort of expression on both of their faces.

“Hmm...” Latina stopped and thought for a while. “Then... it’s okay...?” she said to herself, moving the large candy about her mouth all the while.

A bold smile on her face once more, the old woman sat in front of her grandson Dale and started happily puffing away at her pipe. Her actual name was Wendelgard, but everyone just called her Granny Wen.

“Well, you look better than you did last time you came back.”

“Was I that bad...?”

Granny Wen kept on puffing on her pipe, facing her sulking grandson. “Yeah. Randolph and them planned to smack some sense back into you, and that sounded like a hoot, so I let them.”

“Dad...”

Randolph was Dale’s father’s name.

Apparently, that attack wasn't just his grandmother's order, but also the result of the others getting carried away, too. Dale let out a single, unnaturally long sigh.

"Well, you guys always do that sort of 'prank'... but this time Latina was with me, so I didn't want to take even the slightest risk of her getting hurt."

"What, can you not even protect her properly?"

"I have been protecting her."

Latina sat right in between them, listening to them talk as she sucked on the candy. First her right cheek would puff up, then go back to normal, and then the left one would swell. Occasionally the sound of the candy rolling about escaped from between her lips. She was trying to be quiet and well behaved, but was ending up unintentionally asserting her presence quite a bit.

"...Latina."

"Hmm?"

"Is that candy tasty?"

"Yeah," she responded with a smile of complete satisfaction.

"That's good."

As long as she was happy, he had no complaints.

Seeing her grandson like this, Granny Wen took a puff of her pipe, looking content.

As they walked down the hallway after leaving Granny Wen's room, Latina asked, "You get along with your family, right, Dale?"

"Yeah."

“Then why were you fighting?”

“Hmm... That wasn’t really a fight. It was more like... they were making sure I’m doing my role properly,” Dale replied with a strained smile. “Last time I came back was a bit before I met you. That was when I was at my absolute worst, so they were worried, I guess.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I became happy because I met you, Latina,” Dale responded, patting Latina’s now-tilted head. He didn’t want to talk to her about back when he hadn’t been in such a good place.

Even my family could tell how bad I’d gotten...

He could only give a strained smile when he thought back to the way he was back then. Those calm, gentle days he’d spent together with Latina were truly irreplaceable and helped to heal him. It really was debatable as to who had saved who.

“Still, I really do think you guys went overboard.”

“More importantly, are you always walking around with the little lady like that?”

“Hmm?”

“I just don’t want to do something as awful as leaving her all alone in a place she doesn’t know.”

“But, still...”

Dale had brought Latina to the living room. The low table in the center had sides decorated with elaborate carvings that drew the eye. There was a fireplace, and along the walls were display shelves lined with decorative plates, as well as metal objets d’art

and reliefs. In front of those shelves stood Dale's father, Randolph, sipping tea while skimming a letter. He was reading it here rather than in his personal room, which also served as a study, so it must have been personal rather than work-related.

Granny Wendelgard, the head of the clan and village chief, was getting quite old, so Randolph handled most of the work associated with her position.

Dale plunked himself down diagonally across from his father. A moment later, Latina nestled in close to him. It would seem that Latina wasn't entirely comfortable sitting in the center of the large room, so she half-hid herself behind Dale. She'd pop her head out a bit every now and again, only to dart behind Dale's back once more. She wasn't necessarily trying to hide, but as a result of her gaze wandering about at all the things that interested her around the room, it seemed that way from Randolph's position. The way that something would suddenly catch her eye and she'd look that way was reminiscent of a small animal. And the man's son, who he hadn't met in some time, was gently watching over the young girl's charming movements. It wasn't a bad thing, but he was looking lovingly at the young girl, looking like he felt it natural that she was by his side.

As a parent, Randolph wanted to ask just *what* had happened.

"I picked up Latina while I was working, after her dad had died, and I've been taking care of her ever since. I wrote you some letters every now and again, right?" Dale said, sulking a bit and seemingly sick of Randolph looking at him like he wanted to say something.

"Yeah, but still..."

"If Latina's in the way, she'll go back to the room. Would that be better?" Latina said, cutting into Dale and Randolph's conversation.

Dale responded immediately. “You could never be in the way, Latina!”

“You...” Randolph was at a loss for words.

Seeing Dale’s father like that, Latina seemed a tad flustered. “Dale’s always nice to Latina like this.”

“She never acts selfishly, so I’ve gotta spoil her.”

“I see. So you’re super soft on her,” Randolph said with a sigh, seeming somehow exhausted.

“Um, Dale’s dad...” Seeing a break in the conversation, Latina stepped forward a bit, tilting her head slightly as she looked up at Randolph.

“What is it?”

“What should Latina call you? She doesn’t even know your name.”

Facing her once more directly, he felt that the young girl, with her swaying platinum hair and her big grey eyes that looked straight at him, was amazingly adorable. He thought she was cute when he’d first seen her, but looking at her up close like this, he thought that while she was still very young, it wouldn’t be odd at all to call her a real beauty. He couldn’t sense even a shred of ill intent behind her earnest expression, which made her even more charming.

Randolph was left speechless for a while as he looked at the young girl, only for him to be hit by another shock when he realized something a tad later than he should have. He took a deep breath.

“Hmm?” Latina adorably tilted her head as she looked up at him.

“We never had a daughter, so...”

“Dad...”

“Hmm?”

“Could you ask me that question one more time?”

“Huh? What should Latina call you?”

“I wouldn’t mind you calling me ‘Pops’...”

“Dad...” Dale started.

“I think I get a bit of how you feel.”

This father and son were apparently similar in their strangeness.

“Ah, that’s right, thinking about a ‘daughter’ made me remember,” Randolph said, looking at Dale. “The daughter of the chief of the village down the way is going to marry into our house.”

“Marry?”

“That’s right. We sped up the schedule so we could get it done while you’re here. We’ll be having the ceremony soon.”

“The daughter of the chief of the village down the hill... Ah, you mean Frida? Is that alright?”

“There’s no problem. It’s already settled. The other side wanted it, too. It’s better to rely on us than some far-off lord of the domain when you’re out here in the country, after all.”

“Well, it is pretty obvious that when you’re all the way out here, even if you asked the lord to help with poor crop yields or magical beasts or disease, your request would keep getting put off... But if they asked us, we could help out, at least to a certain

extent.”

“Thanks to your ‘work,’ our issues with the lord have been settled too, so we shouldn’t have any trouble for a while.”

“I see,” Dale said with a smile embedded with complex emotions. “Then I’m fulfilling my duty as part of the head family of the clan, huh...?”

As he looking at his son, Randolph brought the tea cup to his mouth to hide his softened expression. “It’s alright now.”

Dale didn’t respond to this statement both to hide his embarrassment and because this father and son understood each other well enough without needing to put it into words.

“Marriage, huh...? I guess Yorck beat me to it. He must be having it rough then, yeah? He’s still got work, after all...”

“Huh?!” Latina suddenly shouted in surprise after silently listening to Dale speak. Surprised by the outburst, Dale looked over at her and found that she’d gone completely pale.

“What’s wrong, Latina? Do you feel bad?”

“No, Latina’s alright. Dale, who’s Yorck?”

“Hmm? Ah, right, he hasn’t come back yet, so I haven’t introduced you. He’s my little brother.”

“Dale’s little brother? And he’s getting married?”

“Yeah. We’ll get to see the ceremony while we’re here. We’ll have to get you a nice dress, too!” Dale said, apparently having just decided this.

“Latina sees....” Latina muttered, the color returning to her face, and she regained her usual composure. She had momentarily thought that *Dale* was getting married.

“Latina wants to see the bride,” she said with a smile. There wasn’t a hint of gloom on her face.

Randolph had two sons and no daughters. Since both of them were unmarried, he had no grandchildren and he hadn’t the slightest idea what interested a young girl like Latina. She was used to city living, so she’d find it boring out in the country like this, right?

Randolph stood up and excitedly exited the living room.

“Hmm?”

“Latina, do you want some tea?”

“Yeah. Dale, Latina will do it.”

“Is that so? Then I’ll leave it to you.”

After Randolph left, Latina started preparing the tea. Because Latina was all-around better at cooking than Dale now, it was more efficient to have her take care of steeping the tea, and it would taste better that way, too.

“It’s not like the tea from Kreuz.”

“It’s closer to an herbal tea. Is it too different for you? There should be normal tea leaves too, so should we go with those instead?”

“No, this will taste good, too.”

Randolph returned when they were enjoying the light-green tea, which differed from what was normally found in Kreuz. He had several small boxes in his hands.

“Dad?”

“Girls like things like this, right?”

“Hmm?”

Latina tilted her head at the boxes being held out to her. Opening up the boxes at Randolph’s silent insistence, she shouted, “Wow, they’re so pretty!”

“They’re all magical devices... That’s our village’s livelihood, after all.”

Inside the boxes were elaborately crafted accessories adorned with gemstones. The fine craftsmanship and design alone were enough to make them all beautiful. Adding the large jewels, with their varied cuts that reflected the light at all sorts of angles, the pieces looked all the more gorgeous.

“These are magical devices?”

“That’s right. Making magical devices is our village’s main source of income, and when it comes to things that need complex metalwork, we’re world-famous for our skill. Stuff like this and weapons with gimmicks built into them, like my gauntlet, are our specialty.”

“Wow...” Latina muttered, picking up one of the accessories and holding it up to the light. She was enthralled by the sparkling gem; she may have been young, but she was still a girl. Such accessory-type magical devices were one of the village’s top-selling products and were imbued with protection magic. They were especially useful for nobles, who couldn’t walk around openly wearing armor.

“Do you like them? If there’s one you’re fond of, you can have it.”

These most certainly weren’t the sort of items you’d give to a child on a whim.

Realizing that, Latina refused. “No, Latina’s happy just looking

at them. They're really pretty." She was well aware that her guardian occasionally pampered her to an outlandish degree. Going at her own pace, Latina placed the accessory with a green jewel back into its box and then picked up and stared at a red one.

"Leather goods like my coat usually aren't sold to outsiders, though. The enchantment technique is the same, but they're just made for using around the village."

"We're in the mountains, so it's quicker to make something ourselves if we can."

"Hmm..."

There were many magical beasts and other animals in the land surrounding the village, so Tislow was never lacking when it came to leather. They used it when they made hunting equipment and even for their everyday clothes. Such a thing would be considered quite extravagant elsewhere, but as they had the goods on hand, it made sense to use such highly functional gear. The reason that Dale was so ready to spoil Latina with expensive magical devices was because he had plenty of funds, but also perhaps because he came from this village, where they weren't seen as anything special.

"I did contact them in advance, but it'll take some time for them to get my measurements and put the finishing touches on my coat. We're so far out in the country that it may be boring for you."

"No, Latina is looking forward to it. There's lots of stuff here that isn't in Kreuz."

"I see. Well, I've got to go say hi to some people tomorrow, so I'll show you around the village then."

"Right."

Randolph wore a complex expression with a bit of amazement mixed in as he watched Dale and Latina have this relaxed conversation. He acutely sensed just how much his son doted on the young girl. It was unavoidable that a parent would become that way, but looking at Dale now, it seemed clear that Randolph's son was once more back to his old self again, which made Randolph feel relieved.

Dale's mission in the outside world had him risking his life taking on dangerous jobs involving demons and demon lords, which normal adventurers would never touch. Doing such work over and over ate away at him, so of course his father worried. Randolph had also realized that his son had kept cutting himself off from others until he was all alone in order to dull the pain.

So, he's able to earnestly feel gratitude and affection for this girl, huh? As Dale's father, Randolph needed to give Latina his thanks for saving his son.

"Dad, is Master Cornelio still teaching?"

"Huh? His daughter Clarissa has taken charge of teaching the kids around the village lately, but he's still alive and kicking."

"I see... Then you should study under him while we're here, Latina. He should be able to teach you from a bit of a different viewpoint than the Asfarian priests back in town."

"There's a school here?" Latina asked, tilting her head. She'd heard that there were no Asfarian schools in the villages they'd stopped in on their trip. Even though Laband was a grand, powerful nation, there wasn't any proper schooling in small country settlements. From that point of view, Tislow was quite unusual.

"Master Cornelio is a priest of Asfar, so you can technically call it a school," Dale said, looking nostalgic. "I'll introduce you to him tomorrow, so look forward to it."

“Got it,” Latina responded, bringing their conversation to an end.

Though the mansion was vast, the smell of dinner being prepared carried from the kitchen to the living room, and when Latina noticed it, she grew fidgety. Dale knew what was going on, so he simply watched her with an amused expression on his face, but Randolph looked worried.

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh? Um, um...”

Latina was flustered by Randolph’s question. She tugged on Dale’s sleeve and looked up at him as if asking what to do.

“Dale...”

“Just take it easy for today. I’ll ask my mom later,” Dale said, gently patting her on the head. “Latina can’t calm down unless she’s working. Back in Kreuz, she’s always helping Kenneth at the Ocelot. I let her handle the cooking on the way here, too,” Dale explained to his father with a strained smile.

“I see...”

“She doesn’t like just being treated as a guest, so let her help out, alright?”

“She’s such a hard-worker. How admirable.” Randolph said with a gentle grin. Latina calmed down, releasing Dale’s sleeve.

The door to the living room opened while the father and son were watching over the still-anxious Latina as if admiring a small animal. There was no custom of knocking in Tislow. When it came to offices or personal rooms, people would speak up before entering, but that wasn’t considered necessary when it came to a shared space like the living room. Everyone in the village was okay with this because they were part of the same clan and were

all brethren with the same sense of values.

Even at a glance, it was obvious that the young man who opened the door was quite similar to Dale. He didn't even look to be too different in terms of age. He ran his fingers through his hair, which was cut shorter than Dale's, and when he took off his leather coat, a build was revealed that was in no way inferior to that of Dale, an adventurer renowned for his skill.

"Yorck."

"Oh, you're back, big bro? Did you get here today?"

"See, *that's* a normal reaction. Dad and them put in a lot of work to mess with me."

"Oh, they did that again? You've got it rough, bro," Yorck said, looking over at Latina, who was by Dale's side. "Is that the devil girl you've been looking after?"

"Yeah. Latina, this is my little brother, Yorck."

Latina shot straight up and bowed. "Nice to meet you. I'm Latina. She'll be relying on your kindness for a while."

Yorck seemed a little shocked as he looked at Latina and then at his brother.

"What a surprise. She's really got her act together, considering you're looking after her."

