

*If It's for My
Daughter, I'd
Even Defeat a
Demon Lord* 9

CHIROLU

Illustrator: Kei



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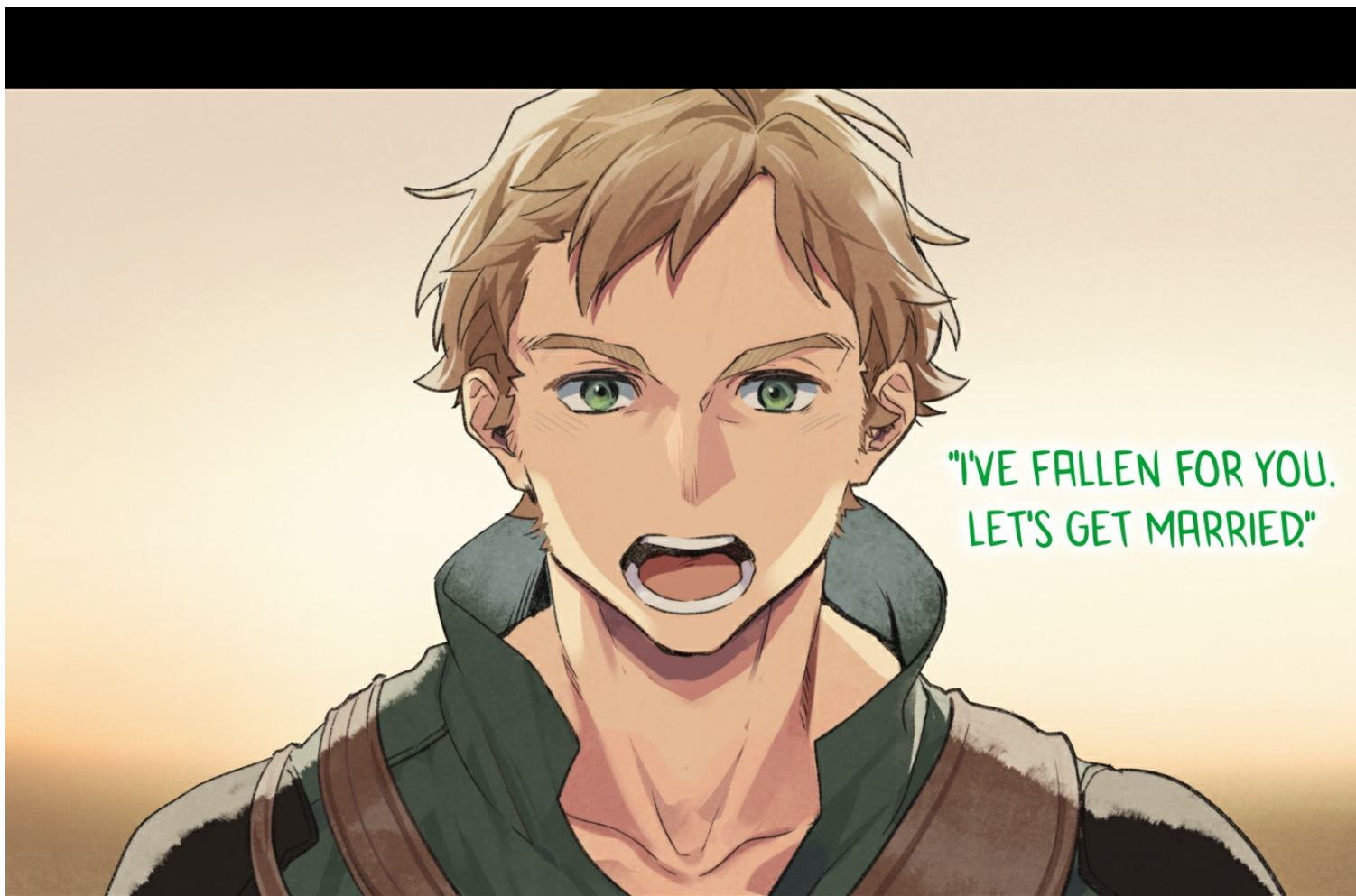


"UWAAAAAH!"

LATINA EXCITEDLY
SQUEALED AS THE EBB
OF THE TIDE PULLED ON
THE SAND UNDER HER
FEET. AND ALL THE
WHILE, DALE WATCHED
OVER HER IN FULL ON
DOTING IDIOT MODE.



THE RESULT OF THE
LITTLE GIRL FINDING AN
ADORABLE RABBIT...



"I'VE FALLEN FOR YOU.
LET'S GET MARRIED."



"WHAT'RE YOU
SAYING? IS YOUR
BRAIN BUSTED?"

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1: A Small Tale After the End of the Story

After their wedding in Tislow, Dale and Latina decided to use their trip back to Kreuz as an excuse for a bit of traveling. They were accompanied by their faithful pup Vint, so it might not be quite right to call it a honeymoon. But still, he was a pup, so even if it was hard to say if he should count in the members of their party, he also didn't exactly get in the way either.

And besides, there was a clear reason he was with them.

When Dale had traveled to his home village with Latina in the past, he'd prepared a horse to carry their luggage. That was because he wanted to make sure nothing slowed him down if they ran into magical beasts or bandits and he had to fight.

Now, though, he was carrying his luggage in a large knapsack on his back.

Dale's physical capabilities had gone off the charts since becoming a demon, so that much weight was no problem at all. It was possible he still may need to drop it and lighten his load if something suddenly happened, but by having Vint tag along, they could rely on the pup's acute sensory skills to avoid such situations. On top of that, Vint could hold his own in a fight, too. He could easily buy enough time for Dale to put down his baggage and for Latina to employ defensive magic.

Most importantly, though, he was a guard who wouldn't interfere with their lovey-dovey newlywed time together.

And so, Dale and Latina had no reason to veto him accompanying them.

"If we keep heading west, eventually we'll hit Qualle," Dale stopped and pointed out when they made it through the mountain road connected to Tislow and reached the coastal highway. If they kept on heading straight towards Kreuz, they would first reach the port town of Qualle that they had once visited.

"Yeah," Latina replied, holding down her hat so it wouldn't get blown away as she stared at the light reflecting off the surface of the ocean.

Her ribbon had the traditional flower symbol from Tislow on it, and it fluttered in the wind.

“I was thinking this time we’d head a bit to the east, though, to a place that draws tourists for a bit of a different reason than Qualle,” Dale said, clearly hinting at something.

“Ooh...” Latina muttered, tilting her head a bit as she stared up at Dale. “So I should just look forward to seeing when we get there?” she asked.

“I wasn’t exactly saying that, but if that’s what you’d prefer, I could keep it secret for a bit longer,” Dale replied with a smile.

“Right. I’ll just look forward to seeing!” Latina answered, a wide grin on her face.

However, the one critter accompanying them soon put a damper on this lovey-dovey exchange.

“Is there meat?”

“It’s close to the ocean, so I think there will be fish.”

“Meat!”

“I’m looking forward to the fish...”

Unfortunately, the romantic atmosphere completely dissipated as Latina’s thoughts turned towards food. Vint really had a knack for changing the subject.

They weren’t familiar with the path, but there wasn’t any uncertainty in Latina or Vint’s steps.

Slowly but steadily, they proceeded down the well maintained coastal highway. Dale naturally didn’t show any signs of fatigue, but both Latina and Vint didn’t voice any concerns on the matter either. One would think that meant they were fine, but Dale soon noticed Latina’s pace slowing down.

“Hmm?”

It wasn’t unusual for her to move slower due to the scenery distracting her, but this was still far too slow even for that. Finding this strange, Dale decided to observe her, and he noticed that Latina was looking anxiously at the beach

sprawled out before her.

“Ah... Now that I think about it, I’ve only ever taken you along rocky coasts. We’ve never visited a proper beach before.”

“Um, it was mentioned in my picture books, so I’ve heard about it before... But is the ocean really salty?”

“That’s your first question, huh? Well, whatever... That’s right. You only got to look at it last time, right?”

Latina was born in the arid region of Vassilios and then raised inside the walls surrounding Kreuz, so the blue ocean stretching out to the horizon must have made for quite a fresh sight.

“Well then, do you want to check out the beach for a little bit?”

“Is it really okay?”

“Just don’t fall and get all soaked, alright?” Dale warned, instinctively turning protective. That was because he’d thought to himself, *For some reason, kids always end up falling at the beach*. They really did have a tendency to end up soaked when there wasn’t a change of clothes handy. He had learned that first hand when helping take care of young boys back in his home village.

When Latina heard Dale’s words, she puffed up her cheeks a bit.

“You were thinking something rude, weren’t you, Dale?”

As a newlywed bride, it was hard to overlook her husband treating her as a child.

But the instant she stepped onto the sand by the roadside, her mood improved.

“Woow!” she excitedly proclaimed, then ran out towards where the waves hit the shore. Or at least that’s what it looked like, but she turned around before hitting that point and came back over towards Dale.

“What is it?”

“Umm... There’s no one around, right?”

Latina glanced all around, and once she confirmed there wasn’t anyone

pacing by, Latina hurriedly removed her boots. Then after a bit of hesitation, she also slipped out of her long pants.

It was so sudden that Dale just froze in place, completely dumbfounded.

She may have removed her pants, but Latina was wearing a tunic, so it wasn't as if her underwear was visible. However, a good bit of the white flesh of her legs that was usually hidden was now showing, so it still made for quite a sight.

"Lati—"

"I'm going to take a dip in the ocean for just a little bit."

Latina's eyes were seriously sparkling when she said that.

In fact, it was such a brilliant shine that Dale's words had caught in his throat when he went to question her.

Right... Guess this makes sense.

By nature, Latina was incredibly shy. And yet she was so excited at the moment that she was seriously cutting loose. Her tendency to dive straight in whenever she was curious about something hadn't changed a bit since she was a child. And honestly, Dale had vaguely sensed that something like this would happen anyway.

She puffed up her cheeks at being treated like a child, yet she was still acting just like she did when she was little.

"Uwaaaaah!" Latina excitedly squealed as the ebb of the tide pulled on the sand under her feet. And all the while, Dale watched over her in full-on doting idiot mode.

By the way, Latina couldn't swim.

The thought of her in something even more sensual and exposed like a bathing suit snapped him out of that protective mindset right away, but considering her inability to swim, he couldn't exactly bring himself to mention the idea.

After a short while, Vint also jumped into the ocean, giving Latina someone to play in the water with. And as a result, this little excursion ended up taking quite a bit longer than first expected. It was the middle of summer, so the cool

ocean water must have felt quite pleasant. Dale got plenty of enjoyment just from watching her splash in the water and have fun, though.

“Make sure to be careful out there, alright?”

“Yeah!”

It wasn't as if she was being reckless or anything, but he gave her a warning anyway.

Latina was enjoying herself, so Dale wanted to let her play for hours on end, but if he did then they would be late arriving at their lodgings. At the same time, enjoying diversions like this was pretty much the whole point of the trip.

And so, Dale gave a bit of a strained smile while following along behind Latina and holding her boots as she walked barefoot on the sand.

When they returned to the highway and continued further east, the path split. And if you strained your eyes and looked past that split in the path, you could see a town, with the red light of the setting sun behind it.

“Looks like we'll make it before dark, somehow,” Dale muttered in relief, letting Latina know that was their destination.

“That's where we're heading?”

“That's right. That town is called Affe, and thanks to the number of tourists it draws, there are a lot of high-quality inns and places to eat. I talked to Kenneth in advance, and he told me about a restaurant run by one of his acquaintances... Well, what do you think, Latina? Are you interested?”

Latina's face had already started positively sparkling midway through his explanation, so there was no need to wait for her answer. As he praised himself in his head for doing his research in advance, Latina shot him a smile.

“Since we've come all this way, how about splurging a bit on an inn?”

“Ah, but will it be alright that we have Vint with us...?”

“He technically has a magical device collar on, so I'm sure it'll be fine. And if there's any trouble, we can just have him wait outside town.”

“Woof!”

“If you don’t want that, then don’t do anything that’ll cause trouble for Latina.”

“Woof!”

Rather than appealing to a sense of morality or public order, it was easier to just use Latina as his bargaining chip with the pup.

Like with other towns and villages, Affe was built with walls surrounding it to keep out magical beasts and bandits. Dale and Latina walked along the highway, heading for the gate that served as the entrance to the town. Many places had restrictions on entering at night, but evening generally wasn’t a problem. And so, Dale paid the gatekeeper the entrance fee and they passed on through.

“Waaah!” Latina exclaimed in surprise as she took her first step into the town. “There really are a lot of inns... I think there are even more than in Kreuz’s southern district.”

“It just feels that way because of how many there are in comparison to the size of the town.”

Both sides of the main street were lined with old-fashioned yet well-kept-looking inns. Some had gardens out front to add an air of refinement, and as a whole, the place seemed to be very welcoming towards customers.

“Dale, you said Affe gets a lot of tourists, right...? Maybe the inns feel so different because they don’t focus on serving adventurers like the ones in Kreuz?”

She looked all around, seemingly unable to settle on just one thing to focus on.

“Even so, there are apparently cheap inns, too. And even ones specialized in customers planning on long stays.”

“Ooh... The ones suited towards long-term customers sounds like how the Ocelot does business. I wonder how big the rooms are... How often do they change out the linens, and what schedule do they have for their cleaning?”

Dale was taken aback at this completely unexpected turn in the conversation, but then he breathed a sigh. Latina really was a tried and true workaholic.

“Dale?”

“Ah, it’s nothing... It’s just the inn we’ll be staying at may not be too useful for answering those questions.”

Latina tilted her head upon hearing that, but Dale just smiled and led her by the hand.

“This was the inn I thought hit the mark when I heard it’s reputation, but...”

“Waaah...!” Latina muttered, unwittingly letting that sound of admiration slip out. Latina had seen the extravagance of noble manors and the royal palace first hand in the capital, but she was still immediately impressed by the refined, high-class layout of the inn. It seemed like a building with a storied history, yet every bit of it had been carefully polished, so it greeted them with a pleasant air of cleanliness.

And that impression only improved when they saw how friendly the employees were in dealing with customers. You could really sense how carefully they had been trained. And from how they didn’t show any concern towards Vint, they even seemed to be fully aware of what the magical device around his neck was.

“I’m Dale Reki. I contacted you in advance, so...”

“Sir Dale Reki, is it? I shall take care of you. Welcome, please come this way. She will be your guide.”

The employee who calmly greeted them was a man in the prime of his life, and his behavior was every bit as refined as what you would expect from a servant in a noble manor. And the female employee who served as their guide had flawless manners as well.

“It sure seems like a nice place, just like I heard.”

“Yeah.”

Latina wore an earnest smile, but Dale was evaluating the inn’s employees with a bit more of a shrewd eye. He saw that even though he was carrying his luggage personally in a knapsack rather than having a servant or attendant carry it, they didn’t look down on him as someone not worthy of greeting properly.