"So you think of me like that too, huh?" said Dale, his brow creasing. Apparently to his family, the still-childish impression of him from when he'd left the village remained strong in their minds. That may have been partly because the rumors of him being a first-rate adventurer who sold himself on his name might not have made it here from Kreuz and the capital, but regardless, his family didn't see him that way at all.

“Nice to meet you, too. You’re always having to help out my brother, right? Sorry about that.”

“Huh?”

“Yorck...”

Latina hadn’t expected him to say that at all, so Yorck’s greeting threw her for a loop. “Um, um, Dale is always very good to Latina, though.”

“She sure is conscientious for someone so young, bro...”

“You...”

“I was at least half-joking.”

Latina tilted her head and stayed that way as she tried to understand their whole exchange. She finally gave a firm nod when they were done. “Dale, your family is *weird*!”

“Latina...”

Dale could only hang his head in shame, crestfallen. He couldn’t find any grounds to deny it.

Before long, Dale’s mother, Magda, announced that dinner was ready. Latina let out a “Woowow!” when she saw the food that was carried out.

“I couldn’t get everything prepared for today, so we’ll have the welcome party tomorrow,” Magda said, even though there was already plenty of food giving off a delicious smell on the table. There were also quite a lot of ingredients and dishes that Latina had never seen before, so she was, of course, overjoyed.

“We’ve got to call Granny...”

“Latina will go get her, then!” Latina said, cheerfully raising her hand and then hurrying off to Granny Wen’s room. Her slippers made a soft *pitter patter* as she went. She really did want to do whatever she could to help out, even if it was something small.

Dale should have trusted the bad feeling he had right then. His first-rate senses were working at all times, and he could pick up even something vague.

That bad premonition ended up being right.

Both during dinner and after, Latina didn’t leave Granny Wen’s side.

While Dale was catching up with his family for the first time in a while, Latina’s eyelids started to grow heavy. The sense of relief at reaching their destination after a long, tiring journey was likely finally hitting her.

“Are you heading back to the room alone, Latina?”

“Yeah. Latina is alright. She’ll go to sleep first, so goodnight.”

With a quick bow of her head, Latina left the living room.

After that, some time passed as they discussed the capital and the state of the clan. It was fairly late by the time Dale finally returned to the room. His old room and the one next to it had been set aside as guest rooms. He opened the door and heard the out-of-tune snores he’d grown so accustomed to.

“Hmm, well, it’s not my room anymore...” he muttered, looking in on the happily sleeping Latina and naturally breaking out in a smile. He’d intended to use this room because it used to be his, but he had no intention of moving Latina when she was sleeping so peacefully. He decided to use the other room, closing

the door gently so as not to make a sound.

At the time, he'd thought that was the right decision.

Dale suddenly awoke in the middle of the night. As he lay on his side in the dark, he wondered why he had woken up. Even if he could awake with a start due to his work, it wasn't something that occurred at random.

He felt like someone was calling him.

"Latina?!"

He jumped up from the bed and flew out of the room. The very instant after he hit the hallway, he flung open the door to the room next door. Hurrying inside, his eyes first fell on the empty bed, and he turned pale. But even so, he kept himself from falling apart entirely, and with what little calm he had left, he sensed a presence in the corner. A blanket from their luggage that was supposed to be packed away had a lump under it.

"Latina?" Dale called out, and the lump trembled a bit.

"Dale...?"

"What's wrong?"

Latina's head peeked out from the blanket. "Dale!"

Latina flew out of the blanket and threw her arms around him. She shoved her tearstained face tight up against the bewildered Dale.

"You've been crying? Why?"

"When Latina... woke up... you weren't there. She was... scared. But she... didn't know where you were," Latina said bit by

bit, her words broken up by tiny sniffles. "You were gone... so Latina was scared."

"Sorry," Dale apologized in a gentle voice, tousling Latina's bedhead. The sleeping Latina had had no idea Dale was in the room next door, and back when they arrived, they'd unpacked their luggage in this room. Having been born and raised in this mansion, Dale was well acquainted with its layout, but because it was her first time visiting, it was a new place to Latina.

Of course she'd be uneasy. He'd forgotten something completely obvious.

I was too relaxed because it was my first time back home in a while...

"It was scary, huh? I'm sorry."

Latina gave a tiny nod, still hugging Dale tight as if she didn't want to let go.

When he saw Latina's slender shoulders shaking, he tried to comfort the young girl and said with a frown, "Come on, hop back in bed. You're cold, right? I'll stay by your side until you fall asleep, so relax."

The seasons in the deep mountain land of Tislow lagged behind those of Kreuz, and it was colder there overall. This late at night, it was so chilly that it was hard to think of it as early spring.

"Latina doesn't want you to go, Dale," Latina said, shaking her head and weeping. She hugged him even tighter than before. "Latina wants to be together... she doesn't want you to go... she doesn't want to be alone..."

Latina's... begging me...

He may have often pampered Latina, but she never made self-

ish requests; and yet here she was, in tears and begging him.

“I guess I’ve got no choice...”

It only took a mere moment for Dale to give in. It was what you’d call a “snap decision.”

†

Early the next morning, Dale’s mother stood frozen and at a terrible loss.

A little later at breakfast, she declared to her son, “I know that everybody has their quirks, but still, I think Latina’s just too young.”

“I’m not even going to ask what you’re thinking about me, Mom, but it’s absolutely, positively wrong!”

“I’d heard that folks in the city marry later, so I’d thought that was why you hadn’t found a bride yet. But to think that my son was into little--“

“Could you please cut it out? Latina can hear you.”

When Magda had gone to inform them that breakfast was ready, she’d found the young girl sleeping in the same bed as her son. First, she’d found one of the guest rooms empty, which she’d thought was odd, and when she opened the door to the other one, that was the sight that awaited her. Her full-grown son, sleeping with his arms around a little girl, and that was certainly something to worry about. She knew he doted on Latina, but she didn’t know it had gone *this* far. As his mother, it was her duty to make him see reason.

After she dropped that bomb, Magda looked her seated son right in the eyes. Randolph, who had watched this exchange while eating, took a sip of his tea and then gave a firm nod.

“I see... So you have *those* kind of tastes, huh?”

“Don’t say that with such a serious expression, Dad.”

That was when the despondent Latina spoke up. “Dale... This is all because Latina was selfish. She’s sorry...”

“See? Latina took you seriously!”

“There, there. She really is a good girl.”

“Right.”

“My parents are just teasing me, Latina. You don’t need to worry.”

Having said that, Dale faced his parents once again. “I’ve had to leave Latina home before, so it’s not like she can’t sleep on her own. But she was all alone in an unfamiliar place this time, so she got nervous. I did that to help her calm down and feel more relaxed.”

“Well, you’re still young, Latina. And it’s pitch-black in the country at night, so of course it was scary,” said Magda with a smile, facing Latina with a completely different expression than she had taken towards her son.

“Right,” agreed Randolph with a nod.

“You woke up in an unfamiliar place, so it’s no surprise you were scared. That son of ours really is no good.”

“Yeah.”

“You guys...”

“Why are you referring to your parents as ‘you guys’?” Randolph retorted.

“Doing this this early in the morning... I’m exhausted...”

“Dale, are you alright? Latina’s sorry she was selfish.”



“You really are the only one who can make me feel better, Latina!” Dale exclaimed, with a flood of emotions from the depths of his heart.

After breakfast, Dale left the house holding hands with Latina, who was still looking despondent.

There was a crisp air to this Tislow morning, but it was more refreshing than cold. It had been the height of spring in the places they’d visited on their journey, but Tislow was still just heading into the start of the season. The branches had yellowish-green leaves, and there were still only buds attached to them. The wild flowers on the side of the road were all gentle, light colors. It was as if they’d all been waiting to bloom together to usher in the late spring.

This land was blessed by the power of the earth, so it was absolutely overflowing with such scenery. Rather than the cape she’d worn on the trip, Latina now had a stole over her shoulders. It was light pink and made of a thick, napped fabric, so it was quite warm. She also had a flower-shaped broach pinned to it, which Granny Wen had pulled out of somewhere in the mansion. “She’s moving way too fast...” Dale muttered to himself, completely ignoring his own past actions.

“That color suits you, Latina.”

“Dale?”

“It’s the color of spring, and it’s cute. Granny made a good choice.”

Understanding what he was saying, she broke out in a shy smile. “It’s warm.”

“That’s good,” Dale said with a grin, and Latina’s smile grew

all the brighter in turn. He gripped her hand a bit tighter, and she did the same as well.

After leaving the mansion, they went around the village in a clockwise rotation. Not far from the estate, Dale stopped in front of a row of similar-looking buildings and pointed at one.

“This is a public workshop for the village. There’s a lot of dangerous stuff in there, so don’t go playing there on your own.”

“Right.”

This was a facility that the villagers used to manufacture magical devices. As there were a great number of confidential clan secrets involved in the process, even a young child like Latina wouldn’t be allowed to enter so easily.

“Over here is the office, so if you have some business you absolutely have to take care of here, then go there. Next door is the delivery carrier. You can send letters from there.”

The building Dale pointed to had a moss-green flag with an emblem of a letter with wings on it that Latina recognized. The young girl was surprised.

“There’s a letter deliverer here?”

“It’s because our village gets orders for magical devices from all over, and we need it for communication about Laband, too.”

While Dale was telling her that, he brought Latina into the office. He was part of the head family, and as the eldest son of the next village head, Randolph, he had to greet people all throughout the village. Not wanting things to be awkward for Latina, he thought it important to introduce her to the villagers as well.

Finishing his greetings at the workshop, they passed along the thin paths between the houses throughout the village. Passing by so closely gave a good look at each house, which all had gardens,

some having small vegetable gardens and flower beds.

“There are a lot of flowers in Tislow.”

“Really? Well, everybody grows them here, since you need to switch them out each day...”

“You do?”

“For the offering to Quirmizi at the entrance.”

“Huh...”

Looking up while discussing this, Latina saw fields gradually come into view in the distance. There were a great number of them on the sloped land surrounding the village. The sight of the scenery, broken up by stone walls as the ground rose, was entirely new to Latina.

“Those are fields? They look like stairs... Amazing!”

“You think?”

Other than the terraced fields, what drew the eyes most was the canal running throughout the village. The pure, cool water flowed without stagnant or dry patches, passing by the side of each house and up towards the fields. The water flowed from springs in the mountains to the center of the village. That they had access to such water for their day-to-day life was thanks to the blessings of the land as well. The village didn't just borrow the power of the land, but also that of water, which is necessary to sustain life.

Every now and again, when the two passed a villager, they'd look at Dale in surprise, only to heartily call out to him when they realized who it was. Dale would stop and greet them in response. All the while, Latina would hide behind Dale's back, nervous around the stranger. Her clinging tight to his clothes and peeking out a bit must have been quite the adorable sight, and it made

Dale regret that he didn't have eyes on the back of his head. After all, right behind him was his greatest blind spot. Latina was practically killing him, acting this adorable when they were this close but leaving him unable to see her. Well, she was cute, so he could forgive her for anything.

After passing between the houses, they arrived at the village entrance, which they had come through yesterday.

"This tunnel is the only way in and out of the village, at least officially."

There was a route through the harsh mountain range surrounding the village. It was managed by the head family and was meant to be used in emergencies. Even within the clan, only a few people knew of its existence.

The village's main street was a wide path that continued on from the highway. They took it across the village, heading towards the mountains.

"Master Cornelio's house is this way, so be sure to pay attention."

"The Asfarian school?"

"He opened up part of his own house to the public, so you could call it that."

Halfway there, the sloped path turned into stairs, at the end of which stood a single house. It was a little bigger than the other homes in the village, likely because it also served as a school. But aside from that, it was no different than the other houses; it even had a single flower decorating the entrance.

"This is a school?"

"Technically, yeah."

Latina tilted her head, confused; it was a normal private home, no matter how she looked at it. But Dale, paying no heed to what the building appeared to be, approached the door and flung it open without even knocking, shocking Latina even more.

“Is the master in?”

“D-Dale?! Is it alright to just go into someone’s house without permission like this?”

Seeing Latina so flustered, Dale finally realized what had her so worried.

“Ah. People don’t knock in our village, and none of the houses have locks, so usually you just come in and call out.”

“Hmm... that’s different than Kreuz.”

“Well, I was born in this village, so I sure was shocked when I first saw how busy things were in Kreuz.”

“Latina was surprised when she first arrived to Kreuz, too. There were so many people!”

While they were discussing this, a woman with her light-brown hair tied up in a ponytail appeared from inside the house. As she calmly approached the door, she saw who it was and said, “Oh, is that you, Dale?”

“Yeah. Long time no see, Clarissa.”

“So you’re back, huh?”

“I got back yesterday. Is the master in?”

“He is. Please come in, and the cute girl next to you should enter, too.”

“Ah, nice to meet you. Please excuse Latina.”

This young woman, Clarissa, did things at her own pace and looked to be several years older than Dale. Her dark-brown eyes had a gentle light to them, as if they were reflecting her personality.

“Do you have some business with my dad?”

“We’re going to be here for a while, so I was thinking I’d ask the master to look after this girl, Latina.”

“Huh? You’re picking Dad over me?”

While Dale kicked his shoes off to the side, Latina properly sat, removed hers, and put them down neatly. As he waited for her to finish, Dale kept conversing with his older childhood friend.

“There aren’t any priests like Master in town.”

“That’s true. I can’t deny it.” Clarissa wore a smile as she ushered Latina inside. “Do you mind if I call you Latina?”

“That’s fine!”

Latina was nervous responding to Clarissa, but tried to maintain a composed expression.

“So you came with Dale?”

“That’s right. Latina lives together with Dale in Kreuz.”

“Oh, my. Just when did you find such a cute girl, Dale?”

“I won’t deny that Latina’s cute,” Dale replied, deadly serious, and Clarissa just smiled back at him.

“She really is cute.”

There was no one around to butt in and stop this idiotic exchange.

Clarissa led the pair into a room that looked like a library, with numerous shelves containing a vast collection of books; it made for an overwhelming sight. Surprised, Latina looked all around and took in the room. It was hard to imagine that all of this belonged to one person. The Asfarian school in Kreuz likely had a larger collection, but that was a facility in one of the main towns in Laband, so it didn't make sense to compare them in the first place.

Passing by the bookshelves, Latina saw a big window, and in front of it was an equally large desk. While the books were methodically organized on their shelves, on top of the desk was a mountain of documents. But even so, everything seemed to have its place and felt oddly balanced. Buried in the midst of this was a single old man working away.