Of course, it was impossible to deny that his name may be having an impact, but he could always be a fake or simply someone with the same name, so it wouldn't do to make a judgment based on that alone.

The place really did seem even nicer than he had expected.

There wasn't a speck of dust to be seen along the long hallway they were passing through, either. In the back of his mind, Dale thought to himself that he would really need to thoroughly warn Vint again.

"Hey, Dale."

"Huh?"

"Is the big surprise still a secret?"

"Hmm..."

As Latina looked at him with slightly upturned eyes, Dale hesitated a bit. But then, he figured he should probably at least explain before she saw it in person.

"The town of Affe is famous for its hot springs."

"Hot springs?"

"Do you know what they are?"

"Yeah. I read about them in a book. They occur when underground water veins heated by geothermal energy come bubbling up, right?"

"The influence of Ahmar is strong around here, you see. And so, apparently the hot springs here are more effective than normal ones. That doesn't come from the temple or anything, though. It's more like a folk remedy, honestly."

"Hmm," Latina replied, seeming like she didn't quite get it. And so, Dale intentionally shot her a clear smile.

"Considering the spring sources around the area, it should be quite a sight. I've traveled all around for work, but I still find this place makes for some really unique scenery. We should go check it out tomorrow," he earnestly stated.

Latina had never experienced a hot spring or its source up till now, so she didn't have anything to compare it to, but surely she would appreciate it at first glance.

“You’ve never seen a hot spring before, right? I hope that you like it.”

“Yeah!” Latina replied with a smile. That was because she didn’t realize that naturally, Dale had ulterior motives this time around.

After all, they were heading to a hot spring, so it couldn’t possibly be any other way.

Of course, Dale and Latina had gotten all lovey-dovey in the past, but they had only just gotten officially married, so it wasn’t as if that passion would have suddenly cooled off. In fact, Dale felt that only gave him all the more reason to be flirty with her.

Latina was very shy by nature. And that wasn’t something that had changed in the least with their marriage.

But if she was in a completely different circumstance than usual, maybe she would feel more open-minded. And what was so wrong with the thought that that could lead to them being even more lovey-dovey than usual?

They were newlyweds, after all, so that was only natural.

And so, he settled on a hot spring. Yes, a hot spring.

The one to put a damper on that thought, though, was the female employee, who had an incredibly apologetic look about her.

“Um... Currently, the path to the spring’s source in the depths of the forest is off limits.”

“Huh?” Dale questioned, completely caught off guard.

He looked so shaken that it was hard to imagine he was the same hero revered for his ability to remain calm and composed on any field of battle.

“Oh, really?” Latina calmly asked, not seeming overly concerned.

“It’s currently being investigated, but it seems there’s been some sort of incident with a magical beast, and apparently it will take some time to summon an expert. The soldiers stationed in this town specialize in dealing with crimes such as theft, so I hear they’re finding this matter quite difficult to handle.”

“Ah, I see.”

“There is some distance between the town and the forest, so there’s no danger. So please, be at ease.”

“Right.”

“Of course, there are also spring sources in town, so you should still be able to enjoy some hot springs.”

“Oh, really? I’m glad,” Latina replied with a smile, but Dale had to hold himself back from muttering, “That’s no good.”

The room they were led to was equipped with a magical device key, showing that they were paying close attention to security. The second they stepped inside Latina’s face lit up, making it readily apparent that she was satisfied with the accommodations.

“What a wonderful room.”

“As long as you like it, that’s all that matters.”

The wooden furniture had been so thoroughly polished that the grain positively gleamed, and though it all had high-class designs, the reddish brown of the wood also gave off a bit of a warm feel. The chairs in the table set and the wallpaper both had surprisingly large flower designs to them. Rather than feeling overly flashy, though, they seemed to play up the spice of being on a trip and experiencing something entirely different from your everyday life. On the other hand, the fabric for the bed covers and curtains was rather plain, like it had taken just one color out of the flower design, creating a nice subdued atmosphere.

Latina took off her hat and tunic and stowed them away in the closet, then she held out a hand towards Dale as he sat down the knapsack in the corner of the room.

“Dale.”

“Right.”

Without even having to ask what she wanted, he passed her his overcoat.

Though they were newlyweds, they didn’t have any of the awkwardness about them that you might expect.

It seemed that Vint had found a spot he liked on the corner of the rug, too. Apparently he had already determined it would be where he would sleep tonight, as he laid right down and relaxed.

“Wah...” Latina exclaimed as she opened the window wide and leaned out. Fitting of such a high-class room, it provided just about the best possible view of Affe imaginable. Thanks to that, she was able to take in the refined sights of the inn town from an entirely different angle than when they were walking down the street.

“Amazing... It’s so pretty...”

“By the way, you said your dream was to someday open an inn every bit as good as the Ocelot, right, Latina...?”

“I have no idea when it may happen, but still... I think it would be nice if I could make it come true. A place where travelers and customers could feel nice and relaxed... And where they could eat delicious food with a smile,” Latina replied with a smile of her own, the brilliant sunset providing a backdrop behind her. “You see, Kenneth said that for a lot of people it seems like nothing’s ever going right, but if you can enjoy delicious food and cooking, then a day might not feel so bad. And so, I want to make a place where people can feel that way, too.”

“I see.”

Considering she was the sister of Vassilios’s ruler and the wife of the Platinum Hero who saved the nation, it was hard to call the dream of just running a single inn and bar all that realistic.

Her thinking was more in line with common folks, and she had a bit of an escapist streak, but she was a clever girl by nature, so she must have understood that.

And so, Dale decided not to deny her dream and instead just silently nod and smile, causing her to smile back. However, her smile looked just a bit more mature than usual.

“I have no idea what form it’ll take, but I’m sure it’ll come true one day. And then, I can take what Kenneth and Rita taught me and teach it to someone else

in turn. I really think I'd like to try that," Latina said with her hands together as if she was praying. Then, in the next instant she returned to her previous brilliant smile and pointed out the window to a large building in the center of town. "Hey Dale, what's that building? I can see a lot of people coming in and out of it..."

"Ah, that's a communal bath. This inn also has a bath, but residents and travelers in less equipped inns use that instead."

"Ooh..."

"The public bathhouses in Kreuz are already way larger than the bath in the Ocelot, but this one is a whole lot bigger than even those."

"Really?"

"I think there's some value in giving it a look. Right, since it's still too early for dinner, do you want to go give it a try now?"

"Yeah!"

Latina suddenly turned away from the window, looking like she was ready to go flying out of the room this very second. Shooting her a bit of a strained smile all the while, Dale closed the window and then followed after her.

+ + +

It was a time after the small town along the highway between Laband and Vassilios had been built.

The lordship of that land, built up by adventurers, had been given to someone who wasn't even part of Laband's nobility out of recognition of a certain hero's exceptional achievements.

Some loudly proclaimed that little bit of land on the frontier was hardly a fitting reward for the hero's great accomplishments, but the man himself showed clear disdain for becoming a member of nobility. And besides, the land fit the needs of the hero and his wife perfectly, so it ended up coming to fruition.

If Laband loudly insisted on its ownership of the newly cleared land, it would have the real possibility of causing tension with their new ally of Vassilios. And

since Laband's strength as a nation had been weakened by the assault of the demon lords, it wouldn't do to cause unnecessary friction with their neighboring country.

However, the wife of that hero charged with the lordship also happened to be the younger sister of Vassilios's ruler.

And so, they yielded that land in the midst of magical beast territory to the hero and his wife, as proof of the friendship between the two nations.

The greatest accomplishment by the hero was his battle with the demon lords, but there were a great many casualties in the process. And additionally, a great many also found themselves far worse off as the world at large suffered.

And so the couple running the land took it upon themselves to charitably aid such folks, with the wife in particular being especially involved. They worked particularly hard for the children, making sure that the kids left all alone in the world could have a proper upbringing in their domain.

The wife was seen as a motherly figure to many of those children, yet she disapproved of all the praise that she received. For some of those who knew her personally, they would describe these kind acts seeking no reward as her seemingly trying to atone for some sort of sin.

And in one part of town, there existed an inn called the Singing White Cat.

It was a famous inn known even in other domains for its excellent customer service and delicious food, and it was opened by the couple who ran the domain.

The wife had made the decision to open the place when thinking of the children she was helping to raise, to give them a greater number of options for their futures. Obviously there were jobs for adventurers in the land, but not everyone would grow to be one. After all, people existed who were not skilled in either physical strength or magical ability. For that reason, it was important to have a place where they could let their respective skills develop, in order to give them a better footing for heading forth into the future. And as a result, the children who helped in this inn were valued highly when they went to work elsewhere in the service industry or cuisine, which in turn raised the inn's reputation even further.

The wife was also famous for having a mythical beast follow her around like a bodyguard, but he was a wolf, so the reason she used a cat in her inn's name remained a mystery to most.

However, that was all still a while off...

+ + +

Dale and Latina had lightened their load by leaving their luggage in the inn, then resumed their relaxed stroll through Affe. The destination they had in mind was the communal bath that they had seen from their room at the inn. Since it was a facility used by a large number of people, it was separated into men's and women's baths in order to maintain order and security. In that way, it was hard to call it a place that would help fulfill Dale's blunt desire to get all lovey-dovey.

However, he was able to put off such trifling matters for later when Latina was getting all excited right in front of him.

He truly was a man who stuck to his convictions.

"Affe gets a lot of tourists, so just like with Kreuz, it doesn't have much of an issue with folks being prejudiced against other races. But there are weirdos who talk about stuff like human supremacy everywhere, so you should still take care."

"Yeah. But it'll probably be perfectly fine."

"It's true that the roots of your horns are hidden in your hair and hard to see, but it's still not good to be overly optimistic about stuff..."

Dale had brought that up before they entered the communal bath out of concern for Latina. And it was just like him to say that, so Latina shot him back a strained smile.

"But Dale... Only heroes can harm demon lords. I don't think it would be very likely for me to just happen to be harassed by a hero in the bath."

"Only heroes can put the life of a demon lord in danger, but as long as it

doesn't go that far, anybody should still be able to mess with you."

"I think you're worrying too much, but still, I appreciate the concern. Thank you, Dale."

"Seriously, take care."

"Right."

They were only parting for a short while, yet they were still so flirty about it.

It was the sort of sickeningly sweet exchange that would make someone long for that pup lounging about the inn to butt in. However, in a way, perhaps it was fitting for a newlywed couple to be having such an exchange in front of a public facility without even thinking about it.

When they stepped into the communal bath, they were first greeted by a lobby. As she watched Dale pay enough for the two of them at the desk, Latina also noticed numerous people showing what looked like wooden tags and then heading inside. After a bit of thinking, she realized from their clothes and the like that they must live in the town. And so, those wooden tags must have been proof that they paid in advance to use it for a period of time.

If you pay all at once like that, does it get a bit cheaper...? Or maybe this place is cheaper for residents of the town in general...?

Those thoughts running through her head just went to show that her thinking really was more in line with the common folk.

Behind the desk, the paths for men and women split off to the left and right. And so Dale and Latina separated, and she excitedly continued further in.

"Bath time, bath time!"

However, when the path separated into two again, Latina stopped and tilted her head.

"It says it splits off into a bath exclusively for humans... Maybe Dale wasn't worrying too much..."

Normally Latina didn't ever really pay attention to the differences between races, but when it was so clearly thrust in front of her like this, it caused her to feel a bit depressed. However, when she noticed that even customers who

were clearly human weren't heading to the exclusive bath, she tilted her head yet again.

"Hmm?"

It was bugging her, so she went ahead and promptly stopped a passing employee to ask.

"Ah, it's true that this bath is exclusively for humans, but it's pretty small, so most of our customers prefer to use the large shared bath."

"Really?"

"More than catering to racial supremacists, we have it because we know some folks don't like beastman fur or merfolk scales floating in the water."

"I see."

"And at the turn of the season, the shared bath is designated exclusively for beastmen. If we left it like normal, it would be completely packed."

"That certainly must be something..."

The distinguishing points of beastmen were their triangular ears, tails, and fur covering their whole body.

Since Latina habitually brushed Vint, she found it easy to imagine how much fur beastmen must leave around when shedding, considering their greater surface area.

"We also rent soap and hand towels, but beastmen use multiple times more soap than other races, while merfolk prefer to use hard brushes to clean themselves rather than washing by hand. We'll also occasionally have angel customers, but they generally aren't fond of staying in the water for a long time, so they mainly use the steam bath. So well, the races all have their own preferences."

"They have their own preferences, huh...? That's good to know."

Having cleared up her doubts, Latina started humming and heading back down the path. Alongside the relief she felt, she was also glad to have gained new knowledge, so she was in quite high spirits.

“The baths in Vassilios were really lukewarm... And apparently Chrysos isn’t good with hot baths, either. I’m not too fond of it being overly hot myself, so maybe that’s a preference for the devil race.”

As someone who also worked in the service industry, she really was impressed by how flexible they were in responding to the likes and needs of their customers.

At her core, Latina’s thinking really was more in line with her role as the Ocelot’s adorable waitress rather than the princess of the neighboring nation, even more than Dale had thought.

Even back in Kreuz, most ordinary folks used public bathhouses. However, Latina had rarely ever been to one, seeing as the Dancing Ocelot was equipped with a bath. That bath was meant to respond to customer demands, but when Latina was little no one felt comfortable having her go to the bathhouse on her own. And when she was older she was an important part of the shop’s staff, so she bathed there for convenience’s sake in order to ensure she was available during work hours.

She had gone to the bathhouse purely out of curiosity after hearing about them from her friends who lived in the eastern district, but that had only been a handful of times.

So frankly, it left a strong impression on Latina when she slipped into the bath so large that even if she stretched out her whole body, she wouldn’t come close to reaching the edges.

“Waah...”

As she felt the slightly more viscous-feeling water against her skin, she sunk down to her shoulders and breathed a sigh of admiration. She really could stretch out as much as her heart desired, unlike with her usual bath.



“This is wonderful. I think I might really like big baths...”

If she were to voice that opinion in front of Dale, though, he would surely say they should go ahead and install a large bath in the Ocelot. The thought of it caused her to unwittingly let out a little giggle.

After a bit of time enjoying the bath while humming cheerfully, Latina’s attention returned to taking in her surroundings.

The soap that she had borrowed from the desk at Dale’s suggestion smelled of essential oils. It was different than what she usually used, but it was a vibrant aroma that most girls would probably enjoy. And so, she headed over to the spot for washing yourself off, looking forward to giving it a try.

“Now that I think of it, we passed a shop selling soaps on the way here. I thought it was unusual, but maybe it would be nice to try all sorts out while we’re here, and then bring some back as souvenirs,” Latina mumbled to herself while making even more bubbles than when she usually bathed.

Her thought process was that since it was a special occasion she would splurge, but that was in line with the thinking of the common man, too.