"Master Cornelio," Dale called out, and the man at last noticed him, raising his head. His hair was white, and his eyes behind his rounded spectacles were reminiscent of Clarissa's. His deeply wrinkled face shifted to show his surprise.

"Well, I'll be. Is that you, Dale?"

"It's been quite some time," Dale said, with a firm bow of his head. The man was Cornelio Cacace, the only priest of Asfar living in Tislow. He wore a gentle smile, much like his daughter's. It was obvious that they were related.

"It seems you've been making a name for yourself in town."

Prompted by Cornelio, Dale sat on a sofa at a low table, and Latina snuggled in next to him. This sort of furniture was rare in this village, and it couldn't be seen from the entrance to the room.

"I'm surprised you know that, Master, out here in this village."

"I do have my sources."

While the two gossiped about the town and the capital, Latina remained a little nervous. That ended thanks to Clarissa, who brought out a teapot and cakes.

“Wow!” Latina blurted out in admiration, before realizing that she’d forgotten her manners. She looked about in shock and found everybody looking at her with charmed gazes, which made her look down in embarrassment. That only made the adults around her smile even more.

“She sure is cute. I wish the kids around the village were this well behaved...” said Clarissa while preparing the tea. Seeing Latina instantly captivated by the sugar dish, she left it before the young girl, where she could get a good look at it. Atop the sugar cubes were various decorative flowers.

“Wow... there are flowers on the sugar... It’s so cute...”

You’re the cute one, Latina. It would seem that even Dale was able to restrain himself enough to not mutter those thoughts out loud in front of his former teacher.

“How do you make these?”

“Oh, shall I teach you sometime? You have the time, right?” Clarissa said, dropping a sugar cube into the tea. The decorative flower rose to the surface. That only captivated Latina all the more. Her cheeks grew just a little red as she gazed into the tea cup and, looking delighted as she grasped it in both hands, she muttered, “Wow. It’s amazing... so cute...”

“You’re the cute one, Latina...” Dale said, his self-restraint passing its limit.

After bringing his tea cup to his mouth and moistening his lips, Cornelio started a new conversation. “By the way, I heard you apparently caused some turmoil in town.”

“Huh?” Dale responded to his master’s sudden shift, but Cornelio’s expression didn’t change.

“Was it related to this girl? I heard a devil child was involved...”

Realizing what he was talking about, Dale could only give a strained laugh.

“You really do have sharp ears, Master. Where did you learn that from?”

“The temples are like a small community. Enough so that a scandal will spread far and wide, rather than being something you can hide.”

Cornelio kept talking, calmly enjoying the scent of the tea. “Of course, the characteristics of those involved spread as well. I figured out it was you right away.”

“Sorry for making trouble...”

“No, I don’t mean to criticize your actions. It’s good for shut-ins to pay attention to the outside world every once in a while.”

Dale was grateful to hear Cornelio say that like it was nothing. He didn’t have even a speck of regret over what he’d done, but he was still embarrassed to have his former teacher find out. Dale wouldn’t feel timid in the least around any of the Asfarian priests from Kreuz, but that wasn’t the case when it came to his master. He may serve a different god, but he was a priest worthy of respect.

“There are a lot fewer Asfarian priests who explore the outside world like you, right, Master?”

“That’s not true. Those of us who serve Asfar simply fall into two groups: those who shut themselves up in the temple and devote themselves to their studies, and those of us who go out and

seek new knowledge,” Cornelio said, taking a sip of tea. “Well, those narrow-minded folks who don’t know how to do anything but study in the temples don’t even know how to make a living when they’re expelled out into the world. Even if you didn’t do it with your own two hands, that’s an awful cruel verdict.”

Despite his words, Cornelio looked somewhat amused. He was normally a kind and gentle person, but at the same time, he could also be strict towards others. He was especially indignant when it came to scandals caused by his fellow Asfarian priests.

Those who served Asfar tended to be split into those who sought information on their own and those who spent their lives studying in the temples. The latter only knew the narrow world inside temple walls, and because many of them devoted themselves to their studies from a very young age, they didn’t know anything of society. They could deal with life just fine, as long as it was in the temple. For that reason, on top of losing their natural-born power of divine protection, it was also a big question for those driven out of the temple if they could even survive in the outside world. They’d lived their lives without any hardship, after all. And even if they had worked as teachers, they still faced great difficulty, since nobody was interested in hiring someone who’d caused enough of a scandal to be exiled from the temple. Considering those conditions, Dale’s retribution from ‘that incident’ was far crueller than any form of corporeal punishment.

“Dale?”

“Master Cornelio... I didn’t just come to say hello today. I wanted to ask you if you could help out with this girl while we’re staying here,” he said, looking serious while bowing to his old teacher, not wanting the somewhat worried-looking Latina staring at him to notice. Not only did he not want Latina to remember “that incident,” he also hadn’t told her that he had used his own authority to get revenge on the perpetrator. Latina was a kind child, so even if it was someone who had hurt her, she would be deeply saddened to learn that she was the reason a person was

harmed. Dale didn't want that to happen.

Keeping Latina's peace of mind came first for Dale.

Being a clever child, Latina sensed that Dale had no intention of telling her everything. She wasn't happy with that fact, but she docilely held her tongue and looked down.

"Clarissa's one of the best in the village when it comes to making tea cakes, so you should have her teach you. Her cooking isn't so good, though."

"Hey, that's mean."

"If you've improved, then I'll apologize."

"Mrrr...."

"Latina's probably better than you when it comes to cooking, Clarissa."

"Huh?"

Hearing him suddenly boast about her, Latina looked up at him in surprise. "But Dale, Latina still has a lot to learn, right?"

"See, look! She knows how to be modest, even though she's so young! She's not just cute, she's also a really great kid, right?! I'm not embarrassed at all showing her off to the master! And she's sharp, so I'm sure learning new things under the master will be a big benefit for her. I know I'm imposing, but could you please help her out, Master?"

His words themselves may have been questionable, but his expression and attitude were those of a proper parent. Over these past few years, he'd grown accustomed to being her father.

Seeing Dale like this, Cornelio smiled. As a teacher, he was glad to be able to see how his student had grown. As long as he

was happy, then he couldn't wish for anything more.

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After leaving the Cacace house, Dale and Latina went around the rest of the village to finish up their introductions. For some reason, Latina ended up holding a heap of goods in her arms by the time they were done.

“Why did everyone give Latina things...?”

“Because you're so cute.”

“Hmm?”

Latina tilted her head, perhaps unaware of her own charm. She was cute enough to stand out even in a big town like Kreuz. In a country village like this, beauty like hers was something they'd never seen before. She was also earnest and polite, so she was very easy to like.

In addition, she always looked happy when she ate. Of course people would want to try to buy her favor by giving her food. More than just one or two folks had had that idea, so wherever the two went, someone would give Latina sweets or fruit as a present.

“Well, we won't have to worry about your snacks for a while...”

“Is it alright to accept so much...?”

“It's fine.”

As they talked, the pair finished their lap around the village and then went around the back of Dale's house.

The path that extended up into the mountains may have been small, but it was also carefully maintained. They walked at a relaxed pace, with the sunlight through the trees casting complex

patterns along the ground. Around then, they heard the sound of water.

When they reached the end of the trail, Latina understood why she could hear that sound from so far away: it was coming from waterfalls. Things opened up into a semi-circular space, and all around, thin streams of spring water tumbled down from the bedrock. Each didn't carry in much water on its own, but the numerous small waterfalls added up to quite a large volume flowing into the basin, making for quite a mysterious sight.

"Wow..." said Latina in admiration, and Dale broke out in a satisfied smile.

Dale took Latina's hand as they approached the side of the waterfall basin, because the wet, rocky surface was especially easy to slip on.

"Amazing! It's so pretty!"

Coming close, Latina happily put her hand in the water, then jumped up in surprise at how cold it felt. This was all spring water, so it didn't warm up, regardless of the season.

"It's cold!" Even so, Latina looked overjoyed, and once more thrust both hands into the clear water. "It's so beautiful! It's like a temple!"

Dale was a little surprised to hear Latina say that. There was a small shrine to Quirmizi by the side of the waterfalls, but it had a modest, simple appearance to it. And yet, Latina had easily recognized that this was a place strong in the power of the gods.

"You can tell? You don't have divine protection, right?"

"Yeah, Latina doesn't. She just thought it felt similar to a temple. She actually feels like it seems more like a temple than the ones in Kreuz."

“Temples in cities are places made for people, for them to worship the gods. The gods’ power isn’t strong in those places, like it is here.”

“Huh...”

“That’s amazing, Latina, that you can sense that...” Dale said with a smile. “You really may be loved by the gods, too...”

And then, he added in, “You’re just *too cute!*”

It completely ruined the mood.

His words were as questionable as always.

6: The Young Girl Revels in Country Living

Their stay in Tislow was scheduled to be roughly two months. Latina obviously couldn't just sit still for that long, so a few days after they arrived, she was already helping out Dale's mother, Magda. As a result, she was waking up quite early in the morning these days. She would occasionally sleep in when she stayed up late the night before or was feeling especially tired, but she did quite well for a child her age. Even Magda, who managed things in the mansion, thought the young girl had the basics of housework down enough that she considered Latina a plenty capable helper.

"You don't eat much bread in Tislow, do you?" Latina said, moving about to watch Magda from different angles as the woman mixed oil and eggs with flour, then used a rolling pin to spread the dough out to an even thickness.

"So you prefer the sort of food you see in town after all, Latina?"

"No, Latina enjoys eating all sorts of food from different places."

Magda wrapped the stretched dough around meat and potherbs. Today's breakfast was a soup filled with these dumplings, which was a staple of Tislow's menu. Compared to Magda's smooth, quick motions, Latina's hands moved awkwardly. She did seem to properly remember the steps, though.

"Latina wants to learn a lot from you, Mrs. Magda, and then she'll cook for Dale back in Kreuz."

"Oh, my. Then I'll have to teach you how to make all of Dale's

favorites.”

“Yeah!”

“Our men are simple folk. As long as you keep their stomachs filled, it’s easy to get them to listen.”

“Huh?”

“How old are you, Latina?”

“Hmm? Latina will be ten soon.”

“Ten, huh? I see, I see...”

“Huh?”

“Kids grow up so fast.”

“Hmm?”

As Magda nodded to herself, Latina tilted her head while putting the finished pasta into a pot.

After eating breakfast and seeing the men off as they left for work, Latina kept helping Magda. Dale helped out his dad and brother and also lent a hand to those who went out hunting, so he spent most of the day out of the house. But in exchange, he and Latina spent the long country nights together.

As his house was the head household, they didn’t make a living by farming, but they did at least have enough of a field to provide the vegetables for their personal use. It fell to Magda to take care of that vegetable garden, leading to Latina’s first experience working a field. She stared in wonder at the soft buds on the crops.

“Wow, they’re so small!”

“It’s still too soon to eat those,” Magda said with a laugh, plucking bugs off of them as she spoke. Seeing that, Latina started doing the same. She wasn’t timid even around magical beasts, so she wasn’t scared at all of bugs, and there was no hesitation to her movements.

“It’s wiggling all around...” observed Latina, flipping an insect over and then looking satisfied. She reached out for another bug.

“Ah, you’ll get itchy if you touch that one.”

Latina quickly jerked back her hand in surprise. “Really? Got it, Latina will be careful.” She gave a serious nod.

After she was through helping Magda, Latina went to study under Master Cornelio. He was a scholar who had moved here because he was interested in the Tislow clan. From him, she learned all sorts of things she wouldn’t have learned at the school in Kreuz, like about Tislow and the capital.

Cornelio was also knowledgeable about the other races, so this was a chance for her to learn about her own devil race.

“It’s almost noon.”

“So it seems.”

And so Latina headed back.

Occasionally, Clarissa would treat her to lunch and she’d spend the afternoon reading. After all, Latina was fond of passing the time that way. She’d also sometimes borrow a book from the Cacace household. When she did, she’d read in Granny Wen’s room, where she’d often lose a battle to the nice warmth of the sunlight and end up nodding off. The thick rugs spread out on the floors of the houses throughout Tislow made it very easy to nap anywhere, making for a terrible temptation.

When Latina didn’t spend the afternoon reading, she’d go out

for walks with Granny Wen. Though Wendelgard was quite old, she didn't spend all day and night shut up in the house. Rather, the clan thought of her as some sort of phantom, appearing in unexpected places at random times. She knew the village better than anyone else and could pop up anywhere.

According to the young men who went out hunting, they'd seen Granny Wen bring down a bird in the mountains and then roast it with a bottle of alcohol by her side.

According to the women, when the children's pranks started getting a bit too complex, it meant Granny Wen had helped.

According to the old folks, Granny Wen had once singlehandedly almost wiped out a pack of magical beasts charging the village.

There was no end to such anecdotes about her.

When Latina joined Granny Wen, they didn't take normal walks, but rather, Wen taught the young girl "paths that weren't paths" throughout the village.

It was Granny Wen who took Latina to the workplace of those with the job of "Suna."

"Dogs!"

"That's right. There are a lot of magical beasts and other animals here in the mountains, so we have these guys help us out."

Latina's eyes absolutely sparkled when she saw the countless fluffy dogs inside the hut.

"We use them for hunting, too. The Suna train and take care of them."

"They don't use Center magic?"

“There are plenty of people in our clan with the Earth attribute, but there’s no guarantee anyone with a Center affinity will be born, so we need a way to use them that doesn’t rely on magic.”

Latina nodded along to Granny Wen’s explanation. Also called the Control attribute, Center-attribute magic allowed one to communicate their intentions to the target as well as manipulate the target’s senses. Those who made their living as tamers primarily had Center affinity.

“Can I pet them?”

“Well... what do you think, Zabine?” Granny Wen asked the Suna woman, who brought back a single puppy.

“You can pet this little guy.”

“Wow, he’s so cute!” Latina said, happily scooping up the brown-furred pup. He looked up curiously at Latina with his big, round eyes.

“He’d like it if you brush him.”

“Understood,” said Latina, a serious expression on her face. And so, Zabine taught her the proper technique for brushing.

Less than ten days later, all of the dogs in the village were putty in Latina’s hands.

Having mastered this skill that was legendary in Tislow, the Godhand, there were no longer any beasts the world over that could resist her.

...That might be going a bit too far, but Latina had grown quite skilled at petting and brushing.