“I think I’d like some pomade that goes well with the scent of the soap, too. I’ll have to ask Dale if we can make a detour,” she happily muttered as she washed herself off.

Even as she was doing that, she subconsciously kept an eye on her surroundings. And her gaze didn’t fail to stop so she could observe the uniquely shaped sponges people who seemed like locals were using, or the brushes favored by merfolk.

Using something to clean yourself roughly like that may be popular with adventurers, too.

Latina really did have endless interest in such tools, the likes of which she didn’t ever see in her day-to-day life.

If she could get them for a good price, she really would like to try to buy a few to bring back with her.

As she had those thoughts that were hardly consumer-like in nature, she was

awash in a mild bliss while being wrapped up in the lovely aroma of the soap.

As a result, when she met up with Dale after finishing her bath, they had a different newlywed-hot-spring-town date than he had expected.

Since Affe was a town with a lot of tourists, they made sure the streets were lit up at dark as well, out of consideration for guests traveling from the communal bath to their various inns. That was accomplished by a portion of the stones making up the paths giving off a gentle light. They weren't magical devices, but rather were manufactured from a material containing trace bits of mana, called phosphorescent stone. It was a unique material which gave off light once the sun went down, but in the light of day it looked identical to any other stone. Surely they chose that method so as not to impact the overall scenery.

"On the other hand, it's more of a pain to maintain and adjust than just using a magical device. Plus, the amount of light and how long it lasts is based on the amount it stores up during the day, so it isn't exactly fixed. That can definitely be a problem too. But it's cheap enough that you don't really have to worry about anyone trying to steal them, I suppose."

"I see... How interesting."

The smile on Latina's face at that moment was absolutely, undoubtedly adorable.

It was an entirely different look than the usual innocent expression she gave off, with her freshly washed hair worn up and her skin still ever so lightly flushed red. She really was absolutely beautiful, and it was hard to imagine anyone arguing with that.

And yet, there was something off.

They were in a refined town with just a bit of light out. So why exactly was he giving a lecture on the town's fixtures in the midst of all this romantic atmosphere?

Being all lovey-dovey, and exchanging sweet words with one another...

Wasn't that the stuff newlyweds were supposed to do when it wasn't a strategic marriage or an arranged one, but one born out of piping hot passion

for one another?

“Ah, that’s the shop! Dale, can we take a bit of a detour?”

“Of course.”

Naturally, he was ready and willing to respond to Latina’s request. He didn’t mind doing more shopping, especially when she looked so adorable asking for something. And he was confident that his savings and earnings were more than enough that it wouldn’t be a problem.

Still, something definitely seemed off.

“Maybe we should have gotten married just a bit earlier... If we did, then would things have been more lovey-dovey...?”

“Hmm?”

Dale had asked that question without expecting a proper answer as he watched Latina contently pick out a scrubbing brush made from a dried out plant, as they stood in the corner of a plain, unadorned general store favored by the locals.

Still, Latina sure did look cute when her eyes sparkled, perhaps because her curiosity was being satisfied.

Dale really was acting just like his usual self too, with the way that his thoughts weren’t straying from that subject in the slightest.

And when they went to a shop specializing in soaps next...

“I know normally you would never go in a shop like this. But I couldn’t help but wonder a bit what type of smell you would like, so I’m really glad to have you come along,” Latina said, looking just a bit bashful. That singlehandedly washed away the frustration that Dale had been feeling. His thought process really was exactly the same as always, and was every bit as unshakably regrettable as usual.

After that, they headed over to a restaurant run by one of Kenneth’s acquaintances.

Dale had been sure to mention in advance that it was a really high-class establishment, but it was still a serious surprise to see it in person.

Secretly, Dale felt relieved when Latina said that they should just purchase the scrubbing brush on their way back. After all, he definitely would have hesitated to walk into such an establishment holding a plain bag full of everyday goods in one hand.

“Kenneth sure is amazing...”

“I wouldn’t say your connections are something to scoff at, either...” Dale muttered, then he took Latina by the hand. “Now then, shall we head on in?”

“But we just got out of the bath, and we’re in casual clothes. Is it really alright?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Dale shot her a smile to calm her down, then stood in front of the shop. It wasn’t decorated with a flashy sign or anything, but they were greeted by a rather refined-looking doorman, and the finely ornamented emblem carved into the door told them that this was the right place.

“Amazing...” Latina sighed, her gaze fixed on the emblem of a flower in full bloom. It was both gorgeous and refined, and it was certainly beautiful enough to be worthy of admiration.

“We have your reservation. Sir Dale Reki, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ve been awaiting you.”

The polite doorman didn’t question Dale and Latina’s identities or even so much as raise an eyebrow when he saw them in casual attire, and instead just held the door open for them.

Dale seemed to say with his eyes, “See, I told you it was alright,” so Latina shot him back a relieved smile.

Just before they passed through the door, the air about them completely shifted. Dale straightened his posture and escorted Latina along, looking like a perfect model gentleman due to his training in the capital’s high society. Following along without even thinking about it, Latina shifted to the sort of graceful actions fitting to her nickname of the Platinum Fairy Princess.

The doorman had presented first hand just how first-rate this shop was, so they felt the need to respect that and respond in turn. And even if Latina was in clothing that prioritized comfort... No, precisely for that reason, she needed to behave herself like a princess traveling in secret.

Dale had given his own name when making a reservation, and it was easy to assume the person with him was the Fairy Princess, so as a first-rate establishment they made sure to be thorough in their arrangements. That was just how much influence the name “Dale Reki” held. Dale was perfectly aware of that fact, but sure enough, Latina didn’t quite seem aware.

Well, she hardly ever leaves Kreuz, and I’m sure the fact that she doesn’t remember anything from when I was traveling all around has a big effect, too, Dale thought to himself with a strained smile as he watched Latina excitedly run her hands over the high-class tablecloth and cutlery in the private room they were led to.

Apparently Latina had decided to indulge her natural curiosity and enjoy herself, as they rarely ever visited any high-class restaurants. However, whenever an employee was looking, she was sure to behave herself like a proper refined lady. It really was just plain amusing to watch her act like that.

“I know you always enjoy picking out a meal from the menu, but for this time, I already placed our orders along with the reservations.”

“Really?” Latina questioned, looking a bit disappointed for a second. However, what he said next caused her to brighten back up.

“At Kenneth’s recommendation, I made sure to include the chef’s specialty when placing my order. That was because Kenneth said we should be absolutely sure not to miss it. And also, I asked them to make your portions a bit smaller so you could make it all the way to the end.”

Dale had meant to explain as just a bit of idle chatter, but Latina didn’t seem to take it that way. Currently, she had an incredibly serious look on her face as she pondered.

“Um, Latina...?”

“If I ordered based on just my curiosity and interests, I’d surely make a

mistake, right?”

“How in the world did you reach that conclusion?”

“A specialty... Right, a dish like that serves as the face of a restaurant, so you can’t miss it. It’s important not to forget that when ordering.”

Dale felt like you should just eat what you want when you want, but he couldn’t exactly say that in the face of how seriously Latina was treating the situation.

“You mean to study it...?”

“It’s a shop Kenneth recommended. I’m sure there’s all sorts of things I can learn from it!” Latina clearly answered, completely resolute on the matter.

Latina’s status had changed to a shocking degree over the last several years, but her master-and-disciple relationship with Kenneth hadn’t been shaken in the least.

Apparently, as a chef, Latina had a great deal of admiration and wonder at the town of Affe. It was close to the ocean, and it also enjoyed the abundance of the nearby mountains. It didn’t have the convenience of being a major hub for trade like Kreuz, but since it was in an area focused so heavily on production, it was possible to get ahold of a lot of fresh and unique ingredients.

That could be seen right away in how the ingredients used in the appetizer were rather difficult to obtain in Kreuz. And the way steamed young greens were adorned with flower buds made for an absolutely stunning presentation. Dale looked like a real glutton as he gobbled down the dish from atop his plate, while Latina carefully ate it bite by bite, observing and savoring the flavor as she went.

The seasonal summer potage soup had a lovely pale green color to it and a wonderful texture, making for a light and refreshing dish. For their seafood dish, they were presented with a shrimp tart, and when they cut into it, there were countless clear, brilliant layers that could be spied in the cross section. Such technique would take far too much time and labor for a shop aimed at the general public, so you really could see the chef’s efforts in the dish.

Dale wished that Latina would stop making such a serious face and just enjoy

the food, but that *was* her way of enjoying it, so he didn't boorishly comment on the matter.

As for the specialty, it turned out to be a surprisingly simple white fish saute. It certainly was tasty, but it wasn't anywhere near as flashy as the other dishes. Dale tilted his head at that fact, but Latina's first bite had a serious impact on her.

"I see, so that's it... That sure is amazing..."

Sadly, Dale had no idea what had moved her so greatly, so he couldn't exactly relate. He was only able to share in her surprise upon hearing that the accompanying fresh flowers weren't decorative, but rather grown specifically to be eaten and arranged as a salad.

The meat dish was also arranged beautifully.

"I've tasted this flavor before, at the beastman village... So it can be prepared like this, too..." Latina muttered in admiration upon tasting the green sauce accented by a bittersweet flavor. Dale, meanwhile, was more knowledgeable about the perfectly cooked red meat.

"You don't see wild game meat in Kreuz that often. Most of it's from domesticated livestock."

"I see, so it came from hunting... The cooking in Tislow was yummy too, but this is what it's like when it's prepared in the Labandese style, huh?"

During the meal, Dale enjoyed some wine paired with the dishes. Latina, meanwhile, cursed her own weakness with alcohol, leaving Dale to feel quite guilty as he tilted his glass. Normally Latina didn't show any fixation on alcohol, so this sort of reaction was certainly unusual.

But perhaps it was only obvious that she would have an interest in the wines the shop recommended to pair with their perfectly prepared dishes.

"Even if you get drunk I'll make sure to escort you back safely, so do you want to try a bit?"

"I want to, but I would be even more upset if that dulled my taste, so I'll just bear it..."

“I see.”

She really did hold firm to her convictions.

Dale was also worried that a sweet tooth like Latina would find the dessert portion too small, but she shook her head when he raised the point.

“I’m already full. I couldn’t even eat another bite.”

“I see.”

“I really enjoyed eating a bit of everything. Thank you, Dale.”

Upon hearing Latina’s earnest gratitude, Dale naturally broke out in a smile. That alone was enough to make all of his effort worth it.

After that relaxed conversation, the employee informed them that the owner who served as the head chef wanted to say hello to them. He was also Kenneth’s acquaintance, so he was definitely trying to accommodate them. But they also wanted to meet him too, so they agreed. In no time at all, a well-built old man approached.

He gave a completely harmless and bland greeting... or at least, that’s how it felt to Dale, but Latina was more than a little excited about meeting him, so she probably wouldn’t agree. In fact, her reaction was probably closer to how most folks would feel meeting an idol or hero. Latina herself may have been the heroine of a world famous epic, but apparently the people she admired most were skilled chefs.

The chef certainly didn’t look at all dissatisfied when Latina’s eyes sparkled with respect as she looked at him, either.

Normally, Dale wouldn’t be able to hide his displeasure at her looking at another man like that and him smiling back, but...

“I could tell that you chose this place to open your shop in order to make that fish dish. That’s really amazing.”

He was completely taken off guard by Latina’s comment, so he decided to just remain silent.

“I see. I had heard Kenneth had taken on an apprentice, but it seems he really did find a fine successor.”

“Ah, I still have a lot to study, though,” Latina replied with an embarrassed smile, but she looked like the remark made her truly happy. In fact, she looked far more overjoyed than she did back when countless nobles praised her as the Fairy Princess.

“Latina really does have the mentality of a chef more than anything, huh...?”

He didn’t put much value in his title of hero either, so he didn’t have much room to talk, but he still muttered it while sipping his coffee.

“You used a special type of salt for the specialty, didn’t you?”

“You noticed?”

“Yes. And I knew it was smoked, but I didn’t recognize the scent so I don’t know what variety of wood was used.”

“That certainly is something, to be able to say you just couldn’t recognize the specific type of wood. It’s a lumber with a good smell, but there aren’t many trees of it around. The fact that they grow around this area is another reason I chose this spot for my shop.”

The conversation had gone far afield from Dale’s realm of understanding by this point.

Meanwhile, the shop owner definitely seemed to appreciate Latina’s responses. Dale could also tell that she was carefully listening to what he had to say, and that the conversation was steadily heating up.

“The tree blooms with white blossoms a lot like apricots, but the fruit has a weak taste and isn’t really suitable for eating. Thanks to that it’s called a false apricot, but in old scholarly books it’s called a deep mountain apricot, which I thought sounded better.”

“Ah! So that’s why the shop’s motif is an apricot blossom, isn’t it?”

“It may not be suitable for eating, but it has quite a fragrance to it. And so I use a liqueur steeped in that fragrance to make the sherbet that was brought out mid-course.”

“So that was what that sweet smell was...”

The coffee was now gone from Dale’s cup, but the conversation showed no

signs of ending. And so, he stared at Latina with a look of defeat in his eyes, seeing she was just as absorbed in the discussion as her mentor Kenneth would be.

But still, Latina looked like she was really enjoying herself, so it was perfectly fine.

“In the period between late spring and early summer, mushrooms grow at the base of the deep mountain apricot trees. It’s a type that doesn’t appear around other trees, so only a very small number of them can be harvested. And so, it’s an extravagant ingredient that can only be experienced in the immediate area.”

“Mushrooms...”

“The freshly harvested ones have an especially wonderful aroma. It’s particularly outstanding when the deep mountain apricot wood is lightly roasted along with it, enhancing it further. It’s rather difficult to bring out its best as a chef, though.”

“Ooh...” Latina muttered, looking spellbound as her thoughts were racing.

Her expression would make a minstrel want to write a love ballad, but her thoughts were full of nothing but cooking ingredients, making for a bit of a regrettable situation.

“It’s just that season right now, isn’t it? Can I eat those mushrooms anywhere?”

The head chef had been quite talkative up till now, but he looked a bit uneasy when he heard her question.

“No...”

“Are they already out of season for the year?”

Various elements in the environment could easily shift the harvest period one way or another. And so, Latina had voiced that assumption while looking just a bit disappointed.

To her surprise, though, the chef shook his head.

“This year had a bumper crop with a great flavor, but the deep mountain apricot trees grow near the part of the forest with the spring source, which is

closed off. Apparently it's caused by a magical beast, but by the time that's resolved, the season will surely have passed."

With that response, Latina was clearly feeling dejected.

If it was simply impossible, then she probably wouldn't have felt so down. Like if the season was over, or if there was a poor harvest this year. If it was a reason like that, even if she was disappointed she could just give up on it and move on.

But when there were plenty of them just there but it was hard to get at them, it was hard to bring herself to just give up. It was impossible to tell when they would next visit this town, and there was no guarantee it would be the right season. But it was clear that it wouldn't be easy to just put it off for the next opportunity.