Part of the reason for her success was that it was the time of year when dogs shed their winter undercoats. To the dogs, Latina

was someone who could skillfully scratch their itchy spots.

Even so...

This strange sight was enough to make Granny Wen mutter, "This is amazing..." It was half in admiration and half in amazement.

The girl was beaming. "They've gotten attached to Latina!"

"That's for sure... There's no other way to put it..."

Holding the brush she'd been given after coming to the dog hut several times in her hand, Latina wore an expression of pride and satisfaction. Stretched-out, relaxed, and looking happy in front of her was a big black dog, the leader of the hut.

"This dog took the longest to warm up to Latina!"

It was no easy task for just anyone to get this dog to wag its tail. And it wasn't the only dog with its belly pointed up into the air. It wouldn't be wrong to say that right now, all the dogs in the hut had been completely and utterly defeated, which a number of them apparently found so pleasant that they were drifting off into sleep.

"Latina, you're amazing..."

"Latina's amazing? That's embarrassing..."

Unable to do anything but praise her, Granny Wen patted her on the head, and Latina blushed.

Hearing of this incident, the other Suna started seriously considering recruiting Latina... and as a result, Dale ended up hearing all about it later.

While Latina was reveling in the country living of Tislow, Dale was also enjoying being back home after so long. It was far more relaxed here than it was back in town. This place where he was born and raised was the only place where he could talk with old, trusted friends.

Today, Dale was lending a hand for the hunt. For the first time in quite a while, he drew a bow with his own hand, aimed carefully, and let loose a single arrow.

“Alright!” Dale let slip in satisfaction, confident that he’d hit his target the moment he released the string. Seeing his arrow strike down a mountain bird, the men accompanying him all offered praise, saying things like, “Looks like you haven’t lost your touch, Dale!”

No one person in Tislow specialized in hunting; the duty of felling wild animals and magical beasts, which provided precious food and materials, was shared by the entire clan. Nearly every day a group made up of several young folks, an experienced older person, and the Suna who handled the hunting dogs was sent out, and their outings also served the purpose of keeping an eye on the area around the village. If they encountered a powerful magical beast while on a hunt, they’d request reinforcements from the village and then have several groups attack in waves in order to easily finish it off.

In a way, their whole clan was an excellent group of hunters. And the one in charge of that important task was the next head of the clan.

“Wouldn’t it go a lot smoother if you took command, big bro?” Yorck muttered, watching from the rear.

“Don’t be stupid. That’s your job, right?” Dale replied in exasperation.

Before he’d left the village, it had been Dale’s job to take

charge on hunts. That much was true. He'd been young, so he still needed assistance from his elders, but it was an important chance for him to study how to lead others as the future head of the clan. But things were only that way up until when he was given the role of Reki and left the village.

“You're the one who will carry on as head of the clan.”

Yorck sank into silence, feeling complex emotions at Dale's words. Not getting a clear response back from his younger brother, Dale could only break out in a smile filled with his own complex feelings.

The mountains around Tislow were an abundant land, able to support a great variety of wildlife; it wasn't at all difficult to find prey. The people of the village were indeed excellent hunters, but for them, that was the norm. They didn't think that they were especially skilled at all. Having gone out into the world, though, Dale knew how good they were. He'd been proud of his skills with a bow, which were enough to earn him the praise of his elders in the clan, but he became properly aware of his talent when he left the village.

The clan was focused on such a narrow area that the name of “Reki” was given to one fighter who was sent out into the world in order to protect Tislow from the outside.

The hunt proved plenty successful. Seeing Latina smack her lips at the sight of the bird he'd caught being grilled up, Dale looked incredibly pleased, and the young girl didn't seem to mind his gaze at all.

Dale visited his father's study while waiting for night to come.

As the effective head of the clan, Randolph's work involved everything from odd-jobs around the village to negotiations with

outside merchants. It wasn't rare at all for him to work until past sunset. The head of the Tislow clan didn't rule over everyone, but rather maintained the clan, managing things so they could prosper.

"Does Yorck still feel indebted to me?" Dale asked.

"So even you figured it out, huh?" Randolph responded with a strained smile.

"Yeah. Even him getting married is a result of me pushing things off onto him," Dale replied with an expression much like his father's.

"You guys and everyone else figured it was obvious that you'd be the successor as head of the clan."

"Yeah."

"Everyone questioned it when you were given the role of Reki by order of the village chief," Randolph said, looking at his son. "We figured if there was going to be a Reki, it would be Yorck."

"That would've been fine, if it was a normal Reki. We wouldn't have been able to make use of the chance to form a connection with the duke without my rare ability, though. Granny made the right choice," Dale said with a bitter smile, full of sympathy for Yorck and from remembering what had happened. It was the expression of an elder brother who had completely accepted his role and swept away all of his doubts.

His father thought in the depths of his heart that Dale had truly matured over these last few years. He wasn't uncouth enough to voice those feelings, though.

"I hear the duke appreciates your work, too. The Reki from all over have been reporting that it's become something of an open secret amongst the influential folks that Tislow has the backing of

the royal family, even if unofficially.”

“Right...? I’ve just been doing my work. Yorck just needs to accept that, too...” Realizing that the state he’d been in had distressed his younger brother, Dale once more broke out in a bitter smile. “I’m fine now...”

“So that little lady saved you, huh?”

Dale smiled at his father’s words. Whenever he thought of the young girl, he was filled with warm feelings, and of course that overflowed into his expression as well.

“Latina helps to heal me. She always says what I need to hear.”

When he returned to his room, he found Latina reading back through her notebook. Nights in Tislow were chilly, so she was wearing a fluffy cardigan she’d borrowed. The sleeves were long, so only the tips of her fingers were poking out. The dress she had on as loungewear was something Granny Wen had hurriedly prepared for her. Granny Wen had taken the initiative and prepared all the things that Latina would need for her roughly two-month stay before Dale could. That was somehow frustrating.

“Hey, Latina...”

“Hmm?”

“Are you happy?”

“Dale?” Latina questioned with a blank stare. It may have been too sudden of a question. While Dale was wondering how to explain, Latina broke out in a smile.

“Latina’s happy. She’s together with Dale, after all.”

He wouldn’t trade that trust-filled gaze and her overwhelmingly positive words for the world, but she didn’t know that.

“Are you happy, Dale?”

“...Yeah. As long as you’re happy, then I’m *super* happy.”

Dale’s response made Latina’s smile grow even brighter.

It was this young girl who supported him and let him be himself. In no time at all, she’d become absolutely irreplaceable to him.

“You’re always looking at that notebook, Latina... It’s a diary, right?”

“Yeah,” she responded, holding it to her chest with care. “Latina’s really happy right now, so she wants to write things down so she doesn’t forget.”

She wore a mature, farsighted expression, which she could only do because she’d accepted her own fate.

“Even if Latina is parted from Dale and everyone, and even if you come to hate her... Latina’s really happy right now. She doesn’t want to ever forget that.”

Understanding the meaning of those words but not wanting to affirm them, Dale was unable to speak for a moment. But there was no point in denying that absolute fact that their lifespans differed.

“I don’t think I could ever come to hate you, Latina.”

“You don’t know how Latina will be when she’s an adult, though,” Latina said, her voice just a bit pained. “And if Latina is bad when she grows up, she wants you to properly scold her, Dale.”

She really was growing up, bit by bit. She could even admit her “crime” to Dale and was now able to face it head-on and accept it.

“Latina will know that you’re doing it for her sake, Dale.”

“I may not be as grown up as you think, Latina...”

After letting that timidly slip out, he hurriedly searched for something to say to smooth things over. But even so, Latina accepted even those words of his.

“Still, Dale is the most important person to Latina.”

He really did want her to be happy, not for anyone’s sake but his own. Protecting her happiness helped prop him up and gave him most of the power he needed to keep going.

“You’re more amazing than I am, Latina...” Because of his modest pride as her parent, he muttered it quietly so he wouldn’t be heard, but he needed to whisper it nonetheless out of respect for his beloved young daughter.

†

Having come to the Suna hut once again today, Latina was diligently putting everything she had into brushing the dogs.

Seeing this, Granny Wen said, “You really love dogs, don’t you, Latina?”

“Yeah! They’re so cute!” Latina replied with a nice smile, wiping the sweat off her brow while doing so. There wasn’t even a hint of doubt to those words.

“Do you like other animals, too?”

“There aren’t a lot of animals in Kreuz, and not many people have dogs in the part where Latina lives. She likes cats. And mice ‘should be eliminated from shops that serve food, like the Ocelot.” Her master, Kenneth, had taught her that.

“These fellows seem to have grown quite attached to you too,

Latina...” Wendelgard muttered to herself, contemplating something. “Well then, shall I take you tomorrow to see someone I think you’d like?”

“Someone Latina would like?”

“Yeah. But you’ve got to keep it a secret from everyone else.”

“Even Dale...?”

“If he finds out, then he may tell you not to go.”

“Is it a dangerous place?”

“I’d never expose my cute little Latina to danger.”

“You really are just like Dale, Granny.”

That was the impression that Latina got.

Just as she’d said, in addition to bringing lunch, Granny Wen took Latina on an outing the next day. And considering how Tislow was surrounded by them, that outing was of course into the mountains. Magical beasts may have lived there, but none were enough to worry Granny Wen.

From then on out, Latina started sneaking around and going out alone, trying to avoid being noticed. Granny Wen soon realized what she was doing, but simply smirked and didn’t say a word. Dale was generally out during the day, though, so he didn’t realize what Latina was doing. As a result, the first one to find Latina’s actions suspicious was Dale’s mother, Magda.

“Dale.”

“What is it?”

“About Latina. Lately...” started Magda, tilting her head. “It seems she’s been eating snacks with Granny lately, but I think

she's also occasionally taking some jerky, too."

"Jerky?" Dale asked, tilting his head as well. Latina wasn't a very picky eater, but thanks to her small build, she also didn't eat all that much. She may have liked sweets, but she never overate when snacking. It was hard to imagine her sneaking food.

"She's been coming and going to the Suna place, right? Maybe she's giving it to the dogs or something."

"But the dogs there are raised not to take food from anyone who isn't a Suna."

"That's true..."

The mother and son tilted their heads at a similar angle. They didn't have the option of asking Granny Wen, since the old woman wouldn't fess up to anything if she found it amusing. And if it were something dangerous, she would've already taken action. She was worthy of at least that much trust and respect.

"I'll check it out," Dale said, now ready to take action.

Latina was busy with work and her studies during the morning. Dale figured that if she was up to something, it'd have to be in the afternoon, so he secretly lined up his lunchtime with hers and headed home. He then kept watch outside the mansion, not going inside. He knew a number of places to hide from when he played as a child and was now in one such spot.

"Hide-and-seek" in Tislow was a little different than it was elsewhere. It was guided by the adults and used proper techniques for hiding. It was technically a "game," but it was effectively the start of training for hunting in the mountains and guarding the village. Even Latina's sharp senses would have a hard time finding Dale when he got serious.

Before long, Latina came out of the mansion. She was glancing

about and paying more attention to her surroundings than necessary, seemingly feeling guilty about something. The pink stole on her back bulged out, likely because she had on her rucksack. On top of that, she was also holding a bag in one hand, perhaps containing jerky. After taking one more look back at the mansion, she started walking. Maintaining a fair amount of distance between them, Dale started to follow her.

She kept confidently walking onward, occasionally stopping to look at a small flower or a bug. After a while, she turned onto a path into the mountains.

She couldn't be...?

Realizing that Latina was going off to play alone in the mountains, Dale turned pale. He was well aware of Latina's ability to sense danger, having experienced it himself firsthand. But even so, it wasn't foolproof. If she got lost out in the mountains, her life would be in danger.

I'm going to have to give her a talking to about this... Dale thought, continuing to trail her. If he called out to her now, he wouldn't know where she'd been heading.

Even in the mountains, Latina showed no sign of being lost. She continued down narrow animal trails, paying careful attention to her surroundings. Following after her, Dale found cleverly hidden marks at the spots she stopped and checked.

So it was Granny! With this evidence, Dale was now confident. All of the marks were new, so they must have been placed there for Latina's sake. That grandmother of his was even more of a "blessed child of the land" than Dale was, so she'd never end up losing her way in the mountains.

Latina kept on going in a direction Dale wasn't familiar with. It wasn't all that far from the village, but it was an area that was off-limits. It was an unwritten rule that you weren't supposed to

go there. In actuality, for some reason, magical beasts and animals never appeared here, so there was no need to hunt or patrol in the area. On top of the area being banned, there was no point for those who went to gather the fruits of the land to risk the danger of traversing such unknown paths and terrain. There was plenty to be gathered elsewhere in such a bountiful region, after all. From the time a villager was a child on, they took it as a given that you didn't come here. That was the sort of place Latina had gone.

After a short while, Latina stopped.

There was a bush amongst the short undergrowth in a bit of a clearing. Latina walked around it, seemingly looking for something in the brush. Dale thought he heard her call for someone. As if in response, the bush started rustling vigorously, and something popped out from the undergrowth. Before Dale could see what it was, Latina went running to it, hiding it in the shadow of her body. But from her following joyful shout, it was clear that *this* was what she had come for.

“Latina brought dried meat today, too. Do you want some?”

After rustling around the bag a bit, she pulled out its contents, which she offered as she squatted down and happily stared at her companion.

“Is it tasty? That's great! Do you want more?”

After offering more of what was in the bag, she seemed to start petting her companion. It was clear to Dale that she was engrossed in what she was doing, even just seeing her from behind. Normally Dale would mutter to himself about how cute it was to see Latina like that, but he wasn't in the state of mind for that right now.

“Latina!” Dale yelled out, standing up from his hiding place. Seemingly feeling guilty after all, Latina sprung up with her back

still facing him, actually leaping up into the air a bit. It was rather charming to see.

“You shouldn’t feed wild animals. We can’t take it back with us to Kreuz, so it’s better for it as well to not make it more used to people than necessary.”

“Dale...” Confused, Latina stood up and turned to face him, holding the animal in her arms.

“Wild animals carry illnesses sometimes too, so you shouldn’t carelessly touch--“

“Not ’nimal.”

Dale’s lecture was interrupted by a voice he didn’t recognize. “Huh...?”

“Angry, angry!”

That steaming-mad voice came from the “animal” in Latina’s arms. It looked like a medium-sized dog and had fluffy fur and a tail. Depending on the viewing angle, it had the feel of a lion to it. On its back were wings. It stared unwaveringly at Dale with its intelligent-looking, golden eyes.