That was why Latina was feeling so thoroughly down. And yet, she wasn't the sort to make selfish requests. It was written clearly on her face that she was feeling disappointed, but she wouldn't bring herself to voice such a request.

As they walked side by side down the path back to the inn, Dale called out to Latina, as she hadn't really been saying much. His tone wasn't angry or astounded, but just quiet and gentle.

"Latina, I think you can be more selfish and ask for stuff..."

"Dale?"

The phosphorescent stone gave off a pale light.

Latina's sorrowful expression was illuminated by that glow, with a strangely beautiful fleeting feel to it.

That wasn't the expression Dale wanted to see most, though.

"I can work pretty hard for your sake, you know."

He wasn't the sort to do charity work, nor did he have any interest in being praised as a hero. But he was prepared to do absolutely anything for the sake of Latina's smile.

Even taking down demon lords to protect that smile was nothing at all.

"I'll do anything in my power to see your desires through."

“Dale...”

In the fairytale-like atmosphere created by the pale light from the path, the extraordinary hero took the hand of his princess with her sorrowful face. He urged her on, and eventually she voiced her forbidden request.

“I want to try eating a mushroom...”

Despite the situation being like something out of an epic tale, what Latina said was far from romantic. It was also hard to say that it was fitting to hear coming from a demon lord. If the demon lords defeated by a certain deplorable hero heard that, they would surely turn in their graves.

“Right. You and Vint will have to hold down the fort a bit tomorrow, then,” Dale said, breaking out in a big, happy grin at having finally dragged a request out of his beloved younger wife.



A black leather coat, a gauntlet on his left hand, and a longsword hanging from his hip; after putting on that usual equipment, Dale slipped out of the inn in the dead of night. It would have been perfectly fine to take care of it in the early morning too, but he wanted to avoid interfering with Latina's peaceful sleep. That worried Latina, but Dale had needed far less sleep ever since he'd become a demon. In fact, even going a few days without sleep wouldn't be a problem.

He had little need for food either, which allowed him to travel quite lightly.

Dale had visited the hot spring source in Affe's forest once before. Originally he had actually planned to bring Latina there, so he was already plenty well aware of the geography around the place. Though with that said, visibility was obviously poor at this time of night. And so to be on the safe side, he went ahead and weaved his mana even more carefully before entering the forest.

"Oh earth and the spirits dwelling within you, by my name of Dale Reki I order you..."

What Dale chanted was a spell that he used especially frequently even among the Earth magics that he was adept with, and was one for grasping the surrounding geography and the direction he was facing. It was a spell that could even be called his specialty. Now having an intuitive sense of the lay of the land, he moved forward with fully confident steps.

It wasn't as if Dale knew the state of the forest in detail. But at the very least, he could guess from the vegetation and the like around him.

He strained his senses, searching carefully for any presences out in the darkness, or anything out of place among the smell of plants and earth. Any time he was struck by even the slightest sense that something was out of place, he immediately hunted down the reason behind that.

It was truly a frightening display of concentration and skill.

Even before becoming a demon, Dale had specialized in exploring forests. But he remained fully focused, as being too used to a job could cause you to let your guard down.

“A burn mark...?”

As Dale stopped and checked the damage, he knitted his brow. The scar was relatively fresh, with the bark melted and burnt. On the other hand, though, there weren't any signs of fire showing on the surrounding grass. Even considering spontaneous combustion, it was just too unnatural.

Dale contemplated, and started theorizing about the cause of what he was seeing. Several thoughts came to mind, but the chances of any of them seemed exceptionally low. Still, working through such possibilities was an essential step in coming to a firm conclusion.

Naturally, upon hearing that there was serious danger due to a magical beast being the cause, he left Latina at the inn and was acting on his own, in a way due to his own deplorable nature.

When he was tackling a serious job, he acted in such a way that would bring no shame to his fame as a hero. He had a sharp gaze, a serious expression betraying not a hint of fear, and an overall appearance that marked him as an experienced adventurer.

Latina knew nothing of that side of him, though.

If she saw the gallant look in Dale's eyes now, she would probably directly praise him by saying how cool he looked. She would likely even blush at seeing that unknown side of him.

However, this side of Dale could also only be seen because Latina wasn't around. When she was by his side his tension would naturally all loosen, and he would dote on her full force without fail. No matter how serious his expression and the air about him may be, that would be crushed by an even greater doting mood.

Thanks to all that, Latina had never seen Dale's more heroic side. And it seemed pretty unlikely that she would get that chance anytime soon, either.

If that wasn't worthy of being called deplorable, then what was?

Even as the morning sun rose and it got brighter out, his field of sight didn't quite clear up.

There was a thick fog hanging about. Perhaps this land got a lot of fog because it was close to the sea. But it wasn't a type of weather that could occur all the time, considering temperature and season.

If this was caused by the magical beast too, though, he could see why this one area was closed down. This white, murky field of vision must have made it difficult even for locals familiar with the area to search about. And so, they must have closed it down to guard against accidents, too.

"Still, that fog sure was pure white," Dale grumbled, looking utterly exhausted as he reported that to Latina while they ate breakfast.

"Wah... I wish I could see that, too. But maybe I'd end up getting lost..."

"I would never lose sight of you, though, so it would be fine."

"Split apart," Vint interjected while wagging his tail and sitting politely at Latina's feet.

"This inn's breakfast sure is tasty."

"Yeah."

It was breakfast time when Dale returned to the inn like nothing had happened, and sat down across from Latina to eat.

To Dale, the main focus was making sure Latina enjoyed her trip, while the magical beast search was nothing but an aside. Their routine was to eat breakfast each morning, and he could see no reason to neglect that daily blessing.

"I was thinking I would have the inn's owner introduce me to someone who knows the details, so I can ask why they determined a magical beast was the cause for these circumstances. And if it matches up with what I was thinking, then I should really wrap this up as soon as possible."

"Right..."

Dale said it so lightly that Latina was unable to tell whether or not to be worried about him. Just from looking at him, it seemed like it would be an incredibly simple matter.

But we heard the stationed soldiers couldn't deal with it, right...?

“You can go ahead and take a walk around town with Vint in the meantime, but just make sure you take care.”

He was actually worrying about her instead.

Latina obediently nodded along, but mentally she was tilting her head again.

Dale had the air about him like he was just going for an after-meal walk. Was it really alright to take a magical beast extermination so lightly?

Ultimately, Dale remained lighthearted till she saw him off while enjoying her post-meal tea.

But for the time being, she decided that there was no point in getting fixated on something she wouldn't know no matter how much she thought about it.

Since she had the day open, she was thinking about touring around the general stores. She got the feeling that she may find some interesting stuff by looking around some shops other than the one she visited yesterday. Ah, and she should try to go to a big bath again, too. As one thought after another came to mind, she started filling up the day's schedule.

“It would be nice if you could get in a hot spring too, Vint,” she muttered, wishing that her accompanying pup could share in the enjoyment since he also came all this way.

“Woof?”

“They do let beastmen in, though... So I guess it wouldn't hurt to ask.”

Naturally, Dale had no idea that the lovey-dovey mixed bathing date he had so desired was becoming a reality for a certain pup while he was out.

There existed a type of magical being called a slime.

It was thought to be a simple organism that multiplied by splitting apart, but many aspects of it were shrouded in mystery. As a result, though normally the naming of “magical beast” was given to biological entities, it instead was classified as a magical being, which was normally meant for non-biological creatures.

The high amount of mana they possessed was one of the key reasons for that. That led to the hypothesis that slimes were originally man-made biological

organisms, and the ones seen today had simply gone feral.

They also had the unique feature of varying depending on their environment. And as a result, it became known as a type of magical being with all sorts of subspecies.

“Just like I thought...” Dale muttered, seeing a pool of limpid water filled to the brim near the spring source.

Underneath the water’s surface, there was a strange wriggling. Unlike the ripples on the water’s surface caused by the wind, the thing underneath looked dense and was quaking heavily.

As slimes relied on liquid to make up most of their body composition, they were fond of waterside areas. On top of that, they could also use their large stores of mana to magically increase the moisture concentration in the surrounding area. The fog from the morning must have been the aftermath of that.

“You weren’t at the hot spring source, so it seems like you aren’t so good with heat.”

That was definitely something of a silver lining here. The amount of damage would have been unfathomable if it had entered the town of Affe through the spring source and hot springs.

And more than all that, Latina would have been endangered if that had happened.

He could never just overlook something like that. And so, he really did feel grateful that he found it before the flexible slime could manage to adapt to warmer temperatures.

Physical attacks weren’t effective on slimes.

What looked at a glance like a single being was actually more like an aggregation of many tiny slimes. Thanks to that, the whole hardly took any damage at all when whacked with a sword or club or the like. And since it had such a simple makeup, it didn’t feel pain. That meant it wasn’t possible to use pain in order to restrict its movements, either.

The liquid inside its body was a strongly acidic compound capable of digesting its prey. And so, interacting with it carelessly could lead to your weapons being corroded or even your skin getting burnt.

For that reason, Dale decided to employ magic without even a hint of hesitation. He kneaded his mana, chanted a long spell, and finally proclaimed the spell name.

“<<Manifestation: Earth>>”

With that different spell than his usual <<Ground Transfiguration>>, a crystal rose from the depths of the spring as Dale had desired. Like with real gemstones, it was the kind of spell that was quite rare to see as it required high amounts of mana and affinity, though that wasn't necessarily the case in places with abundant resources. The cage of quartz formed in a shape that would be impossible in nature, separating the slime from the outside world. Based on what he knew about them, it was clear to Dale that this slime was far larger than average.

It must have realized what was happening, as a portion of the slime exploded. That self-destruction was an attack performed by sacrificing a portion of itself for the sake of the whole. With that, fluid came pouring out, seeping into the surroundings.

Seeing that, Dale continued on chanting.

The walls of quartz grew even thicker. Having more or less lost any place to go, the little bit of acid that had leaked out now swayed atop the slime's body.

The slime had been trapped in what looked like a distorted pestle made of quartz, and when it started probing around for a way out, Dale muttered, “It sure is a big one... If Latina was here she'd probably find it super interesting, but that'd be dangerous...”

He really didn't sway in his convictions.

“Maybe I should've brought Vint along with me. After all, Hagel's Fire magic was really useful when I was traveling around dealing with the demon lords.”

He couldn't help but think to himself with a strained smile that having things too easy really ruined people.

Even so, Dale focused in order to cast another round of magic. Quirmizi's blessing didn't affect anything but the Earth magic he specialized in, so other types used up mana. However, when Dale was strengthened by becoming a demon, that applied to the amount of mana he possessed, too. Plus, since his opponent had been sealed from escaping, he could even chant off a long spell without any problem. Thanks to that, all the typical drawbacks of casting a big spell had been cleared away.

When the magic finally activated, it had an overwhelming effect.

The maelstrom of cold it whipped up froze the slime's liquid body thoroughly, attacking each and every cell. And as the murky transparent white of the slime's liquid body froze over, there was a slight high-pitched cracking sound.

Standing in front of the now completely frozen icicle, Dale gave a single sigh.

"Before I clean this up, I better make sure there aren't any more around the area."

Surely there wouldn't be any more this big. But there was still a chance there could be some little ones lurking around.

"It'd be nice if I could find those mushrooms Latina wanted, too," Dale muttered, adding a mushroom hunt to his search for any remnants as he pushed his way through the forest.

"And so, this is a dried out slime," Dale had stated lightheartedly after returning to the inn like he was just continuing on from breakfast, pulling out a scraggly, semi-transparent lump.

"Slime?" Vint questioned, sniffing the substance with great interest.

It was a great deal different from how Latina imagined a slime to be.

"It's not all bouncy and jelly-like?"

"I mean, I wouldn't go that far..."

"It's so hard."

"Ah, that's just because it's dried up."

Afterwards, Dale had gathered up several small slimes and froze them, then

used magic to suck all the moisture out of them. The reason he dried them all out was because it allowed him to have some proof that they were dealt with to deliver to the proper location.

“There may still be some left, so I was planning on telling them to hunt them down across the mountain when I handed this over. Slimes have a lot of subspecies, but they’re easy to figure out how to deal with if you can peg what type it is.”

“Hmm...”

The fact that Dale headed out and returned in the evening so nonchalantly made it hard for Latina to grasp the seriousness of what had occurred. And in the first place, she had grown up in Kreuz with Dale heading out daily to exterminate magical beasts, so she didn’t see how amazing he really was.

“Are slimes edible?”

“It’s like a bundle of acid, so I’d say no,” Dale replied, only for an unexpected comment to come from Vint at his side, who had reached a conclusion after thorough sniffing.

“This thing, really gross, so no way.”

“You’ve eaten one before?”

“Orange-colored ones, a bit sour. Easy to catch. Like a little snack.”

“So you’ve eaten them...?”

Apparently soaring wolf cubs treated an orange subspecies of slimes as snacks. Dale could actually see how they could look kind of tasty depending on how they were colored.

Still, it would be a problem if Latina ended up getting any more interested in the subject.

“Ah, Latina,” Dale called out to intentionally change the flow of the conversation, forcefully driving it away from what they had just been discussing. “I found the mushrooms you wanted to eat. I handed them over to the inn’s chef, so I think they’ll probably be used for tonight’s dinner.”

That had an immediate effect, as Latina broke out in a wide smile as her head

was filled with thoughts of that night's dinner. She just looked so happy that Dale couldn't help but grin too, feeling that today's mushroom hunt really had been worth it.

And when Latina finally got to eat the mushrooms she had so desired, her joy was even greater.

They were lightly roasted over deep mountain apricot wood and just had a bit of salt for seasoning. And biting into them turned out to be an honestly moving experience. The savory taste it overflowed with made it feel like a waste to simply swallow it, as chewing it was so enjoyable.

“Amazing... This is delicious...”

Dale, of course, was fully satisfied by the dish, but he enjoyed taking in Latina's smile even more than he did the food.

†

There was also one more reason Dale had felt the need to take care of this extermination job.

Seeing the source of the hot springs with Latina was one of the reasons Dale had decided they should visit Affe in the first place.

It wasn't as if it'd been reopened right away, but the original reason for the closure had been resolved, and there was nothing further to fear from it.

And so, this is pretty much the perfect opportunity!

Dale shot Latina a wide grin, not even hiding his thoughts. She simply viewed this as a pleasant stroll, though, and smiled back without any hesitation.

Latina stopped in the shade of the forest's trees and stared up at the clear blue sky.

She had been raised in the city of Kreuz, so the sight and smell of such dense greenery was apparently quite novel to her. Her expression was full of emotion, eloquently displaying what she was feeling.

Even when she started moving again, she showed no hesitation walking through this unfamiliar location.

Since he could see how much Latina trusted him through her actions, Dale was also wearing a blissful grin.