“A mythical beast...?” Dale muttered, dumbfounded, and Latina responded with a clear, “Yeah.”

The biggest difference between animals and magical beasts was whether or not they could use mana. Animals that had gained that ability over generations in turn gained great power. Some could trigger Wind magic with their unusual roars. Some could use mana to boost their physical abilities. And some used it to support bodies far larger than those of normal animals. Even if those feats weren’t all explicitly magic, such phenomena were all caused by mana, so the animals came to be called “magical beasts.” That designation was given not just to animals, but to all

living creatures, such as bugs and the like as well. Undead monsters, like ghosts and moving corpses, and other inorganic beings that used mana to move were referred to as “magical beings.”

Mythical beasts could be thought of as the top rank of magical beasts, standing above the rest. They possessed not just mana, but also a high level of intelligence. It was said that they had a language, culture, and unique society all their own. And amongst them were those who understood the language of man.

Dale had interacted with mythical beasts before in the past. With their high intelligence, they were able to become demons. They weren’t enslaved, instead serving as proper subordinates of a demon lord. Their abilities were even greater than those of magical beasts of the same type.

With a mythical beast in front of him, Dale unconsciously reached for the sword at his hip. It apparently recognized Dale’s reaction, and its fur suddenly stood on-end to intimidate him. The two stared one another down, a tense air between them...

“Squish-squish?” Latina buried her face into puffed-up fur, instantly destroying that tension. “What’s wrong? Are you angry? Did Dale do something? Sorry.”

“Not... angry.” The creature’s fur sank back down and it stopped trying to act threatening. The tension dispersed.

By the way, all of this occurred with the mythical beast still in Latina’s arms.

“Latina...?”

“Latina’s sorry for coming to play without asking... Granny said that this place was a secret, but Latina wanted to come. She wasn’t able to control herself, so... sorry...” Downhearted, Latina looked at the ground, and the mythical beast wagged its tail in seeming displeasure.

“Bullying? Beat the hell up?”

“Dale’s just worried about Latina. He’s not bullying her.”

“So this really was Granny’s doing, huh...?” Dale let out a deep sigh and looked at the mythical beast in Latina’s arms once more. “Still, to think there was a mythical beast this close to the village...”

“Is that odd?” Latina asked, tilting her head.

“Normally, mythical beasts don’t come close to human settlements...”

“Really?” Latina tilted her head even further in confusion.

The environments suited for mythical beasts and people differed, and mythical beasts found getting involved with humans to bring unnecessary trouble, so they didn’t like doing so. They were intelligent enough that they also understood the danger presented by the races of man, who used tools and magic. As a result, mythical beasts generally avoided living in places inhabited by people.

In other words, Latina’s following statement was outlandish and absolutely absurd.

“This one’s family lives near here too, though.”

“What?!” Dale couldn’t help but be left speechless. He yelled out angrily in his mind, of course at his grandmother.

After Dale suppressed his inner turmoil, he asked Latina what had happened and learned that Granny Wen had led her to the mythical beasts’ den.

“They’re called ‘soaring wolves.’ They live in packs,” Latina explained what Granny Wen had told her as she walked alongside Dale. The wolf cub was a few steps ahead of them, looking like a

well-trained dog.

“So there was a pack a mythical beasts living this close to the village...?”

“Granny said that it’s a secret kept by the heads of the clan, and that Papa Randolph knows, too.”

“Dad...”

“Mr. Yorck is still just the apprentice of the clan head’s apprentice, so he hasn’t been told.”

From the rest of what Latina had to say, Dale got a grasp on the situation. Apparently the successive Tislow clan heads had an understanding with the soaring wolves and agreed to live symbiotically. The most important part of that agreement was that neither would invade the territory of the other. The soaring wolves wouldn’t come into the village or attack its people, and the people of Tislow wouldn’t enter the soaring wolves’ domain in the mountains. The soaring wolves captured and ate animals and other magical beasts, so such an abundant area could support many of them. With the existence of such predators, naturally the number of such creatures declined. For Tislow, this was a good method for preventing magical-beast attacks.

The soaring wolf Dale was looking at how confirmed his conjecture. Latina had called the previous creature a cub, and apparently that was the right way to refer to it.

The massive frame of the soaring wolf before Dale was stretched out comfortably on the ground. Thanks to the aura coming off of this huge carnivore, the weak of heart wouldn’t have been able to even stand before it. It was a lithe yet strong animal, like a lion or a tiger. Just how large would it appear if it spread out its folded wings?

“That’s correct. We soaring wolves have had a contract with

Tislow since the distant past. As long as neither side violates its terms, it shall remain valid.” With a solemn, majestic voice, it smoothly spoke the words of man.

Just what sort of negotiations had the people of Tislow done in the past? Dale felt complex emotions while trying to imagine what his ancestors had been thinking. He’d never heard of anyone negotiating a contract with mythical beasts to live alongside them. It wasn’t just this fact that had Dale lost in thought and wanting to turn a blind eye to reality.

“Here?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Here?”

“I see, not bad.”

The massive, powerful, rare mythical beast—a soaring wolf—was loose, relaxed, defenseless, and showing its stomach. At the start, it was of course on guard seeing Dale for the first time and wouldn’t possibly have taken such a position. But when Latina took her brush out of her rucksack and started brushing the soaring wolf all over, it naturally shifted to that posture.

Huh? Mythical beasts usually don’t let others even touch them in the first place! This is bizarre! Dale held that quip back and kept it in his mind. Perhaps because they were a type of wolf, which were canines, they happily wagged their tails, seemingly unable to withstand Latina’s grooming, and would occasionally shift to make it easier for the brush to reach them.



Hell had frozen over.

Soaring wolves wagging their tails... Soaring wolves showing their stomachs...

There was an air of absolute submission to the scene. Latina herself seemed entirely unaware of that, though. And furthermore, she had accomplished all of this without any Center magic. She'd managed it all with her own skill alone.

"Latina, you're... amazing..." Dale whispered.

"Hmm?" Latina looked confused, her brow shining with sweat. The soaring wolf they were speaking with right now and which she had tamed so thoroughly was apparently their leader. In no time at all, this young girl had made powerful enough allies that she could likely take control of an entire town if she wanted to.

Having finished brushing the alpha soaring wolf, Latina held the cub in her arms. "This cub gets along with Latina best." She was beaming. Seeing her like that, Dale wasn't able to say anything. This cub, the first soaring wolf Dale had seen, was the child of the leader. Aside from the black mixed into the tips of its ears, tail, and paws, its fur was the exact same grey as the leader.

"Um, his stomach is the fluffiest part." With the cub still in her arms, she came running to Dale to show off the stomach fur of the massive carnivore, defenselessly and without hesitation. The leader of the pack gave his complete approval to the bold, daring actions of the small girl. In fact, he even seemed happy about it. Dale's reaction—escaping from reality with a far-off gaze—may have been the perfectly normal one to have. Easily imagining his grandmother having a hearty laugh at Latina exceeding even her expectations when she set this up, Dale cursed her in his mind.

"Latina likes animals, but she doesn't get along too well with cats," Latina said, looking up at Dale on their way back to the vil-

lage. “She wants to, so she approaches them, but they run away.”

“I see...”

“Latina likes petting, and fluffy fur feels good.”

“...I see...”

It should’ve been absolutely heartwarming to see her frolic with animals, but he couldn’t earnestly feel that way because of how abnormal it was. Still half-lost in escapism, Dale thought to himself that nothing was good in excess.

“She gets along with all the dogs in Tislow, too.”

“...I see.”

He had listened to what she’d said up until now, but perhaps because the situation was so different than he’d expected, he let out a big sigh.

Latina’s still growing...

It would seem that Latina’s potential for growth had exceeded his expectations.

7: The Young Man Attends His Brother's Wedding with the Young Girl

As Dale's brother Yorck's wedding approached, the whole of Tislow grew restless. Out in the country, entertainment was limited. Such a big event of course made for a special occasion for the villagers, and this time around, the leading man was part of the main household. It would obviously be a grand event. Their expectations were through the roof.

Every house in the village was airing out their Sunday best and preparing gifts, and the whole village was filled with a lively air.

Latina's outfit came from Dale's family, adjusted to fit her. Rather than needing to frequently be remade, it was made to be tweaked bit by bit to fit the wearer as they grew. The blouse required careful adjustment, but everything else could simply be shortened to fit the young girl.

Latina was absorbed in her needlework as she sat in Granny Wen's room again today. At night, she'd either be in the room with Dale or the living room, while she generally spent the day in the kitchen and this room. By the way, Latina was now able to properly sleep in a different room than Dale. Her general pattern was to stay in Dale's room until she got sleepy, say goodnight, and then move to the room next door, get in bed, and fall asleep within three seconds.

"Done!"

"Let me see..."

Having finished sewing the skirt, Latina held it out to Granny

Wen with a sunny expression on her face. After checking the seams, Granny Wen gave her approval.

“Not bad.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Who taught you? It wasn’t my idiot grandson, right?”

“A friend’s mom did.”

Latina wore a proud smile as her hair was ruffled. Granny Wen was affectionate towards Latina and liked to pamper her. In a way, she was even more generous than Dale. But even so, she did know when to be strict. In Dale’s case, he’d always energetically praise Latina, no matter what. That did make her happy, but to a girl like Latina overflowing with a desire to improve herself, she felt even happier to receive a passing grade from someone strict like Kenneth or Granny Wen. Rather than being arrogant, she was able to properly accept cold, harsh judgments as well.

“How will the bride be coming?”

“After she arrives from the village down the way, she’ll stay in a house near the entrance to take care of preparations. We have our own way of doing things. And since she’ll be joining our clan, she’ll have to do things our way.”

“Latina sees. She saw a wedding in Kreuz at the temple of Quirmizi before.”

Ahmar was the principal god of Laband, but in addition presiding over the harvest, Quirmizi was also the god you prayed to for the prosperity of your descendants. Following that logic, Quirmizi also oversaw weddings. Even if they didn’t have a proper priest with divine protection, nearly every town and village had a place dedicated to the worship of Quirmizi for that very reason, as it also served as a facility to hold a wedding.

“Our way of doing things may be a tad different than the way they do things in town.”

“Latina’s looking forward to it!” said Latina happily, holding her successful skirt to her chest.

Tislow had a culture all its own. That applied not just to the customs, but to the attire as well. The thick skirt had ribbons attached to its embroidered hem. Outside of formal occasions, people would often wear an apron overtop. Both men and women wore vests over their shirts and blouses, and a subtly embroidered sash completed the outfit. As they were a people who served the god of the earth, the embroidery on their formal clothes was always designed to look like flowers. These took no short amount of time to make and were the result of detailed handwork. They were handed down through a household, and mothers took quite some time making them for their children.

Latina was greatly looking forward to wearing such unfamiliar clothes. She was a girl, so of course she was interested in fashion.

“Does it look alright on Latina? It doesn’t look strange?”

“You’re a charming girl, Latina. It suits you well.”

“You really are cute, Latina,” added Dale, his comment not much different from his grandmother’s.

“Right.”

“Our clan’s clothing looks totally fresh on you, Latina.”

“Right.”

“You look like you belong in the spotlight more than the bride!”

“Right.”

“Hey, you idiot brother! And you too, Granny! Cut it out!”

It was the day of the wedding itself when Yorck played the straight man to this grandson and grandmother pair.

Latina had put on her outfit entirely consisting of clothes from Tislow and was spinning about in front of Dale, unable to calm down. Following tradition, she also had a large, jeweled broach attached to her chest. As a clan of craftsmen, the people of Tislow were quite familiar with jewelry. Latina was obviously just borrowing it, but it was a truly splendid piece, fitting of the main household.

Unmarried men and women also had fresh flowers as part of their outfit. Women wore them in their hair, while the men tucked them into their hats. The difference between those who were married and those who weren't was also shown on the designs on their sashes, with those who were unmarried having flowers, and those who were married having fruit. Though he was the leading man of the day, Yorck's outfit wasn't different from that of the other men. He had a jeweled ornament pinned onto his stole and a knife at his waist, but that was the norm for Tislow. The only thing that marked him as different was the design on his sash: only the groom's had both flower and fruit embroidery.

“So you've still got the flowers, huh? Looks like your little brother is going to pass you by,” those offering their congratulations told Dale, the brother of the leading man.

Latina looked even cuter than usual today, to such a degree that Dale couldn't help but want to break out in doting exclamations. The vivid flower in her platinum hair looked absolutely beautiful. It was the same old attire Tislow women wore, but it looked shockingly fresh on her.

“You look cool, Dale.”

“It’s pathetic that I’ve still got flowers, though.”

This sort of light banter continued until the start of the ceremony, when a bell rang out from far away and the atmosphere grew somehow tense. It was the relatives of the bride who rang that bell to tell of their coming as they walked. They weren’t used to Tislow’s way of doing things, so they were terribly nervous and rang the bell awkwardly, but in response, the people of Tislow greeted them by scattering flower petals about their path.

Except for when deep snow prevented them in winter, marriage ceremonies were held all throughout the year, but spring was definitely when they were at their most beautiful. This time in particular, when they were coming into spring, there were many varieties of flowers in full bloom, and plenty of petals to scatter with the villagers’ blessings.

When that advance party reached the groom’s house, the sound of bells grew even louder. It was then that the groom’s family came outside. Latina came out alongside them, and her eyes shot wide open at the brilliant colors painting the path through the village. Yellow, red, pink, white... Adding in the shades, there were so many colors that it was difficult to express them all. The flower petals danced through the air, bringing a fragrance along with them.

“So pretty...” Latina said in admiration, her gaze drawn to a single point. Tislow men held up poles supporting a chair, and seated in it was the bride, dressed in a brilliant outfit. Her beautiful dress used elaborate, complex embroidery, and she wore elegant jewelry as well, topping off the outfit with an orange hat, the color of Quirmizi. It was also abundantly decorated with fresh flowers.

The palanquin the bride rode in continued slowly down the flowered path. Several people wearing outfits different than those of Tislow, the bride’s relatives, followed behind.

“The bride is beautiful...”

Latina’s cheeks were absolutely rosy as she stared in admiration. As for Dale, he casually put himself in the shoes of the bride’s father, who may have been happy for this auspicious marriage into the Tislow clan as a village chief, but couldn’t hide his complex feelings on the matter.