Even Vint's tail was happily wagging along as he walked ahead of them.

The small dirt path through the woods had tree roots jutting out into it, making for rather poor footing. But apparently, Latina even found joy in the path being so unkempt, as she hopped along while avoiding the hazards. Just when Dale began worrying about her tripping, she suddenly lost her balance, but she was fortunately able to catch herself on her way down.

Latina looked embarrassed by her own clumsiness, causing Dale to break out in a strained smile and completely forget to scold her.

A unique smell then filled the air, signaling to Dale that their destination was nearby. The accompanying loud sound of water also informed Latina of where exactly they were heading.

"I thought it would be a river, but it's not...?"

"Yeah," Dale lightly replied as they started heading downhill.

Occasionally Dale offered Latina a hand so that she wouldn't slip. And since the footing was so bad Vint decided to fly instead, which he was rather skilled at.

"Wah..." Latina exclaimed in wonder as she looked up, seeing an impressive waterfall. A large amount of water was flowing ceaselessly from the rock face, making for quite the display. "It's amazing..."

"The waterfall's really something, but it's not the only amazing thing around here."

"Huh?" Latina questioned while tilting her head.

As they approached the waterfall, it became clear that the basin had been carved out rather deep and looked like a fountain. When Latina dipped her hand in she immediately looked shocked, and then after a moment she turned to Dale.

"It's warm?"

"Up above the spring source joins with the river and then they fall down

together. Thanks to that, this whole waterfall is a hot spring.”

“Wow! That’s so amazingly wonderful!”

Apparently she hadn’t expected this at all. With her eyes positively sparkling, she put her hand back in the waterfall basin and started excitedly stirring it around.

Seeing Latina like that, Vint apparently decided that meant it was time to play in the water, so he leapt into the waterfall basin. And as it turned out, he was a far better swimmer than Dale had expected.

“It’ll be like getting in a really big bath, right?”

“It’s pretty famous among adventurers. Lots of folks use it, and it’s known for providing a different experience from the bath house in town.”

“I see.”

Dale nonchalantly explained all that, but he also had an ulterior motive in coming here.

Latina was incredibly shy. Several years had passed between their engagement and their marriage, but she hadn’t really changed in that regard over that period.

And yet on the other hand, Latina was also quite curious.

This sort of environment entirely unlike what she saw in her everyday life was exactly the thing to stir up her curiosity. And by creating such a situation, Dale would surely be able to enjoy a more lovey-dovey time together with Latina than normal. They would surely be able to feel completely free to enjoy bathing together.

It was fortunate that the aftermath of the magical being incident would limit people from coming there. They weren’t even likely to run into other travelers. And so, that would definitely help to give her a push.

Dale had known her for so long that he was very well acquainted with her personality by now.

This was sure to go well.

Or at least, that's what he had thought.

"It sure is amazing."

Dale wasn't the only one watching Latina innocently splash around in the water, though.

No, a good number of folks from Affe were also there, acting as a gallery.

Dale stared at them with dead eyes, but then his expression shifted right back as he looked at Latina again. His inner thoughts were showing to an almost alarming degree.

Of course, Dale himself was the reason things had ended up this way.

He had wanted to make Latina happy. With that in mind, yesterday he had entrusted the inn's chef with mushrooms that only grew in this area. On top of that, he had also handed over the dried slime to the inn's owner who had previously told him about the magical being incident.

The reason the inn's owner had revealed that information that could be damaging in the first place was because he was aware of Dale Reki's reputation as a hero. And then, he had reported that the incident had been settled.

It was only natural that people would come to check the state of things.

Having realized all that as soon as he saw the townsfolk, Dale's eyes had gone dead.

And naturally, even he couldn't ask that Latina fulfill his secret ambitions with so many people watching.

Dale's desires had been thoroughly crushed, while Latina was seriously enjoying the sights. And so, the one who got to enjoy the beautiful hot spring most of all was the utterly unconcerned pup, Vint.

Things were wrapped up nicely, and everyone, the townsfolk of Affe included, were more or less satisfied. And they all lived happily ever after.

2: A Tale From Before the Story Began, and Before a Certain Couple Got Together

What led up to Latina hearing the tale from the past was a certain customer visiting the Dancing Ocelot.

It wasn't solely adventurers who stopped by the place.

Both travelers and merchants also visited there to learn a variety of information, as the shop served as an extension of the temple of Akhdar. If a natural disaster blocked off part of the highway, then it was important to take waits and detours in mind. And if there was information about bandits or magical beasts prowling about the road, they needed to know that in order to hire guards for their trip.

And so, it was very important to check for significant news in order to make sure your journey was a safe one.

"Welcome!"

Cheerfully greeting customers like that was part of Latina's daily routine as the shop's adorable waitress. Her charming voice resounding through really created a wholesome and calm atmosphere that was hard to imagine for a shop where such roguish-looking adventurers gathered.

It had become second nature for an experienced professional like Latina to instantly grasp details about the customer she was greeting. Whenever she saw someone was a new customer, she would guess as to their profession from the clothing and equipment they had on their person.

This man in particular was older than her, and while his traveling attire looked sturdy and of decent quality, it certainly wasn't suited for battle. The only visible weapon he had was a single knife dangling from his hip, and from its shape and size, it was hard to imagine he was an adventurer or had some other combat-focused job.

He doesn't look like a magic user, either. And he doesn't feel like a merchant...

He seems more like a traveler from a slightly well-off background, Latina thought to herself as she approached the customer.

The majority of non-adventurer customers either wanted to hear information or put out a request for adventurers. It was still a little early for their general business hours as a bar, but there were some customers who did come for the food and drink. Predicting what type of customer you were dealing with allowed you to offer the appropriate services to them, and so it was a skill that Latina had picked up on her own over the years.

“Welcome. This is your first time here, isn’t it? The board for information from the temple of Akhdar is over that way,” Latina said with a smile.

She had pointed that out first because that was what the majority of first-time customers were most interested in.

“Thanks,” he briefly replied, but then he stopped partway there and turned back to face Latina. “Ah, right. Does this place serve light meals? I missed lunch today.”

“Yes, we do. Is a counter seat alright...?”

There were tables open, but she avoided guiding him that way because it was around when the regulars started to gather. By now, Latina was fully aware that regular customers often felt intimidated when surrounded by such rowdy adventurers.

“In addition to choosing from the menu, you can also get the chef’s recommendation, which will be a full serving.”

“Then let’s go with that.”

“And what would you like to drink?”

Latina waited on the gentleman promptly, showing both charm and skill and smiling the whole time. Once she was done she went to the kitchen to tell Kenneth the order and then prepare his drink personally.

“Sorry for the wait.”

The instant that she placed down the glass and accepted his money, the door to the shop swung open. And when she reflexively turned to greet the new

customer, she found a regular standing there.

“Welcome.”

“Hey there. I’ll take the usual.”

“Right.”

“The rest of them will get here before long, so go ahead and get some snacks for all of us ready, too.”

“Got it.”

It was a rather vague order, but she was well acquainted with the old-timer, so that was no problem. However, unlike usual, Latina also stopped and asked a question.

“Um, today we have shellfish dipped in oil. Will that be alright, or are those not to your taste?”

“Oh? That sure sounds unique.”

“The recipe’s still a work in progress, though. But Kenneth said it was good enough to serve to customers, so I would really appreciate hearing your impressions...”

The old-timer broke out in a bit of a smile upon hearing that. This newlywed girl still hadn’t given up her title of adorable waitress, and knowing her, if it was a dish she had carefully prepared there was no way it would be bad.

By the way, when Latina was developing new dishes, her mentor Kenneth was strict and offered precise advice, making him a very useful person to consult. Dale was completely useless, though. After all, he doted on her far too much, so he just said that everything Latina made was delicious.

Still, it wasn’t exactly easy to criticize him for that. Latina took such a professional approach that by the time she felt ready to have someone taste something, it more or less qualified as a completed dish. But Latina and Dale had completely different standards for food to begin with.

Some time had passed as Latina bantered with the regular.

“Sorry for the wait,” Kenneth called out while peeking out of the kitchen and

carrying a basket full of a number of prepared dishes and bread. He then walked over to the counter seats, then laid out the plates.

That was when the man spoke up.

“You’re...” the man started in an emotional tone.

“Hmm?” Kenneth questioned while frowning a bit, sensing that had referred to him. The customer seated at the counter didn’t pay any attention to that reaction, though.

“I never thought I would meet you in a place like this! Man, this is a crazy day! Do you remember me?!” the man asked, unable to hide his excitement as he stood up from his seat.

“Um, you’re... Ah, from Wal...”

“So you do remember!”

Latina didn’t recognize the noun that Kenneth had wrung out while furrowing his brows, but there was something she did realize.

“Kenneth, you were just making a face that said ‘thank goodness I got it’...”

As Latina marveled at the fact that Kenneth was making a face that was far more fitting for Dale, the regular by her side nodded.

“Wal is a port town in the west of Laband. That means he knew Kenneth back from when he was still active, huh...? But still, it’s hard to suddenly try to remember something from over a decade ago, you know...”

“I’d have difficulty remembering a customer from that long ago out of the blue, too...” Latina added, nodding along.

“Kenneth was an adventurer before we got married, but... Have you heard any stories from back then, Latina?” Rita asked with a bit of a troubled look on her face, having appeared beside Latina at some point.

“No, not really... Just that Kenneth helped Dale out in the past.”

“Yeah. Dale used to be in Kenneth’s party, after all,” the regular chimed in, and Rita nodded.

“That’s right. I’ve only ever heard stories about back then through Kenneth

myself, but... When the time came for Dale to leave his village, he was entrusted to Kenneth's party. And so, my husband was the one to teach him the basics about being an adventurer."

"Ooh..."

"There was quite a commotion when Kenneth said he was going to retire, too. Back then, he was the leader of a reliable party that drew enough attention to get a lot of requests by name. Folks said that he was retiring far too early. Everyone shut their traps when they heard it was to marry Rita and become this place's chef, though."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Even Rita's old man had lamented that he couldn't leave the kitchen up to his daughter, and so he had no complaints about getting a son-in-law who could cook."

Latina stopped and thought a bit as she listened to the exchange between Rita and the regular.

Latina was acquainted with the former owner of the Dancing Ocelot, Rita's father. When Rita and Kenneth got married and took over the shop, he and his wife retired. They still lived in the neighborhood, though, so when things were busy they would help watch after their grandchildren, Theo and Emma. And so, Latina had plenty of chances to see them over the years.

"Now that you mention it, have I seen Rita in the kitchen before...?" Latina muttered while searching her memories.

She had a vague recollection of it happening in the past. She could recall Rita helping with preparations and cleanup in the kitchen when Kenneth was especially busy and couldn't do it. But at some point, Latina had taken up her role as his apprentice and handled such matters, so she now only rarely saw Rita in the kitchen. But Rita had been busy raising the kids ever since Theo was born, so Latina hadn't really found it strange.

"But the kitchen is Kenneth's workplace... So maybe Rita just doesn't get the chance to do anything there that often...?"

"Of course that's why," Rita clearly stated, and sure enough the regular didn't

say anything further on the matter.

“I heard a story about Kenneth handling an extermination request in Wal once... Apparently, he fought a pretty big magical beast,” Rita nonchalantly stated.

“That’s putting it lightly... And Rita, you should know better than anyone that rumors of Kenneth had made it all the way to Kreuz, right?” the regular chimed in with a grin.

Rita shot him back an eerily chilly smile in response, but her tone remained friendly as she replied, “It’s bad for you to drink too much, so how about I prepare you a special healthy tea for today?”

It was the sort of line you would never expect from the proprietress of a bar.

Latina tilted her head a bit at Rita’s reaction, but the regular didn’t seem to question it at all, and just gave a strained smile and a hearty wave of his hand.

“Don’t go acting so cold, there. Drinking helps you forget old stuff like that, after all.”

“For a drunk, your tongue is certainly still deft enough.”

“I’m not drunk yet today.”

Sensing that Rita and the regular had returned to their usual friendly banter, Latina looked Kenneth’s way again. He looked clearly troubled by how the first-time customer was getting overly worked up and talking away, but he didn’t seem to be taking issue with the praise being aimed in his direction.

“Hmm?” Latina questioned, tilting her head again upon realizing how her own impressions contradicted each other.

“Wal?”

“Yeah. Do you know it, Dale? Apparently it’s a port town...”

“Yup. Actually, I went there before when I was young. It’s a little town with a fishing harbor. What about it?”

Ever since she was little, it had been part of Latina’s daily routine to report the day’s happenings to Dale. And so, she had done just that when Dale

returned home.

However, she hadn't stopped preparing for dinner as she did so, laying out dishes one after another atop the tables as she talked. When she reached Kenneth's reaction to the first-time customer, Dale gave a strained chuckle. He had been out for the day so he hadn't witnessed the events, but apparently he found them easy to imagine.

"He was really going at it, so Kenneth looked surprised too... And both Rita and that customer said something about Kenneth having taken on a big job in Wal in the past..."

"The magical beast extermination from fifteen years or so back...? That certainly was one heck of a job... And I'm sure it must have left a big impression on the folks who'd heard about it at the time."

"You know about it, Dale?" Latina questioned, looking a bit surprised.

After a bit of hesitation, Dale went ahead and made up his mind.

Ever since Latina was little, Dale had intentionally not talked to her about his work. That was because sometimes the jobs he received from Laband were bloody affairs that included slaughtering members of her race.

Thanks to that, Latina had rarely ever heard what exactly Dale did as an adventurer.

As he moistened his lips with a light wine, he thought on what to say.

"It may not be that interesting to you, but..." Dale began, kicking off his story of the past.

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When Dale was 15, it was decided through a contract with Tislow that he would receive work directly from Duke Eldstedt, the greatest noble in all of Laband.

However, as the head of Tislow at the time, Wendelgard didn't immediately dispatch her grandson to the duke.

"I won't say that the training you've received up till now will be useless, but it won't be enough. But with that said, all the folks I knew from when I was young

are retired by now..." Wendelgard said while swaying her favorite pipe and breathing out a long puff of smoke.

"The folks you knew when you were young..." the 15-year-old Dale muttered, a strained expression on his face as thoughts of his grandmother's budding loves came to mind. He was well aware that when his grandmother was young she made a living in the rough-and-tumble field of adventuring, and that in the several decades since then, her connections from that time had been quite valuable.

Still, his grandmother was also so far outside the norm that he frankly wouldn't have been surprised if some of her acquaintances were still active.

"By watching Randolph, you've come to understand that negotiation techniques and manners can also be weapons to employ against your foes, haven't you?"

"Yeah... But I also know I'd have trouble doing it as well as my old man."

"You're sure to face a diverse array of foes from here on out. But you're just a country boy who knows nothing of the world at large, so you're far too lacking in experience. And so..." Wendelgard stated, stopping for a moment and staring straight at her grandson. "I was thinking of entrusting you to Tarnat. You're familiar with them, right? The ones who guarded the Weiss merchant caravan. You'll be learning how to be an adventurer from them, which should be useful when you do work for the duke."