Just what would he do if Latina wanted to be a bride herself? If she brought back some spineless guy and said she was going to marry him, then he may end up making him *literally* spineless... Dale may not be able to use Fire magic, but he’d surely want to burn him to ashes. Well, if nothing else, he wouldn’t accept anyone who wasn’t at least his equal. Someone weaker than him was out of the question from the very start. But Latina might end up hating him if he opposed her, right? What should he do? He felt like he was going to break out in tears.

“Why are you making a face like that?” Randolph’s quip may have been on point, but it fell short and failed to reach his son.

Randolph took a bell from the advance party, he and the man bowed to one another. With the gate left wide open, the palanquin the bride was riding was ushered inside by the groom’s family. As she stepped down into the mansion with her cloth shoes, she didn’t leave behind even a speck of dirt or grime. To Tislow, the earth itself was a god worthy of awe. This ceremony held the meaning of delivering the bride to the house of the groom without allowing that god to steal her away.

After that, the celebratory banquet began. A constant flow of villagers came up to the new bride and groom, who were standing up on a tiered platform, to offer their blessings. The adults also brought gifts, but everyone offered them a single flower. Latina also came up and shyly greeted them, holding a light pink flower to her chest.

“Congratulations.”

The bride accepted the flower from Latina with a nervous smile and placed it on the table set up behind her. The mountain overflowing on top of it showed just how many people had already come to see them

Finally, they offered these flowers, the proof of the blessing of the people around them, up to Quirmizi, bringing the ceremony to a close. The culture of Tislow attached great importance to flowers.

After the ceremony was over, the banquet turned into a true party. Men and women of all ages smacked their lips at the mountain of food, and just for this occasion, the clan head broke out her cherished liquor. Magda and several of the other women were already wearing aprons and hurriedly moving about.

Amongst the lively crowd, Latina was sitting meekly by Granny Wendelgard's side, chewing on her slice of river-fish pie, only to realize that Dale wasn't around. Looking to her right, she saw Granny Wen biting off a chunk of herb-roasted meat and then gulping down a cup of liquor. Further along, she saw Yorck caring for his new bride Frida, who looked to have gotten drunk.

Looking to her left, Latina saw Randolph arguing passionately with the villagers, who were being spurred on by the alcohol. It was a stupid debate over whether it'd be better for Randolph's first grandchild to be a boy or a girl.

Looking straight ahead, she saw a large number of people enjoying the banquet. Latina had helped make the large platter of food Magda had carried out. She was overjoyed to see people enjoying what she had made.

"Dale...?"

Not seeing him anywhere, though, she felt extremely lonely. Granny Wen soon realized why Latina's gaze was darting all about.

“Latina.”

“Hmm?”

“My idiot grandson went outside. If you’re going after him, be sure to wear something warm,” Granny Wen said, handing her a nearby stole. After thinking for a bit, Latina gave a deep bow, put on the stole, weaved through the crowd, and went outside.

As she stepped out of the mansion and away from the warmth coming off the people inside, a pleasant night breeze hit her face. The silence out here almost made the bustle inside seem unreal.

There he stood. Latina was relieved and approached him, but then felt bewildered, as he seemed somewhat different than normal.

“Dale...?”

Hearing her whisper, Dale looked up with the same smile on his face as always.

“What’s wrong, Latina? It’s cold out here, so you should go back inside.”

“You taught me that when you don’t want to smile, it’s alright not to, right?”

After his surprise passed, Dale’s smile gained some bitterness. “I’m alright, Latina... Sorry for worrying you.”

“Dale... are you lonely?”

“Today’s a celebration, so of course I’m not,” Dale said in denial, only for Latina to hug him tight.

If Latina were more grown up, then could she help Dale out more? Feeling a little sad, Latina blinked her moist eyes. She wanted to help him out in some way, like he always did for her.

She thought if she was more of an adult, she'd surely not have to see such a pained smile on his face.

Wanting to "save him" like he had done to her, she hugged him tightly. "Latina... should hurry up and grow up..."

As she muttered that, Dale broke out in his usual strained smile. "You can take your time growing up, Latina, don't you think? You don't need to push yourself."

As he reached out to pat her head like he always did, he realized she was about to break out in tears. He gently shifted his hand from her hair down to her cheek. "You really are a kind girl, Latina..."

He didn't expect Latina to see through him like this. When she asked if he was lonely, he became aware that his feelings were indeed something like that.

His younger brother's wedding. The crowd of villagers offering their congratulations one after another. The calls for even further prosperity for the clan. And he wasn't the one in the center of all of it. Everyone had spent so much time talking together without him. Time had kept on flowing while he wasn't around. And it would keep on flowing without him in the future. That much was obvious. Though he should've accepted that, a lonely feeling filled his heart.

For as long as he could remember, he thought he'd be the one to become the head of the clan. Everyone around him thought so as well, and they'd treated him as such. He never regretted the idea of living for the sake of the clan. It had been his foundation, that he'd carry on protecting the clan as the successive village heads before him had done, including his father and grandmother. He yielded that seat of clan head to his younger brother for the sake of the clan, too.

To protect Tislow, his clan, he ended up leaving. He chose the

path of taking on the name of Reki and leaving his village in order to protect it.

Even so, he occasionally thought about it. That if he hadn't been born with divine protection, then maybe he could've stayed here forever. And that he should've been the one to be the village chief.

"I think I'm a little drunk... I guess I'll take a walk until I sober up a bit. Care to join me?"

"Yeah."

Walking while holding hands like this had become something perfectly normal for the pair. And it meant more to him than anything else in the world, that it was now a given for this young girl to be at his side.

†

Tislow had long since been disliked by the local lord of the area. The clan possessed their own unique culture and rules. Essentially, they weren't a part of the nation of Laband. Even so, it was solely because of their high level of skill in unique fields that they weren't treated as rebels, subjugated, and eliminated.

There were settlements called "Tislow" outside of Laband as well. In the past, those in power sought those other places out. The Tislow there chose to resist, only to retreat from the village in a single night in the end, leaving behind an empty husk. To the clan, the clan itself came above all else. In order to protect that, they had no qualms about abandoning their land.

When the Tislow clan left a land, it lost its abundant divine protection as well. And so even peerlessly productive land would soon turn back to normal, once more becoming a simple, inconvenient, remote area. After a war of attrition to break through the firm defenses leveraging the terrain manned by the excellent war-

rior magic users of the Tislow clan, they gained only a single abandoned village. It didn't especially pay off.

The people of Tislow didn't mind abandoning their land because it wasn't hard for them to move to a new location, cultivate a new land, and rebuild the village. That was largely thanks to the power of the earth, which was synonymous with their clan. And no matter where they went, the goods they produced with their skills carried a high price. Their unique skill for producing magical devices was truly the goose that laid the golden egg.

Here in Laband too, the local lord ruling the domain was not fond of Tislow. They wisely used their abundant land to build up a stockpile of food reserves to such a degree that they could manage to support the surrounding villages even while fending off a siege. They had a great many magic users, and their specialty, Earth magic, had the ability to heal. This clan of the earth was also intimately familiar with medicinal plants. As a result, they possessed medical abilities far beyond what you'd expect so far out in the country.

Though they were adjacent to the land the local lord ruled, they were a powerful, separate zone that didn't answer to his authority. It was obvious that someone in such a position of power would despise them. It was also readily apparent that in the remote parts of his domain, where he held less influence, the people living there trusted Tislow more than they did their own lord.

To the country of Laband itself, however, Tislow was worthy of being granted an exception and given autonomy. They wanted to avoid having them leave the nation above all else. If they lost such precious craftsmen it would lead to a shortage of magical devices throughout the country and have an effect on national policy. The profits that Tislow's magical devices brought to Laband couldn't be ignored, either. Their loss would greatly impact both the distribution and flow of money. Furthermore, if Tislow left and moved to another nation, that country would naturally gain those benefits.

And so, taking all of that into account, the influential people at the core of the nation found it best to maintain the current situation.

This relationship between Tislow, Laband, and the local lord had been maintained for quite some time, but when the local lord changed and sought to govern over the region, not even trying to hide his opposition to Tislow, that balance had started to crumble.

It was the head of the Tislow clan, Wendelgard, who had made the first move. She used the Reki spread out through the land to invite Cornelio Cacace, a high-ranking Asfarian priest, to the village. He was an authority in the field of cultural anthropology, so Wendelgard extended the invitation after hearing that he was interested in the unique culture of Tislow.

Normally, Tislow wouldn't allow outsiders in. When it came to welcoming someone as a new member of the clan, there was no issue, but they wouldn't just let someone move into the village. And so, this decision was an unusual one.

Cornelio was an influential voice even in the central temple in the capital, so Wendelgard used him and the temple of Asfar as a means of forming a contact with Duke Eldstedt, the most influential man in Laband. At that time, Tislow presented the eldest son of the head household, Dale. He was used as a tool for political negotiations. Said to be favored by the gods, he possessed the divine protection of not just one god, but several, which was very rare.

He was an imposing presence that could harm a demon lord. In other words, he held abilities that allowed him to be called a "hero." While such people were exceptionally rare, it's not like he was the only "hero" out there. However, just because someone possessed the abilities required to be called a "hero," there was no guarantee that they'd be a soldier accustomed to the field of battle.

With the threat of the increasing influence of the warlike and dangerous Seventh and Second Demon Lords, a hero with combat abilities who could oppose them, like Dale, was incredibly precious.

Dale definitely had the ability to fight. His divine protection was well suited to being used in battle. His divine protection from Quirmizi was strong even for those from the clan, aiding him in magic related to the earth. When Dale cast Earth magic, he hardly expended any mana. And as a skilled hunter, he also excelled at handling weapons. Studying under Cornelio, his education didn't fall short of what he'd get in a town, and he learned how to be an adventurer under a skilled young man in the business.

As a warrior, Dale wanted for nothing in terms of nature and nurture.

†

Dale had taken Latina for a walk to the waterfalls.

Latina recited a chant, and a ball of light appeared, floating in front of her. As if reflecting her personality, it had a gentle, tender feel to it. The pair walked side by side down the path it lit.

When they reached the waterfalls, there were several lanterns around, and they reflected off the surface of the water, resulting in countless, trembling rays of light. The place was already mysterious to start with, and now it made for an almost otherworldly sight.

“Wow...”

“Yorck and Frida were just here for the ceremony.”

The final part of the ceremony fell to the new husband and wife. Latina had been waiting in the mansion, so she hadn't come here. She was glad she was able to see it.

There was now a mountain of flowers offered before the shrine to Quirmizi. The number of flowers alone was an indication of just how many blessings they had received.

“I’m sure Yorck will be a good clan head...”

As Latina looked up at Dale, the trembling light from the lanterns cast complex shadows on her face, and it was hard to tell what she was thinking. Feeling like she was going to suddenly turn into an adult, Dale went to rustle her hair, but not wanting to mess it up after it had been so carefully prepared, he just touched it gently.

Dale had certainly been able to fight. But up until he’d left, he’d only taken a weapon in hand to go out on a hunt or to protect the village from outside enemies. He’d never before taken another person’s life.

If demons all looked like beasts, then he likely wouldn’t have suffered so much. They may have gained power greatly exceeding that of their original race in serving a demon lord, but their appearances didn’t change. The devils who made up most of the demons, in fact, didn’t look any different from humans aside from having horns.

He had no regrets when it came to fighting the invading forces of the Seventh Demon Lord, who brought conflict and strife to humankind. The servants of the Second Demon Lord were mutilated in such a way that it was hard to even think of them as living beings. When it came to accepting their resentment-filled pleas (even if it was impossible to understand what they were saying, it was hard to take them as anything else) and taking their lives, that may have been an act of mercy.

But even so, killing people, an act that only took something away, ate away at his heart. Dale’s true nature was that of the clan head of Tislow, who would use his power to protect his people. It was in his nature to show his true power for the sake of those who

needed his protection.

He had been far off from the village he was supposed to protect, and even if he was told it was for the sake of the people, he just kept on killing for the country. He was just too far from the village, so he didn't feel like he was protecting them; but even so, he wanted to, and therefore he couldn't run from his duty.

The prestige and money and rewards did nothing to save him. He couldn't use such things to repair his own broken heart. The solution he found to get used to killing was to crush his emotions so he could carry out his work. But that option meant stifling his true self as well.

But it was then that he met a certain young girl who saved his life. Day by day, he watched over the healthy growth of this weak, helpless child, who even now seemed like she could break at any time. Held in his arms, she'd look at ease, with a happy smile on her face. This girl was someone he needed to protect. Rather than fighting for an unspecified "somebody," he now fought for her sake.

A town full of strangers had become a place where that girl peacefully lived.

Having a clear person to protect now, he gained the motivation he needed to fight, which he had been lacking. As long as she was happy, then he could keep on going.

And yet, when he felt like his heart was going to break, this young girl had also given him words that helped to save him. That warmth healed him.

Her words gave him enough power to face forward and act brave as her father.

"It's all thanks to you that Latina is happy now."

Those words of hers and the smile that accompanied them were the source of his motivation.

“I’m alright, Latina.”

She was so small, but she was kinder than anyone else. He wanted to raise her to keep that pure heart and never be harmed by anyone.

“You saved me, Latina...”

The young girl blinked her big grey eyes in response, looking confused.

Maybe it was alright to speak such timid words every now and again. He could always blame it on the strong liquor he had drunk for the first time in a while.

“Dale?”

“Latina, you say that you’re glad to have met me pretty often, but the same is true for me, too.”

If he hadn’t met her, what would he be like now? Would he be able to smile properly? Would he be able to tell his brother “Congratulations”? Could he have kept on going without losing sight of his memories of this village, which he was supposed to protect?

“I’m glad I met you, Latina.”

“Latina’s glad she met you too, Dale.”

As she smiled gently, he hugged the young girl tight. They were close enough to feel one another’s body heat, as they often were, but it somehow felt a bit different than usual.

“If Latina was able to help Dale, then that makes her happy.”

Hearing her gentle voice, Dale wondered just what sort of

adult she'd become. Would she someday stand by someone else's side, smiling happily like she was now? Surely, it was his job as her father to protect her until that time came.

“Still, I won't let some spineless guy make Latina his bride!”

“Right.”

“If Latina wants, then he can try to beat me! I won't fall, though! Nobody will take me down!”

“Right.”

After heading back to the banquet, Dale returned to being his usual self. He kept pace with Granny Wen's drinking, which was faster than Latina had ever seen before.

“Um... are you alright?”

“You're worried about me?! You really are kind, Latina!”

He grabbed hold of her, clearly drunk.

“Huh?!”

“Ah, you're such a good girl, and so cute! I won't let you be anyone's bride! I won't!”