Thinking back on it years down the road, Dale would realize that there were more well-known adventurer groups than Kenneth's young party among those who protected the merchants coming and going from Tislow around that time. Granny Wendelgard sure had an eye for people to choose Kenneth, who still went by his old family name of Tarnat back then, to take care of her grandson in spite of all that.

Kenneth was affable and naturally talented at watching out for others, and at the same time he also had excellent leadership skills and situational awareness. And appropriate for the fact that he was a firstborn child, Dale was independent to a fault. However, Kenneth possessed the skills to sense what was going on with Dale and help him out even without being asked. When adding in the fact that he later became Latina's mentor and effectively acted as her guardian when she was young, Dale really did owe him an awful lot.

On top of that, Dale felt strangely frustrated at the fact, but he had to admit that his grandmother had a discerning eye to so clearly evaluate Kenneth's abilities.

At the time, Kenneth used heavy equipment in battle and led the party, which had four other members. There was Karel, a bow user who also employed basic healing magic, Helmut and Salomo, lightly equipped fighters who took the vanguard, and Scipio, a magic user who employed both the Fire and Water elements. It was rare for such a young adventurer party to have multiple members who could use magic. And the front guard was impressive as well, as Helmut could switch between a lance and a sword depending on the situation, while Salomo used a great number of short swords, allowing them to properly divide their roles. As the party could handle fights against both humans and magical beasts, they accepted all sorts of jobs ranging from guard work, to extermination, to gathering, rather than specializing in one thing. And so, that was yet another reason they were chosen to help Dale gain experience.

When the time came to entrust Dale to them, his grandmother who led the clan and father who acted as representative for the main family invited the party to their home, where they gave them a warm welcome and made the formal request. Kenneth and them would never refuse to accept Dale at this point, but the party's leader felt the need to say something then regardless.

“I’m no teacher, and I’m still inexperienced myself. I intend to do the best that I can as a leader, but I can’t guarantee that I’ll live up to your expectations.”

Seeing how Kenneth didn’t falter in the least when facing someone as eccentric as his grandmother was more than enough to raise Dale’s impression of the man, but Granny Wen just gave a hearty chuckle, not concerned in the least.

“I’m the one who should be saying that. If my idiot grandson ever seems hopeless, feel free to send him on back. You don’t need to feel so responsible with all this. I just want you to keep in mind that he knows nothing of the world beyond these mountains.”

That was how Dale was entrusted to the party, and though he was indeed ignorant of the ways of the world, he immediately started displaying his skill.

In addition to the archery techniques that were his clan’s specialty, he’d also learned the basics of wielding a sword from his father and grandfather. On top of that he was blessed by Quirmizi and possessed great skill with Earth magic, which he could employ in battle in both close-and long-distance fights.

That still wasn’t the extent of his skills, though.

Having come from a clan of hunters, he was proficient not only in capturing prey, but also dissecting and preparing it. He may not have had camping experience, but he was skilled at a great number of outdoor tasks. As they were essential in Tislow, he gradually acquired them from a young age, but that wasn’t the case for folks who grew up in the city. And despite being the heir to the head family of the clan, Dale wasn’t given a pampered upbringing, and was more capable in the outdoors than most.

Though Dale was still on the young side, he really did have the basics down a lot better than your average rookie, so he got a fairly high appraisal by the members of the party right off the bat. At the same time, Dale also realized that he was just getting a sort of grace period with his grandmother and father entrusting him to the party. He didn’t have any time for grumbling about being thrown out into the world or treated like a kid. Even when it came to odd jobs, he knew that he would need to be able to handle all of it on his own. And so, he knew he should be grateful for the opportunity to train himself in an

environment where he could be taught.

It wasn't like Dale was looking that far into the future or had accepted everything. That was only natural, though, considering his age and his feelings. And it was likely largely due to Kenneth being there to guide him like a big brother that Dale didn't end up falling into anger or despair as badly as the adults around him had feared.

Kenneth was also still considered young for an adventurer, but even someone who had been raised to be the next head of the Tislow clan like Dale had to acknowledge his abilities that made him the cornerstone of the party. Then there was the impression he gave off just in terms of appearance, too. Kenneth had a large frame and a low voice, but he had a very friendly personality and felt like someone you could rely on. And that wasn't all, as when he had to bare the brunt of an attack for the party, he projected some serious pressure towards the opponents and a definite sense of stability.

And it was under that man that Dale built up experience as an adventurer.

It wasn't all that long in terms of the time they spent together. But even so, Dale had outdoors skills to start with, but Kenneth taught him how to interact with clients and ascertain market prices, and tried his best to make sure that he was always there when purchasing supplies. Being given the opportunity to have so many different experiences as much as possible provided Dale with a whole lot of experience. Dale got a great deal of fulfillment from what he learned each and every day, and on top of that he just plain enjoyed being together with Kenneth and his group.

By the time they visited Wal, Dale had grown somewhat accustomed to being a member of the party.

It wasn't like they had come there explicitly to handle an extermination request or anything. They were just on their way back from a guard job, having escorted a client to a large nearby town governed by a local count.

"Since we've come all this way already, I'd like to take the chance to check out the fishing harbor."

When Kenneth suddenly said that, the longtime party members and Dale weren't surprised in the least. Dale had sensed what was going on with Kenneth

pretty quickly when he noticed he wasn't getting cooking duties shoved on him or even handling it in a rotation, as their leader was taking charge of that pretty much every single day.

He was blessed with a large frame that made him an excellent warrior when he dished out powerful blows with an axe, and occasionally he would even act as a shield for the rear while still actively giving out precise orders. And yet, being an adventurer was ultimately just a means to an end for Kenneth.

They traveled all around for their requests, and when they did he would always carefully check out the ingredients and cooking techniques of the region. And then, he would put the recipes he gained to use and recreate the dishes.

Dale didn't perceive this as Kenneth merely being eccentric, though, as he sensed something akin to what he felt from the craftsmen back in his home village. He was familiar with that sort of focus that occasionally resembled obsession, repeating things over and over through trial and error. And the fact that Dale accepted that side of their leader actually caused Karel and the others to have a much higher opinion of the youth.

"A fishing harbor... Is that different than a port town like Qualle?"

As the second-in-command of the party, it was Karel's responsibility to answer Dale's question. This man was skinny and would be considered spindly at a glance, but Dale had come to realize even that was a tool to be used when he saw Karel being the one to negotiate with clients who were hesitant to deal with a rough group like adventurers.

"First off, they're completely different in terms of scale. Qualle is the foremost trade port in Laband, after all. But since we're talking about Kenneth, I'm sure he's interested in the types of fish that can be caught in that part of the ocean."

"Ah, I see..." Dale replied with a strained smile.

"I'm not too fond of smelly fish, myself," Helmut chimed in.

"That's no worry if it's tasty, though," Scipio added.

Salomo was a man of few words, so he just nodded along.

“It’s just a port meant for local fishermen, so it’s only really built to deal with small boats. Then again, the count’s land we just came from had a decent amount of seafood and processed goods passing through, so it’ll probably be fairly lively.

They followed along the highway while having that calm, idle chat, turning towards Wal as they went. As if to support Karel’s words, the path narrowed but still remained properly maintained. That was proof that they were doing definite business with neighboring towns. And since they were traveling there on foot, it was certainly appreciated.

“It would be a big help to either catch a return ship or a merchant carriage we could get a ride with,” Scipio said with a joking tone and everyone chuckled along with him, but that really was how they felt.

They spent one night along the way camping, then got rolling again early the next morning.

Dale wasn’t surprised in the least that the smoked meat they were treated to then was something Kenneth sometimes made while they were camping. He *was* shocked at how much the man’s skill as a chef showed just by placing that between two slices of bread as a snack, though. He must have cooked it absolutely perfectly. To be honest, it was way better eating Kenneth’s cooking than a meal from some mediocre restaurant.

When Dale conveyed that thought to him, Kenneth looked a little surprised.

“The stuff your home village produces is all flavorful and high class. And your mom’s a pretty darn skilled chef, too. I’m not foolish enough to go making light of such country cooking. So you know, you probably have an even more discriminating palate than you think,” Kenneth said, sounding impressed. Dale just tilted his head, though.

“I don’t fuss that much over food, though...”

“Whether or not you do has nothing to do with how good of a tongue you’ve got on you... And besides, if you’re going to be eating something anyway, then it’s better that it tastes good, right?”

“Is that how it is?”

“Plus if you’re to be coming and going around elites, then being able to discern tastes definitely isn’t a bad thing. Still, no matter how high class the food, your own preferences will ultimately come first. After all, there’s no such thing as a taste that’ll satisfy everybody. But if my cooking’s to your tastes, then I’m glad to hear it.”

At the time, neither of them realized that a certain girl would learn from Kenneth and cause Dale to fall for her in part through his stomach. And of course, even though Dale had a more discerning tongue than he knew, she did a splendid job of searching out his tastes through careful consideration and observation, so that she could suggest delicious meals each and every day...

When Wal finally came into view, the first one to realize something abnormal was going on was, unsurprisingly, Kenneth.

“Something’s off...” he muttered, stopping and straining his eyes as they reached the top of a hill overlooking the town.

Noticing how Kenneth was acting, Karel came up beside him, while Dale shot him a questioning look.

“What is it?”

“The ocean doesn’t look rough at all, but there aren’t any ships out for fishing.”

“That’s true. And it’s still too early for fishing season to be over,” Karel agreed, then Dale finally got what was going on.

Observing the harbor, there were ships moored, but there were none to be seen out on the water. They had combined their knowledge together with their observations to realize the strangeness. Dale may have been out of his element, but still, he couldn’t keep relying on the excuse that he was raised in the mountains forever. And so he focused himself while also reflecting on his own shortcomings.

Thanks to that, Dale was able to notice something else.

“Hey... There’s something odd with that spot.”

“Where are you talking about?”

“A bit out from the harbor... The ocean’s an unnatural color. Is it how the light’s reflecting...? No, that’s not it, but it’s got to be something...”

The spot Dale pointed out was colored differently than the deep blue of the rest of the sea as it sparkled in the sunlight. It also didn’t look like what would be caused by a change in depth, so the party stared intently... only for it to sway.

It was now clear that there was some massive creature hidden there.

Before long they made it into Wal, and the streets were so dead that it practically felt deserted. Karel had a quick word with Kenneth, and then he separated from the group. Karel had a far gentler appearance than the rest of them, so it just made sense for him to break off when gathering information from townsfolk and the like. After all, most ordinary folks would probably quiver in fear if he was accompanied by tough-looking guys like Helmut and Salomo.

“Apparently it hasn’t been just recently that they haven’t been out fishing...” Kenneth muttered while looking at the state of the boats and fishing equipment.

“What should we do? Wait for Karel to come back?” Scipio questioned.

“We could also try talking to the town mayor, but... What is it, Dale?”

Kenneth had asked that because he noticed Dale was still staring out past the harbor to where that shadow was, not moving, only for some notably large waves to come crashing in. The ships moored there swayed greatly, and the seawater came eerily flowing up on the shore. As the seawater covered their feet, Dale braced himself subconsciously, but his gaze remained fixed out on the water.

“That’s...”

The silhouette was far too large to belong to any fish. And the tip of the massive beast’s tail could be seen piercing the surface of the water. Its scales were surprisingly vibrant, and they left a dazzling afterimage as it splashed the surface of the water.

Upon seeing the long, thin tail for just a second, Helmut uttered the name of

the beast he had suspected since spotting it atop the hill.

“A sea serpent...”

“No, that’s not it...” Kenneth muttered, denying his ally’s words and seeming somehow taken aback. “Those distinctive vermilion scales... That’s an agate-eyed dragon...”

“Agate...?” Dale questioned, but then saw he wasn’t the only one confused by Kenneth’s words. Judging from everyone else’s reactions, this wasn’t just a case of him being ignorant of the world at large.

“It’s an aquatic type of dragon that lives in the ocean.”

From Kenneth’s explanation, it seemed this wasn’t a commonly known type of magical beast.

“Normally, it’s supposed to live out at sea, though. It’s not all that smart, and it can’t use magic, but apparently its magical resistance can prove tricky... This is actually my first time seeing one outside of just books...”

Dale realized from Kenneth’s tone that he was feeling something between excitement and admiration, especially after what he said next.

“It’s considered a legendary ingredient...”

“Huh?”

“I see.”

“So that’s it, is it?”

Dale was completely taken aback, but the longtime members of the party seemed like they had more or less expected this. Even the generally silent Salomo nodded along.

“Wait... Kenneth?”

“The taste changes when it’s frozen or even kept in cold storage, so it’s not an ingredient suited to being preserved for a long period of time and shipped around. Needing to taste it fresh in order to get its true deliciousness wouldn’t be enough on its own to qualify it as a legendary ingredient, though. The fact that it lives in a very limited area is also a big reason...”

Everyone else was silent.

Kenneth was normally calm and composed, but he was getting more and more heated up.

Even Dale could sense it: Kenneth had honed in on something, and there was probably no stopping him at this point. And the distant expressions on the other members of the party only served to confirm his assumption.

“Agate-eyed dragons usually live out in the open sea. Thanks to that, you need to fight them on the uncertain footing of a boat, meaning the main way to handle them is with long-distance attacks. However, they’re so resistant to magic that the means of handling them are seriously limited...” Kenneth stated, getting all the more worked up.

“Hmm? Hey, Kenneth...” Dale chimed in without thinking, but it seemed to get across. Rather than ignoring him, Kenneth stopped his explanation and turned to face the youth.

“What is it...?”

“If it lives at sea... Then what is it doing in this little harbor? Is there a chance that it’s some different magical beast with a similar coloration?”

“Well, it certainly isn’t normal for one to be so close to land... But nothing else would match those uniquely colored scales and that size.”

“Really?”

“The body colors of most types of sea serpent fall somewhere between blue and silver. There are fish with scales that are red like that, but none that big. And now that we’ve confirmed how the scales cling firmly to its body, it’s not likely that it’s a different species of dragon.”

He was clearly excited as he talked, but if he was able to make such detailed observations, then he hadn’t lost his composure.

“There are other types of red-scaled aquatic dragons, but those all live further north. They don’t come anywhere near Laband way down south. So there’s an extremely high likelihood that this is an agate-eyed dragon.”

“R-Right...”

“Though they live out at sea, I have heard tell of them occasionally coming into a harbor when chasing after a school of fish. I figure that’s probably what happened here.”

Dale had studied the ecology of magical beasts, plants, and animals to some degree, but he still couldn’t help but be impressed by how confidently Kenneth was able to make that statement.

He felt like the gap between him and Kenneth now went beyond just a mere difference in experience.

“So, what should we do? Wait till Karel comes back with some information?” Scipio asked.