Sleeping drunks needed to be let lie.

Dale could hold his liquor, but when paired with Granny Wen, they drank enough to empty out an entire barrel, leaving him dead drunk. Latina was only used to seeing him drink light wine, which wouldn't affect him in the least. She had no idea how to manage this crisis. She'd never before experienced being clung to tightly and having a cheek rubbed up against hers over and over and over.

“Waaaaaaagh?!”

Latina let out a strange cry, but that just seemed to make the two drunks in front of her even happier.

“Latina, when you want to get married, just tell me. I’ll find you someone who can beat the hell out of this idiot grandson of mine.”

“Cut it out! With your connections, I feel like you might really find someone!”

Even so, he laughed the same as always.

Dale and Latina smiled at one another.



Dale's coat was finished a few days after Yorck and Frida's wedding. It wasn't too different from his previous one and even had pretty much the same design. There were a number improvements made based on his requests, but they couldn't be seen by the naked eye. It had become a sort of trademark for him, so it'd feel somehow embarrassing to change it now.

He'd seen his younger brother's wedding, and he'd gotten what he'd come here for. In other words, the time had come to head back to Kreuz.

Things became quite busy once he decided that. The preparations to return progressed smoothly. It was the start of spring when they left from Kreuz, but the seasons were already changing again. They had their lives in Kreuz waiting for them, too. Now that they'd gotten what they came for, they couldn't stay here forever.

"Thanks for everything," Latina said with a bow on her last day of studying under Cornelio.

"Think nothing of it. It was rather enjoyable. Having a pupil who truly wanted to learn helped keep me serious."

With a calm expression on his face, Cornelio looked at his tiny student. Just as Dale had said, she was a very clever, intelligent young girl. Cornelio felt that she was still keeping a lot to herself, but if his teachings were of help to her, then that's all he wanted. And he'd be glad if she helped to reduce some of the heavy burden shouldered by his former student as well.

Meanwhile, what Latina wanted from Cornelio was his assistance in understanding Dale. He didn't talk at all about Dale's abilities, telling her to ask Dale directly someday, but in exchange, he taught her a lot about Tislow, where Dale's roots lay.

After Cornelio started teaching her, she'd figured out in no time at all that there was hostility between Tislow and the local lord. Even Cornelio had to stop and stare in amazement at this.

"If Latina were the local lord, then she'd find Tislow really scary."

Upon hearing that, he asked her numerous questions to test her out, only for a troubled look to come across her face as she searched for a response. She didn't always arrive at the correct answer, but many of her responses weren't what you'd expect from such a young girl. He sensed the sort of education that would only be held by those who stood above others. Perhaps that was also related to the secrets she was keeping.

"But Latina thinks it'd be better if nobody fought."

"Even if you don't want to fight, though, there are invasions and the like to consider. Would you just resign yourself to being overrun at such a time?"

"Latina wouldn't want to hurt anyone, even if they were the enemy... But she'd also want to protect the people precious to her. It may be impossible to help everyone, but she'd at least want to protect the people close to her."

Clutching her chest, she added, almost sounding like a prayer, "Latina definitely doesn't want something bad to happen to everyone because of her."

There was a bit of discomfort in the clever young girl's reply. Cornelio didn't dare to question her further, though. More so than before, he sensed that he was touching at a fragment of something greater. He guessed that those words were tied to the chains holding down this kind young girl.

"Latina wants to become a kind adult, like Dale."

“Is that so?”

He felt like he'd come to understand why his student was so affectionate towards her. It wasn't just her outward appearance, but her personality as well that was beautiful. She wasn't perfect, nor was she a saint. But precisely because of that imperfection, she strongly fascinated and charmed those around her.

While they were sitting in Granny Wen's room as always, the old woman turned, faced Latina, and suddenly said, “I should give you a souvenir before you leave, Latina.”

“Huh?” Latina tilted her head and looked at Granny Wen.

There was only a little bit of time left for her to see this scenery she'd grown accustomed to before what was the norm for her changed.

“It's nothing too unwieldy, so it should be perfect for a souvenir. Go call that idiot grandson of mine.”

“Hmm?”

With her head still tilted in confusion, she pitter-pattered off to go call for Dale. He should've been in the middle of giving their preparations for the return trip a final check.

In no time at all, Dale had been led to Granny Wen's room by Latina. He knitted his brows and started by saying, “What do you want? Don't spoil Latina too much, Granny.”

“Are you really one to speak?” retorted Granny Wen with a laugh, adjusting her posture. Seeing his grandmother act differently than normal, the expression on Dale's face shifted.

“As the clan head of Tislow, I grant you a name.”

Hearing Granny Wen's dignified statement, Dale and Latina were speechless.

They understood that she was giving a Tislow role name not just to Dale, but to Latina as well.

"Tislow always accepts members of the clan. With this, you can return here whenever you wish, Latina."

"Granny?"

"That holds even after I die, and my idiot grandson is gone, and everyone here now makes way for the next generation. Even if this village is gone and moves somewhere else, Tislow values the clan above all else. You can come back any time."

As Wendelgard said that, Dale patted Latina's head as he often did. That was something his grandmother used to do to him.

"Normally, you don't receive a name until you become an adult. But there's no guarantee that I'll still be around when that time comes. So hold onto it in here until then, and then you can ask Dale what it means," said Granny Wen, pointing to Latina's chest.

It was the duty of the clan head of Tislow to give role names. And to the clan, receiving your name was proof that you had become a full-fledged adult.

Wendelgard was the only one in Tislow right now with the right to grant a name.

To the Tislow clan, it wasn't simply blood that tied them together. Such links did exist, but it also wasn't prohibited to accept outsiders into the clan.

As a clan of priests for the god of prosperity, they possessed a great deal of knowledge, so they understood how disadvantageous it was to build up generation after generation from the

same bloodlines. Accepting new bloodlines into the clan so their blood didn't grow thick and stagnant was essential for their prosperity. Most entered the clan by marriage, like Frida, but that wasn't the only way. The only rule was that new members must live in a way that maintained the dignity of the clan. As long as one could accept that rule, they could join. And it fell to the abilities of the clan head to determine if they were truly capable of that.

Granny Wen hadn't told Latina not to ask the meaning of the name because there was any sort of custom to hide it. From Latina's character and the path she was following, Granny Wen had no concerns about giving her that name, but she worried that if she told Latina what it meant now, it would end up restricting the great possibilities the young girl possessed. She told Dale not to ask as well for the same reason. There was no guarantee that her grandson wouldn't be influenced by her name and limit his own potential as well, and from Wendelgard's perspective, he was still young and inexperienced.

If Latina decided to live in a way that differed from the name when she became an adult, then that was fine. As a member of the clan, roles were given, but they also had to be accepted.

Her own grandson had taken in this child and saw her as someone to protect, so Tislow at least would be a place she could return to. Even if she couldn't return to the place she was born, she could create a new place where she belonged here.

Even if he'd wanted to, Dale couldn't give her a name, as he wasn't the head of the clan. So his grandmother gave it in his place. That was her present to her grandson, who lived in a way that maintained the dignity of the clan despite struggling deeply with his weighty role.

"If you get sick of my stupid grandson, then tell me right away, alright? I'll find you someone better."

“Dale is the best,” Latina said tearfully, and then smiled. “It’s thanks to Dale that Latina met you, Granny. And Dale always gives Latina whatever she wants.”

While consoling Latina, who was moved to tears, by stroking her hair, Granny Wen wore her usual, bright smile.

“When you grow up, I’m sure you’ll be fine woman, Latina. Definitely.”

“Latina wants to become a grandmother like you, Granny.”

“Huh? No, you should reconsider that, Latina,” Dale said, visibly flustered at Latina’s statement. Seeing Dale vigorously shake his head side to side, Granny Wen gave a clear click of her tongue, and Latina looked puzzled.

“Now then, today we have a feast. Today’s the day when we say farewell for a while, until you next come again.”

“Right.”

At dinner she was surrounded by smiles rather than tears as they finished out their final day in Tislow.

The pair headed back towards Kreuz with a great number of souvenirs, and not all of them were material.

A Productive Day for the Fluffy Toddler

Today, as always, the father's and daughter's voices echoed throughout the Bündte household in the small beastman village.

“No!”

“Don't say that, Maya. Don't you want to play with Papa?”

“No!”

“Maya...”

When Joseph heard his beloved daughter declare that so clearly, his triangular ears drooped down pathetically. A beastman's ears and tail were better indicators of their feelings than their facial expressions. When it came to putting on the poker faces and fake smiles that were essential for negotiations, they needed to first learn to control those body parts.

Maya was extremely angry at Joseph, who was blocking the house's front door.

When it came down to it, Maya was more of a daddy's girl, so she definitely didn't hate Joseph. But she wasn't feeling that way right now because she was looking forward to her daily walk. She had no interest in playing with her father.

“Ma—”

Joseph still wasn't giving up, so Maya resorted to force. She ducked down, made herself compact, and ran as fast as she could. Thanks to her father's figure, he had a large blind spot directly beneath him. To be blunt, his belly obviously got in the way.

Joseph could move quicker than you may guess from looking at him, but his maneuverability was no match for that of a pure beastman giving her all. The beastmen's maneuverability was high to begin with, and that was even truer of their agility. Even though she was still just a toddler, Maya was well aware of that.

The child slipped between Joseph's legs and started rolling. A moment later, she stood up and pitter-pattered off on her walk.

"M-Maya..."

She didn't even turn back to look at her lonely father. This was an everyday occurrence, though, so that was understandable.

The extent of Maya's habitat, her "world," was limited to the beastman village. The outside of the village was also outside of her territory, so she didn't think of trying to leave. Despite what they may say, Joseph and Ute allowed their young daughter to walk around on her own precisely because they knew that. To them, this small village was like their own back yard.

Maya had her own unique way of going on a walk. She wasn't limited to just the beaten paths. What was nothing more than a gap in a wall of wood to an adult made for a fine tunnel for little Maya. After passing under some shrubbery, she used the spots hardened by the adults' footprints as a path.

It was then that she saw a lizard darting along, its tail wagging back and forth as it went. Her eyes sparkled.

"Wizzar!"

She reached out without hesitation. But the lizard dodged smoothly, having no intention of being so easily caught. It also still had the option of detaching its own tail as a last resort.

"Wizzar!"

Maya's route shifted as she chased after the fleeing reptile.

Beastmen had nearly the same lifespan as humans, and the two races had a similar sense of values, so they made for good neighbors. Their birth rate wasn't low, either, so they had many children. This village may have been small, but you could still see a number of children playing throughout it. Their ages varied, but considering the size of the village, they were lucky to have someone to play with.

But *he* didn't feel that way at all. A small boy, his white fur coated in mud, looked up at the other children surrounding him and bit his lower lip in frustration. This clan living on the outskirts of Laband tended to value individuals based on their abilities even more so than other beastmen. The favoritism wasn't based on pedigree or social status, just personal opinion. And so this boy, who was the smallest and weakest of the children, was considered the lowest-ranked by the other kids.

By the way, though Joseph's physical abilities fell short of the other villagers', his rank in the village hierarchy wasn't low. Having inherited the Tislow bloodline, he was an expert at healing and support magic, despite how he looked. Magic users were uncommon in general, so it was rare for such a small village to have one, and since he was so capable, that made him all the more highly valued. A village like Tislow where nearly half the villagers were magic users was outside of the norm.

The boy was frustrated at the older boys surrounding him, shoving him around, and then finally laughing at him when he fell in the mud, but he didn't have the size or strength to do anything about it. His vision grew blurry, but thanks to his pride, he held himself back from crying in front of the others.

That was when she appeared.

The face of a girl with fluffy black fur popped out of a nearby bush.

“Hmm?” Maya tilted her head at the number of boys now standing in front of her. She saw a white-furred boy a little older than her on the ground and covered in mud, surrounded by three even older boys. “Hurt? Hurt?”

“What do you want, squirt? Get out of here.”

“Yeah, you’re in the way!” the older boys spat at Maya and waved her off.

That made her mad. She seemed quite unhappy about how they were treating her.

“No!” she said clearly, her fluffy fur now standing on end.

The boys were a bit surprised. They’d clearly never even considered the possibility of the younger child fighting back. Not caring about what the boys were thinking, Maya started moving... which is to say, she charged right at them.

“Gah!”

Boy One-of-Three fell to a well-aimed headbutt using the whole of Maya’s weight and force.

“Agh!”

“What’s with this squirt?!”

Boys Two-of-Three and Three-of-Three cried out, but Maya simply shook her baby bloomers-covered bottom from side to side, her short tail wagging all the while. There was no meaning behind what she was doing, but it seemed clear that she was making light of the boys, as if saying, “Bring it on, underlings.” She was just a toddler, though, so she may not have been thinking anything at all.

Angered by this provocation, the two boys forgot the difference in age and size and tried to grab for her, but Maya easily and

agilely dodged their grasps.

Her father Joseph was acknowledged by those around him as a first-rate warrior, and Maya had been getting the better of him day in and day out. She'd inherited much from the abnormal Tislow clan.

Maya flew into the air with a leap that surprised even the boys, beastmen themselves, and added in a twist when launching her attack. It wasn't a splendid roundhouse kick, but Boy Two-of-Three was knocked to the ground by a blow from her bloomers: a Killer Hip Attack.

Boy Three-of-Three, the last one standing, took a step back, preparing to flee. He had at last realized the being before him was not the mere toddler she appeared to be.

“Aaaaaaaaaaah!”

Even though her opponent had lost his fighting spirit, that was none of Maya's concern. She was simply passing her divine judgment on the fools who dared to see her as beneath them.

“Amazing...” Seeing the three boys who had bullied him all sprawled on the ground, the white-furred boy sat in wide-eyed astonishment.

“She's such a cute and tiny little girl...” he whispered, and the girl stared straight at him, their eyes meeting. The boy felt his cheeks flushing red.

Then his view was filled with her bloomers.

This brief love was crushed by a hip attack before it could even begin.

Maya returned home in a good mood, having satisfied her hunting instincts and gotten in some nice exercise. She'd found all four boys she left behind, their tails pathetically curled be-

tween their legs, to be beneath her and not even worthy of consideration. It was an inadvertently cruel judgment.

After this, the relationship between the four boys more or less improved. There was a strange solidarity between them from all having been wiped out by a single toddler girl.

†

“Oh, you’re back, Maya?” Ute called out to her daughter, who had popped up at some point and was now using a stick to draw a bunch of circles on the ground in front of the house.