Kenneth looked around at his party, then stated, “We’ll go talk to the town mayor. I never imagined we would run into such favorable conditions. So we really should get moving, before the request gets given to some other adventurers.”

With that, the party set out towards what they believed to be the mayor’s residence. They had gotten a glance at the town from atop the hill, so they figured they had an idea as to where it was. It had been apparent from even a glance that there were no firm walls around the town to keep out bandits and magical beasts like what you would see with a city, and it didn’t seem like the layout of the paths and buildings was meant to confuse visitors.

It certainly did have a rustic feel to it, but the scenery of the town also made it easy to tell the level of prosperity it possessed.

The mayor was surprised and clearly on guard at the sudden arrival of the adventurers, and once Kenneth started negotiating with him, he was shocked for a different reason entirely. And with that, he invited them inside to discuss the matter further.

When they exited the residence and stepped outside, they found Karel waiting for them past the gate.

“So you really were here, huh?”

“Yeah. We asked what we needed to. How were things on your end?”

“Well, I already went ahead and checked us into an inn, so how about we swap info there?”

After that brief exchange, the group started walking again. And seeing all this, Dale gave a sigh.

“What is it?”

“Ah, it’s just... Everything’s progressing so smoothly, like it’s only natural...”

They had done everything perfectly, from opening negotiations with the mayor, gathering information, finding lodgings, and plenty of other trifling matters. The general image of adventurers was that they were combat specialists, yet their negotiation skills were absolutely off the charts.

Dale still looked a bit childish, and when he looked at the adults with something akin to admiration in his eyes, they looked just a bit embarrassed, then broke out in hearty chuckles.

“It comes down to practice, but there’s aptitude to consider, too,” Karel stated.

“After all, there are folks like me and Salomo out there who are disastrously bad at stuff like that,” Scipio chimed in.

“I’m not especially skilled at it, either. That’s why we’ve got a specialist around,” Helmut added.

Hearing that, Dale groaned just a bit. Considering his position, it wasn’t a skill he could just write off as something he didn’t have a talent for.

“You don’t need to be in such a rush. You’ll get the hang of it eventually.”

“But ‘eventually’ isn’t good enough, right?”

“You’ll be fine. Well, I guess this isn’t a *completely* sure thing, though, so I’ll add a ‘probably’ to that,” Kenneth said with a chuckle.

Dale seemed a bit disgruntled at Kenneth’s comment, his face carrying a sulky expression one might expect from a young man his age.

Seeing that, Kenneth’s gaze softened ever so slightly.

The youth before his eyes was struggling to become a man, but even so he

humbly accepted his own shortcomings and kept moving forward, trying desperately all the while to absorb everything he could.

Dale's unrestrained passion had a nostalgic air to it, like fresh leaves, and the boy looked just a bit dazzling to Kenneth.

Still, it certainly didn't feel half bad having a kid like that treating the crew as a role model.

They were all well aware of the duty the boy had been tasked with. And at the same time, they had also heard that he possessed the rare skill earning him the title of hero. But regardless of how rare that may be, Kenneth also knew that wasn't related to the talent of the person in question. Just because someone was a hero, didn't mean they would become a sword master or possess great skill with magic.

In the first place, the reason the term "hero" came to be was because the person who once saved the nation from a truly vile demon lord and united the surrounding countries was just an ordinary person, not possessing the abilities one would expect of a great champion. That person's bravery was widely praised, and so ever since then, out of respect for how they became a true champion, those with power that let them oppose the demon lords came to be known as heroes. This became an epic saga that was widely loved, and served as an important part of the nation's history.

But as for this boy, he would surely have to stand on the sort of harsh battlefields expected of a hero. And there was no way that the kind of requests that came from the highest authorities in the nation would be simple.

So he wanted to be of help to the youth... Though he couldn't help hoping for some credit in whatever grand epic resulted from Dale's endeavors. After all, nearly everyone who chose to walk the path of an adventurer had some definite admiration for such things.

And so, Kenneth and his group weren't exactly unhappy with their role as mentors.

Fittingly for the small port town, the inn that Karel got them into was rather old and small. However, it did look like it was being maintained and properly managed. But on the other hand, it felt downright deserted, most likely because

of the current state the town found itself in.

There didn't even seem to be any other customers around when they grabbed seats in the restaurant on the first floor.

The sight really did make the place feel all the more desolate.

At any rate, the group shared the information they had gathered. When they mentioned their theory that what they had seen was an agate-eyed dragon as well as what they had heard from the mayor, Karel gave a nod.

"That's pretty much the same as what I heard. The fishermen apparently concluded it's a dragon, too, deciding to err on the side of caution and just keep an eye on it."

"The mayor also knows what's going on, but it'd take time to head for the city, share the information via a temple of Akhdar, and wait for adventurers to arrive. And it would take even longer for the local lord to dispatch soldiers to deal with the problem. It's easy to say they're waiting and seeing, but it feels more like they just don't know what to do."

"They'd need to offer a heck of a lot of reward money for a request to take down a dragon, too," Scipio chimed in with an awkward chuckle.

"So the town mayor accepted Kenneth's request," Dale said in understanding.

"You need to offer reward money when putting out an extermination request, but that's not necessary with someone who says they'll go and do it on their own. Dragon parts hold a good deal of value, so if we sell those off after exterminating it, we should be able to earn plenty of profit. And that's not even what we're after in the first place, so we're fine without getting any reward money."

Through his negotiations with the mayor, Kenneth secured exclusive ownership of the catch in exchange for not asking for any other payment. And since they would be fighting near the town's harbor, he also received a guarantee that they wouldn't be held accountable for any damages that may occur. After all, it was important to consider the risk of their right to their prey being taken as compensation.

"Just to confirm, Dale, does your Earth magic work on the ocean floor, too?"

“Hmm? It’d be tricky to do if it was too deep... But if we’re talking about something like this harbor, it should be doable if I have enough time.”

“Then we should be able to secure footing for ourselves.”

Dale’s Earth magic was definitely a reason Kenneth had judged their conditions to be so favorable.

“Normally our only choice would be to launch long-range attacks at it from atop a boat, but now we’ll be able to drag it out and attack it directly. It’ll still of course be a deadly mistake to underestimate it, but it’s incredibly rare to have such good conditions. We’ve got a real chance of pulling this off, so I can’t see any reason to turn down this opportunity.”

“Plus, it’s supposed to be tasty.”

“Yeah, it’s a legendary ingredient.”

“How exactly do you prepare a dragon?”

Kenneth had been totally serious, but his allies all went and threw their feelings on the matter out there.

After coming to the conclusion that they would gather some more information about the situation tomorrow, they decided to get a meal at the inn’s restaurant. Since no one had been able to fish in the area for a while now, they weren’t served any fresh seafood, which got Kenneth’s fighting spirit even more fired up.

The divine protection Dale received from Quirmizi acted as a safeguard when it came to Earth magic. As long as he was casting magic using that element, he would never use up any mana.

However, since Dale wasn’t primarily a magic user by trade, it took him a bit of time and concentration to activate. And since he was using an even longer chant than usual, the precision required in weaving his mana was significant.

“Oh earth and the spirits dwelling within you, by my name of Dale Reki I order you, shift your form according to my wishes...”

They had first driven the agate-eyed dragon to the center of the harbor using Scipio’s Water magic. It naturally didn’t do much damage to a being with such a

high resistance to magic, but it was effective in annoying it and getting it to move where they wanted.

With that, the dragon arrived at the point where they were waiting.

In that instant, Dale finished off his chant.

“...Display your glorious strength. <<Ground Transfiguration>>”

With that, the ground lifted up from the ocean.

The displaced water turned into a large wave, washing over the surroundings. It was enough to lift up the fishing boats, but when it slammed into the buildings, it burst into white foam.

“Oh earth, by my name I order you, shift your form according to my wishes. <<Ground Transfiguration>>”

As he chanted the same spell as before again, the already protruding surface spread out to create even more footing for them.

Before the agate-eyed dragon could even tell what was going on, it was dragged upwards and its usual territory completely vanished. Since it lived in the ocean, its limbs had evolved to prioritize swimming ability. But apparently now that they were touching solid ground, they didn't have the strength needed to allow it to freely move around as it pleased.

Having cast his grand spell, Dale staggered for a moment in a lapse of concentration.

“You don't need to force yourself to join the front line,” Karel said from beside the youth, not even looking his way. His gaze remained perfectly fixed on his target, and he released the tension in his bow's string. The arrow cut sharply through the air, heading towards the beast's head at the end of its long neck.

“It's not like I've used up my mana... I'll be fine,” Dale briefly replied as he drew his sword.

Thanks to the dragon's high magical resistance, the magical device bow that he favored wouldn't be very effective. And so, he instead went running forward in order to slash at his target.

The three members of the vanguard had gotten moving the instant Dale completed his magic, so they had already reached the dragon. Salomo had made it there first, and he was carefully watching the beast's wriggling movements while slashing at its gleaming red belly. He landed one blow, then another. With that, the dragon realized what was happening and that these humans were its enemies, and its agate-colored eyes fixated on Salomo. Sensing that, the adventurer chose without a moment's hesitation to distance himself.

Salomo had realized that his own weapons wouldn't be enough to land a decisive blow when up against the dragon's tough scales. And so, he retreated in order to distract the beast along with the magic-using Scipio.

At nearly the exact moment that the agate-eyed dragon's attention turned towards Salomo, Helmut swung his long spear towards the beast's softer abdomen.

The agate-eyed dragon let out a shrill shriek.

Even though he could sense the clear resentment in the beast's voice, Helmut didn't let up with his attack. Through his countless slashes, a great number of the damaged scales were shaved away and its flesh was cut loose, sending fresh blood flying through the air.

Amongst all that pain, the agate-eyed dragon swung its tail to swipe away its enemies. Even though the beast's overwhelming weight alone was enough to make it a potentially fatal weapon, Kenneth remained calm and stepped out in front of his allies.

Using his battleaxe as a shield, he warded off the blow from the dragon's tail. Naturally, that didn't mean he stopped it directly, but rather intentionally redirected it. It was the kind of maneuver that could only be pulled off through a combination of skill and experience. Scipio also provided Kenneth with magical support, and thanks to the flow of water he created, the threat was kept safely away from any of their allies.

"Dale, can you aim for its neck?" Kenneth questioned, giving that short command.

"I'll give it a try," Dale responded, already running while slicing at the beast's

abdomen.

Then, he let loose a basic spell that was one of his specialties, “Oh earth, by name I order you, strike down my enemy. <<Stone Spear>>”

The attack magic executed in a different way than it normally would. The sharp conical stone shape usually meant for striking an enemy instead shot up under his feet. The instant that Dale reached the beast’s neck as planned, Karel let loose a barrage of arrows at its head. It wasn’t quite enough to completely rob the dragon of its vision, but it did cause it to reflexively close its eyelids and lose sight of Dale.

“Haah!” Dale yelled out, taking advantage of the opportunity to slash with his sword. He didn’t flinch as he was coated by fresh blood gushing forth from the deep wound, instead driving his blade even deeper.

Having received that critical blow from Dale, the agate-eyed dragon had clearly lost its ability to launch precise attacks.

“Scipio!” Kenneth yelled out to the group’s magic user, not taking his eyes off the beast.

“Yeah!”

The bloodied Dale was sent flying to the rear, cast aside as easily as if he was a kitten.

“Gotcha!” Kenneth yelled out while swinging his battleaxe, predicting the movements of the flailing injured dragon all the while. It was a powerful blow, slashing through the abdomen Helmut had already sliced open.



Unable to bear it, the agate-eyed dragon twisted its massive body, then a second later its head listlessly drooped. It had essentially left its critical injury completely defenseless.

Helmut deeply drove the tip of his spear into the soft flesh exposed by the wound Kenneth had opened wide. At nearly the same moment, Kenneth swung with enough strength for a fatal blow at its injured neck, tearing through it.

With that, the dragon's massive frame came crashing down, causing the ground under their feet to tremble.

"Dale!" Kenneth called out while turning around, having finally seen the beast meet its end.

"I'm alright," Dale replied with a light wave of his hand, having had the blood washed off of him through Scipio's Water magic. "It didn't get in my eyes or mouth."

"It's known as an edible species, so I don't think there's any need to worry so much about it. But still, best to be safe."

There were plenty of magical beasts out there full of poisonous bodily fluids. And when there wasn't much known about the species you were dealing with, it was especially important to be cautious.

"I cast detoxifying magic too, to be on the safe side."

"You sure do know a lot of different types of magic for someone who isn't even a dedicated magic user..." Scipio said in an astounded tone.

"That's because Tislow's a blessed land, where it's not rare at all to be able to use magic," Karel chimed in with a chuckle as he watched over the first-aid being applied.

"It's a waste not to use everything you can. Back in my village, studying magic comes right after learning to read and write," Dale replied as if it was only natural as he brushed aside his dripping wet bangs. Then, he gave the sleeve of his coat a sniff and grimaced. Mentally, he made a note to give it a thorough wash before the stench became a real problem.

"Well then, now we've got the real task before us," Kenneth stated while

placing his hands on his hips and stretching.

“Yeah, how are we pulling this thing ashore...?” Scipio asked in agreement.

“Is it alright if I go ahead and put the harbor back how it was?”

“Yeah, but wait till we get out of here first.”

“Right. And Karel, leave the cleanup here to us and go either find a merchant whose services we can buy or a carriage we can rent for transportation.”

“Got it. And I’ll see if I can find a kitchen we can borrow, too. We can’t transport the edible parts, right?”

“Yeah. We’re counting on you.”

Once everyone’s roles were decided, they each set about working on their separate tasks. As he watched Salomo and Helmut tying rope around their catch, Dale wove his mana once again.

Wanting to make things easier for transporting the beast, he used his magic to create a downward slope. He was going to have to fix all this later anyway, and now that he had come this far, this wouldn’t require much extra effort to clean up.

“Are you alright just firing off magic again and again like that?”

“Yeah. As long as I rest a bit, it’s no problem. I mean, I don’t even use up mana to begin with. It just takes a lot of concentration. That’s the one thing I wish I could get used to already,” Dale replied to Kenneth with a light wave of his hand.

And Kenneth really did seem to be able to tell that Dale wasn’t pushing himself, as he just turned to the rest of the group and said, “I think it’d be easier to dissect it a bit up here rather than pulling it down as is.”

“Ah, that’s true.”

“It’d be smart to cut the head off and bloodlet it, too. We’ll get soaked in blood, but we can just wash it off in the ocean later.”

“The smell of the blood won’t attract any sharks or anything, right...?”

“Better that than making a big puddle of blood in the middle of town.”

“I’ll do most of the prep work, but go ahead and skin it, Helmut. And Salomo, you gather up the parts like the nails and fins.”