“Yup!”

“Maya?!” Joseph’s drooped ears shot straight up and now pointed towards the sky. “Welcome home, Maya. Did anything happen?”

Maya replied immediately with a smile. “Nope!”

To her, it had been an incredibly ordinary outing, with nothing that was worth mentioning. As they talked, the number of circles scratched into the ground had been growing.

“What are you drawing, Maya?”

“Watia. Maya.”

Apparently, the circles all added up to make faces. Hearing his beloved daughter give the name of the “big sister” she was so fond of as she pointed to the bigger cluster of circles, Joseph gave a strained smile.

“What about Papa, Maya?”

“Nope, nope!”

“Where’s Papa?”

“No Papa!” Maya gave a single glance to her father, who was on the verge of tears, then soon returned her attention to her task.

She still frequently thought back on the “big sister” she loved so much. She smelled good, and was warm, and helped calm Maya down. Her big sister was very, very kind. She was a precious addition to Maya’s world.

Maya didn’t have even the slightest doubt that her precious big sister would come to see her again. She didn’t have a reason for that trust, but Maya had no need for such trivial things.

“Watia, Maya, together!”

Having drawn two big circles for their smiles, Maya broke out in a grin of a complete satisfaction.

Afterword

“The cherry blossoms have bloomed, so please take some time off.” Every year, I hear such foolish statements and respond with things like, “Ah, where should I go this year?”

For most of you, this is probably our first time meeting. I’m CHIROLU, and I’d like to sincerely thank you for picking up this work, the second volume of *If It’s for My Daughter, I’d Even Defeat a Demon Lord*.

Sometimes, I want to go somewhere far away. I want to see both places I’ve been to over and over again and also sights I’ve never seen before. My objectives have become polarized like that, but still, it’s become something of my life’s work to visit all the places famous for cherry-blossom viewing.

I was born and raised in the Kanto region, so each year I’ve been able to enjoy a variety of spots famous for cherry blossoms from the time they bloom until they’re all blown away. Perhaps that was what started it all.

Selfishly, I’ve idly wandered to Tohoku to see its famous cherry blossoms. That didn’t really surprise the people around me, though. They just cared enough to say things like, “It’d be tough to make a day trip of it,” or “I wouldn’t want to ride a bus through the night several days in a row.”

My parents are the sort who hate crowds, so for family vacations when I was young, we stuck to walks through picturesque scenery rather than going to places like amusement parks. To

avoid the crowds, we'd leave at three in the morning, so we'd arrive just after the sun rose, making for a rigorous schedule. But the sight of the sunlight filtering through the morning mist in a forest, and the feel of stepping on frost in the wetlands, and the force of a waterfall overflowing from the downpour the day before... that remains with me even now. I sit in front of my computer and smartphone, wondering if I managed to capture even a fragment of that scenery from my memories.

Thank you so much to everyone who helped make this book a reality. Though it was a flurry of events that led here, you truly drew an adorable "daughter," Kei. And more than anything else, to those of you who chose this book out of so many options, you have my deepest gratitude.

As long as this book brought you at least a little joy, then I'll feel truly blessed.

And let me end this by saying, I pray that you're able to start drawing again even a day sooner, Truffle.

September 2015,

CHIROLU

Bonus Short Stories

The Little Girl's First Errand

“Latina’s heading out.”

“Take care!”

“Right!”

With that lively exchange, Latina left the Dancing Ocelot, the pair who was seeing her off waving to her as she left. Rita said to Kenneth, “I wonder if she’ll be okay. Is it still too soon to send her on an errand?”

“She’ll be fine.”

For starters, not all people were virtuous, but on top of that, this town had a large influx of outsiders coming and going, so it was dangerous for a small child to walk about and shop by themselves. However, seeing it as an important experience, Kenneth asked Latina to go to a shop they always visited together and purchase a slab of butter as her first errand.

Therefore, Rita’s concerns were only natural, but...

“The weather sure is nice! I think I’ll go for a bit of a walk!”

Kenneth pointed silently at the back of the young man who said that unnatural, unprompted line before leaving the shop. As expected, the doting idiot had made a move.

Latina’s two platinum pigtails swayed as she pitter-pattered along, and she seemed to be enjoying herself. She was quite glad

that Kenneth was relying on her to get a job done.

Even her walk was adorable. You could even say that a kidnapper or some other sort of criminal couldn't help but set their eyes on her. After all, she was just too cute.

Still, if anyone were to lay a hand on her, they'd see hell in full and vivid detail. Even if they *didn't* lay a hand on her, they'd better be prepared to meet a fitting fate if they so much as looked at her suspiciously.

As Dale thought such dangerous things while keeping his eyes fixed on Latina from the shadows, he himself was the perfect picture of "suspicious." He looked so suspect that the people walking along the path detoured around him, but he paid that no heed.

Latina was small enough that she could easily disappear behind the adults surrounding her. Dale lost sight of her in the split second that one such adult passed by. In a panic, he leaped out of hiding. The next instant, he leaped right back.

"Ants!"

He spotted her again as she crouched down and excitedly watched the ground. Down so low, she was paying no attention to the adults around her, carefully observing small flowers and insects. Apparently, her focus was currently on a procession of ants. Still squatting, she shuffled to the side, checking where the line was heading. After watching for a while, she nodded a few times and then stood up, seemingly satisfied. She once more started pitter-pattering along.

Or so Dale thought. But the next moment, she broke out in a sprint.

"Wha?!"

Dale hurried after her, completely flustered. It was hard to

read just where she was heading without even stopping. Even an experienced adventurer like Dale couldn't track her whims.

"Come here, kitty!"

Apparently this time, she had found a cat out on a stroll. It casually walked along the roof while Latina leaped up and down calling out to it. However, it ignored her and walked off, calmly swishing its tail all the while, causing the young girl's shoulders to droop in disappointment.

Dale wanted to hug her tight and comfort her. If he had been just a few seconds later in remembering that he was watching over her on her errand, he would have ended up jumping out.

"That was a close one," Dale said to himself, wiping the sweat from his brow. He then saw Latina at last open the door to the shop that was her destination.

Latina didn't make any stops on her way back, instead heading straight home. The level-headed young girl knew that she needed to make it back before the butter started to melt.

"Hey, Kenneth."

"What is it?"

"Why was Dale hiding and running all by himself? Was he playing hide and seek?"

Hearing Latina ask that, Rita cracked up, while Kenneth couldn't hold himself back and a "Pffft!" escaped his mouth.

Not understanding that reaction from the two adults, Latina tilted her head.

The Girl, the Belly, and the Toddler

In the beastman village, Latina stared straight at the prominent belly of Dale's relative, Joseph.

"What is it?" Joseph asked.

"It's nothing," she responded.

Even so, her gaze remained fixed in the same spot.

She lived in the Dancing Ocelot, and the old men who gathered there were all the sort who could handle serious physical labor and had the bodies to prove it. She didn't have a chance to touch a potbelly like Joseph's very often.

Before long she reached out, only to pull her hand back. This happened over and over again for a while.

"Can Latina touch it...?" she asked, finally unable to hold back any longer. Joseph gave his permission, and she gently reached out. As the peculiarly springy flesh pushed back with a *sproing*, Latina's big, grey eyes blinked in surprise. Then, with a wide smile, she did it again.

Sproing, sproing, sproing.

Joseph didn't know what was so fun about it, but when he looked at Latina, she giggled back at him. She seemed to be enjoying the springiness of his belly quite a bit.

"Watia?" asked Maya, confused by Latina's actions. After a bit, she seemed to arrive at a conclusion.

"Watia."

"Yes?"

With a fearless expression that seemed to say "Here I go," Maya approached at a run and then took a high-flying leap. Her landing spot was her father's stomach. His fat let out a *sprooooo-*

ing as it absorbed the blow.

Latina's eyes sparkled.

But even so, his body couldn't handle the sudden blow of Maya's full body weight, even if she was a small toddler. That was none of Maya's concern, though. Joseph had no idea how to handle the situation.

"Waaah!"

Dale had scooped up Latina from behind and stared menacingly at Joseph. Apparently, the adventurer didn't care for having Latina's attention stolen away.

Joseph let out a sigh, unable to decide if he had been saved or was facing a new threat.

The Girl, the Son, and the Father

In the settlement known as Tislow, the duties of the acting clan leader, Randolph, were vast.

One day, when he finished one of those duties—looking over the business of their primary export, magical devices—he gave a big stretch. He felt like his whole body was creaking.

"Hrmph..."

Thinking on it, Randolph had been doing nothing but deskwork as of late. The last time he got any real, proper exercise was when he'd gone to greet his son, who had come home for the first time in a while.

"Right."

With a single nod, he grabbed his favored sword from the corner of the room and left the mansion.

“Papa Randolph.”

Outside, he found the young girl who was visiting along with his son playing all alone. She looked up at Randolph with her big, grey eyes.

Her gaze stopped on the blade in his hand, and her eyes grew wide. “That’s a big sword.”

“Really?”

“It’s a bit like Dale’s, but yours is much bigger.”

Now that she mentioned it, Randolph realized that was true. It seemed that Latina had good observational skills.

“It’s dangerous, so don’t get near me.”

“Right.”

The young girl decided to watch as Randolph swung the sword about to work out his rusty body. She sat down at a distance and stared. He tried not to pay her any mind, but sure enough, thanks to his little spectator, he ended up wanting to show off. It turned into a more proper bit of training than he’d initially intended.

“The way you use your sword looks a lot like how Dale does.”

“You can tell?”

“Yeah. Dale practices with his sword a lot at the Ocelot. It’s really similar to how you do it,” she said with a smile. This was shortly after Randolph had put down his sword and wiped off his sweat. He was truly impressed at the young girl’s powers of observation.

“It’s because I’m the one who taught him how to use a sword.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I see, so you can tell at a glance...”

“Yup. Um, the customers at the shop say Dale is really strong. Are you strong, too?”

“I was stronger than he was back when he left here.”

“That’s amazing!”

Unsurprisingly, this earnest praise put him in a good mood. His son had lived through countless deadly battles after leaving the village, so Randolph didn’t think he could beat him now. Even so, he still wanted to make himself look good.

It may have been only natural that Dale ended up spoiling this girl. After all, he’d taken after Randolph, who worried about things like his self-image.

Dale had come to check what was going on when he heard a cheer coming from Latina from the front lawn. He found a sight he hadn’t expected, and he wasn’t quite sure how to react.

“What’s up?”

“That’s my line...”

His father wore a solemn expression, even as the young girl clung tight to his head. Dale had no idea what was going on.

“Dale, it’s so high!”

“Yeah, well... that’s true.”

The stout Randolph had managed to support the young girl riding on his shoulders without staggering at all.

“Dale.”

“What is it...?”

“Lately I’ve been thinking that your mother and I should’ve kept trying until you ended up with a little sister,” Randolph quietly stated, still wearing the same serious look.

“I’ve really got no idea how to respond to a statement like that from my father,” Dale replied, his voice raising an octave. Latina, still on Randolph’s shoulders, tilted her head at this exchange.

“What’s wrong, Dale?”

“Ghk...”

“Well, you see—“

“Don’t explain it to her!” Dale yelled. His father tended to march to the beat of his own drum.

Randolph nodded to himself in satisfaction, feeling grateful that he’d had the chance to meet this cute little girl, as well for the humorous exchange at his son’s expense.

The Grandmother, the Flower-Viewing, and Memories

While they were staying in Dale’s home village of Tislow, Latina spent quite a bit of time with his grandmother, Wendelgard. She seemed to be even more affectionate towards Latina than she was towards her own grandson, and her love for the girl rivaled even that of the doting idiot’s.

“Oh, yeah. We saw a lot of pretty flowers on the way here,” Latina said, recounting her travels.

“Hmm, I see. Well then, shall we have a flower-viewing tomorrow while eating lunch?” Granny Wen responded with a smile.

As promised, Granny Wen ended up taking Latina into the mountains the following day. As this land was deep in the moun-

tains, seasons were late to arrive, so spring was only just starting. After walking with light footsteps up the hilly road for a while, Granny Wen at last stopped at their destination. Amidst the light-green vegetation stood a large tree blooming splendidly in pale-pink flowers. The sunlight streamed through the gaps between the trees, creating a warm, sunny spot.

“Wooooow...!” Latina exclaimed joyfully, her platinum hair swaying. Showing no sign of tiring, she rushed over to the tree, spread out her arms, and spun around.

“From that reaction, it seems like it was truly worth having brought you here,” said Granny Wen, sounding satisfied. She had already plunked down onto the ground. She took her pipe out of her breast pocket and started puffing away.

“Latina hasn’t seen people smoke like that very often.”

“It’s pretty rare for this country.”

Granny Wen let out a hearty laugh and held out her pipe for Latina to see. There was an elaborate engraving at its head.

“Flowers?”

“That’s right. It doesn’t suit me, right?”

“That’s not true at all. It’s pretty.”

“My husband made this for me. He was weak physically, but he was real skilled when it came to making stuff like this.”

“Your husband? Dale’s grandfather?”

“That’s right.”

“What sort of person was he?”

Granny Wen responded by letting out a puff of smoke and

looking up at the sky. Light-pink flower petals danced through the air in front of that beautiful blue backdrop. Remembering how her husband had once sat by her side and admired this scenery, she naturally broke out in a grin. “Are you admiring such refined scenery where you are?”

After muttering that, Wendelgard considered pulling out a bottle of alcohol and furrowed her brow. She looked back on her memories of him. “Well, he was a fine man in his own way.”

“That’s how I ended up asking about your grandfather, Dale.”

It had become something of a daily routine for Latina to tell Dale about her day when night rolled around.

“My late grandfather...”

His grandfather had died when Dale was still young, so he remembered him as someone who could do anything. Dale had grown so skilled at swordsmanship in this land that specialized in the use of the bow because he’d been diligently taught the basics by his grandfather, as well as his father who had studied under the man.

His grandfather was also apparently quite skilled at paperwork and supplemented his lively grandmother’s weak points. Not only that, but he’d also tutored Dale’s father in accounting, mathematics, and all sorts of other things, making him something of a legend.

Dale had never heard any of the other villagers speak ill of the man either, even though he was originally an outsider who had married into the village. He had seemingly been quite the man of character. The only thing Dale couldn’t understand was...

“No, it may have been precisely *because* he was that sort of

person that he married my grandmother...” Dale muttered with a sigh in astonishment.

“Hmm?” Latina said, tilting her head.