With that they had their new tasks, and they silently got to work. Dale was taking a break and watching at the time, but perhaps due to his blood as a Tislow hunter getting all fired up, he soon grew restless. Now that he thought of it, it wasn’t often you got a chance to dissect such a large, rare beast.

“Kenneth, let me help too.”

“Right. Think you can help skin it?”

“It’d be my first time with something *this* big, but I’ve dealt with some large lizards back home.”

“Well, it’s not like we run into ‘lizards’ this big that often, either,” Helmut said with a chuckle.

“Yeah,” Dale muttered, pulling out his knife. “Ah, could I have some scales and stuff later as my personal share?”

“I don’t mind, but why?”

“Because I figure the craftsmen back home would be excited about such rare materials. So I was figuring I’d send them along to give them something to discuss.”

“I see.”

Even as they chatted, they didn’t slow down their work in the slightest. And so, the massive, menacing dragon was steadily divided up into chunks of meat. In fact, the beast’s fate had likely been sealed when it was first declared to be a delicacy.

At any rate, both Kenneth and the rest of the group were entirely focused on dissecting the creature. And when they started seeing how delicious the chunks of meat looked with the fat clinging to them, any thoughts of the dragon they used to belong to more or less vanished.

“It can be a little tough to look at a whole roasted lizard sometimes. But when it’s this big you’ve got to cut it up anyway, and then it’s hard to even picture its original shape.”

Still, it wasn't such a bad feeling, hunting down a dragon for its meat. There weren't any that lived near his home village, so they'd never had the chance, but if there had been, he was certain the hunters would have jumped at the chance.

They would be able to sell off the large bones like the spine and ribs. And so, while Dale set about using magic to return the harbor to its former state, the rest of the party was silently cleaning those off. In the middle of all that, though, they suddenly realized that both Kenneth and Karel were conspicuously missing.

And yet, nobody in the group found that strange in the least.

Later on, they loaded the luggage into the carriage Karel had procured and fixed it in place. Then after that, they all bathed at the inn and washed off their equipment. And unsurprisingly, when Dale's paralyzed sense of smell started working again, he couldn't help frowning at the residual stench clinging to him.

While Dale didn't bring a lot of them, a few spare everyday shirts and pants were among the minimal luggage he brought along. Granted, the amount he could carry was limited on such a nomadic journey. It was something he hadn't really ever considered back in his home village.

As he stepped outside of the inn he saw the sun was starting to set, dying the sky red.

He looked around as the salty ocean breeze blew through his damp hair and spied that a bonfire had been prepared, and the women from about town were walking all around. The flow of people was mainly centered around a makeshift outdoor stove, where a familiar large man was standing and skillfully working away.

I guess I probably shouldn't go asking him which one he sees as his real job...

Seeing how the clean apron he wore fit him perfectly, it must not have been borrowed. And the blade he held in his dominant hand didn't look to be any ordinary knife, but rather one meant for cooking that he was well accustomed to using. It felt odd to realize that he must have been using a fair portion of his limited luggage space just for cooking tools.

Apparently, the women from about town had gathered to help out.

To a novice like Dale, it sure was an impressive sight seeing Kenneth not only briskly throw out orders to those around him, but also prepare a number of dishes at the same time all by himself.

Around when the red sky started shifting into a deep indigo, the prepared bonfire began serving its purpose of lighting up the surroundings. It was a setup reminiscent of a night festival, and in fact it served as a celebration of the unprecedented threat of the aquatic dragon being wiped out, as well as the fact that they would be able to get back to fishing from tomorrow on.

It was the type of ingredient that rich dilettantes would pay plenty for, but it was hard to sell, due to being difficult to preserve and ship. And so, they ultimately had to resign themselves to using up all of the meat. Those who gathered at the ensuing banquet held in the town couldn't hide how they felt daunted by the unfamiliar ingredient, but alcohol gradually drove away any residual misgivings about the beast, and they started showing interest in such delicious food.

"Yum."

The meat skewer seemed to have just been made by sprinkling salt over it and roasting it, and yet the amount of salt and roasting time were just perfect, making for an exquisite dish. It was lighter compared to farm meat, but it had a nice, firm texture to it, and a delicious flavor came gushing out when you bit into it.

"It definitely is good, but it's hard to think of what to compare it to," Dale muttered to himself while glancing at the next dish.

The stringy parts had been boiled long enough that they became viscous like gelatin, and then steeped in the flavor of potherbs and tomatoes. It made for a really unique texture of a sort that Dale had never tasted before. The deep fried dish was quite interesting, too. It was seasoned a bit on the strong side, but it paired perfectly as a snack alongside the drinks.

Then there was a dish made through steaming, prepared in a way based on the local cuisine of this port town, using a citrus-based sauce. Even the scraps didn't go to waste as Kenneth used them to make a soup, which had a salty

flavor and was served in a bowl with noodles and more citrus.

Dale had his cup filled with fresh wine and took a sip. It was a cheap wine, but it wasn't overly sour and went down easy, which earned it passing marks in his book.

As Dale moved towards the center of the banquet while picking at the dishes on offer, he soon noticed the man who should have been the star of the moment was instead staring out at the dark nighttime sea. He spied the man's cup was empty at the moment, though, so he borrowed a bottle of wine before going on over.

"Kenneth."

"Dale...?"

"What's with that face? You were so energetic just a little bit ago," Dale questioned while pouring wine into Kenneth's glass.

"Was the food tasty?" Kenneth asked, with a bizarrely listless look to him.

"Yeah."

"An agate-eyed dragon, huh...?" he muttered with a sigh, causing Dale to look a bit puzzled.

He didn't say it often, but Dale really did think his "big bro" was someone worthy of respect. And so, he gulped down the contents of his own cup and grasped for what to say.

"Even working as an adventurer, it's unlikely you'll ever run into one of those incredibly rare beasts. And even if you do, taking it down is a whole other matter entirely. It's possible to set up a specialized fishing trip in order to take on the challenge, but for that, you'd need to find an investor with a massive fortune first," Kenneth stated.

"Right..."

"It's rare enough that I'd call it a once in a lifetime opportunity, even for famed adventurers. That's how legendary of an ingredient it is..."

"It sure was tasty."

“Yeah, it was... I had wanted to try eating it, just the once...” he muttered, his words coming out bit by bit. He really wasn’t acting like his usual self.

As Dale searched for words of wisdom that had come from the man himself, Kenneth gave another sigh.

“It was my goal in becoming an adventurer...”

“Huh?”

Kenneth paid no attention to how taken aback Dale looked, though, and instead stared into the darkness towards the far-off horizon line.

“Now that I’ve accomplished my goal, what’ll I do from here on out...?”

Dale’s impression hadn’t been wrong.

Now that Kenneth had completed his life’s goal without Dale even realizing it, he was undoubtedly at a loss.

†

After hearing “The Epic of Wal” from Dale, Latina asked the question she was most curious about: “You can eat dragons?”

In a way, he had totally expected that.

“The agate-eyed dragon we ate back then tasted totally different than other meats or fish, but it was crazy tasty... I don’t really have the words to describe it, but it sure was good.”

“Ooh...”

When he saw the curiosity sparkling in Latina’s gray eyes, Dale started thinking maybe he’d go catch an agate-eyed dragon or two, no matter how much trouble it may prove to do so. He really was serious about it too, making all sorts of plans in the back of his head on how to best use his connections and authority.

“The only dragons I’ve seen before were flying dragons at the capital. But still, you and Kenneth sure are amazing to have taken on such a large magical beast...”

Despite her words, there was a clear look of concern on Latina’s face. Noticing

that, Dale gave a strained smile and patted her on the head like he did when she was little.

“It’s true that you start to get a reputation of being a first-rate adventurer when you take down a dragon. But put another way, it happens enough for that not to be so rare an occurrence. Plus Kenneth and I are just fine, so there’s no reason for you to worry, Latina.”

“Right.”

When he thought on how Latina had worried like that when he left her home and headed out for a job ever since she was little, he thought it really may have been for the best that he hadn’t had much of a chance to tell her the details of his work. After all, the Seventh Demon Lord’s troops made a real habit of bringing dragons along with them. It was true that you were called first rate for taking one down, but he dealt with them so often that he had grown completely numb to that fact.

It made him glad to see Latina concerned for him, and he could understand why she felt that way, but fighting a dragon was far from an unusual job for Dale.

“Well... That agate-eyed dragon was seriously tasty, but from what I hear, most land-based dragons aren’t suitable for eating.”

“Really?”

Dale felt relieved that he had managed to so swiftly shift her attention.

“Their meat is tough to start with, and a lot of them have a resistance to fire, so you can’t really soften it through cooking, either.”

“I see...”

“Flying dragons have great strategic importance so nobody eats them, and supposedly they wouldn’t be tasty even if you tried, anyway.”

“But if we know they’re not tasty... Then that means someone has eaten them before.”

Dale was at a loss as to how to respond to that.

Most of his knowledge on such things had come from Kenneth, and he hadn’t

ever questioned why he would know such things in the first place, but now that he thought on it, Latina was absolutely right.

He wanted to think that Kenneth just learned it from someone else too, but he really couldn't say that with certainty.

"I guess that's true."

"So dragons aren't very tasty... Huh?"

Dale had been tempted to ask if she wanted to try eating one even so, only for Latina to think of something partway through her statement and tilt her head before continuing on.

"* * * * * meat could be... I mean, I thought it was some type of giant lizard, but maybe it's not...? Huh...?" she muttered, mixing in a word from her home country.

"Well, maybe there's no helping that it tastes bad, then..." Dale said while averting his gaze a bit.

Latina, meanwhile, furrowed her brows and looked to be struggling to search distant memories. When she seemed to finally be satisfied with her search, she met eyes with Dale and then let out an odd little giggle.

"Hmm? What is it?"

"It's just... You were a whole lot younger in that story than the you I know, so it's kind of a strange feeling."

"I mean, to put it bluntly, I was still just a kid back then..."

At the time, he put on a front far more than was necessary, hoping to get the people around him to acknowledge him. Now that the years had passed, he could tell that actually must have made him seem even more childish to them, though.

"I mean, you were an adult ever since I first met you."

"By now, you're actually older than I was when I found you, though."

"Ah..." Latina muttered, blinking her eyes in clear surprise. "That's true, isn't it? How strange."

“Well, I mean, pretty much all the old-timers making up the regulars of this shop have known you since back when you were a kid... and honestly, it’s not all that different for me, either.”

A great number of the senior adventurers centered around Kreuz had known Dale since back when he was just a fledgling Kenneth had taken under his wing.

“I mean, there’s some stuff you can only really see when the years have passed, but it can be real embarrassing to think back on.”

Would he even have been able to take charge of a young girl so utterly unrelated to him without the impetus of youth to spur him on? He had thought he was a proper adult back then, but in actuality he was still young and inexperienced, and so perhaps the people around them saw him not too differently from the young girl he cradled in his arms.

“So you’ve all done work here in Kreuz since way back then?”

“No, Kenneth and them just used Kreuz occasionally, but from what I hear it wasn’t their base of operations or anything.”

“Really?” Latina questioned.

With that, Dale resumed his story of the past.

“It’s a bit of a strange twist of fate, that the reason Kenneth’s party started working out of Kreuz was because we had taken out that agate-eyed dragon.”

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The next destination for Kenneth’s party was Kreuz, after slaying that agate-eyed dragon in Wal. The reason for their destination was to sell off the hide, bone, and other valuable parts of the dragon they’d prepared. And since their condition would affect what they could be used for, Kenneth’s party wanted to find buyers before anything started to deteriorate. That was even more true because they were rare, valuable parts.

A great number of merchants did also gather in the port town of Qualle, but if you were trying to maximize profits, then Kreuz was on a whole other level.

Kreuz was the second largest center for trade and distribution in all of Laband, so it was very welcoming to outside merchants and adventurers who visited.

That reputation came from the fact that it was easier to find a place to sell something there than in other towns, and because the conditions weren't set to be explicitly favorable to residents, so even adventurers without any backing had a chance to maximize their profits.

The carriage they rented took them from Wal to the nearest port town. From there, they traveled by ship up a large river that connected to the coast, heading towards Kreuz. The vessel carried not only people but also crated goods. And for Dale, the trip made for yet another learning experience.

Once the ship moved from the ocean to the river, the whole journey became incredibly smooth. While the rest of the party took it easy and saw this as a chance to relax, Dale decided to use this time effectively in order to write a report to send back to his home village. Of course, to those around him he looked like a high-level student buried in homework, causing them to break out in awkward grins.

Eventually, the boat came up alongside the bridge to the north of Kreuz. Apparently, past this point it was difficult for large ships to advance due to the depth of the water. In order to go further, you would need to bring your luggage down to the nearby riverbank prepared for these situations, and move it to either a small boat or carriage to continue onwards.

It was Dale's first time visiting this part of the river, and he actually thought it was a town.

There were a great number of people working there, and there were also inns set up there for them. Plus there were stalls there lined up to do business with the workers and folks using the boats, making it a lot more lively than the rural villages Dale was familiar with.

"A bit of a settlement naturally popped up here, but it's not officially considered a town," Karel taught Dale. "Since it's not a town, they don't collect taxes. But in exchange, there's no guarantee of protection and you're responsible for yourself here."

"Is that really alright? What about magical beasts and bandits...?"

"I wouldn't say it's perfectly safe or anything, but it's close to Kreuz, so apparently they can take care of themselves to some degree."

Plus, he explained to Dale that during long periods of turbulent weather, stalls and luggage could be quickly packed up and everyone could retreat to safety. Though, put another way, such events were frequent enough in the area that a proper town couldn't be established there in the first place.

While Karel was teaching Dale all that, they arranged a carriage and gathered information on places in Kreuz that might buy rare ingredients like the parts of an agate-eyed dragon.

Kenneth had seemed somehow listless since that night in Wal, but there weren't any clear changes in his work to indicate that. It was even possible that he was in a slump since they hadn't handled any dangerous jobs since then, so perhaps he would return to normal once he threw himself back into such a situation.

It'd be nice if that was the case, but still...

Dale was seated in the back of the carriage as it rattled along, and he gave a sigh as he stared up at the sky. To someone like him who grew up in the mountains, both the sight of the ocean reaching out to the horizon line and a river so wide it would be hard to swim to the other side were fresh to him. And even with such thoughts racing through his mind, the sight of the sky reflecting on the sparkling blue water looked quite beautiful. So even though he was essentially just another piece of luggage being transported by the carriage, it still felt like a deluxe seat as it allowed him to relax and enjoy the scenery.

Ultimately, they ended up entering Kreuz through the eastern gate.

The crafting district in the east was far more bustling and lively than any town that Dale had visited thus far. You could really sense Kreuz's prosperity as one of Laband's most prominent towns from both the goods lined up in the shops along the way and the people passing by.

"We already got information back at the riverside about a place that'd probably buy it all, but to be safe, I guess we should check things out at a shop with an Akhdar flag," Kenneth stated as they approached the center of town.

"I think there's one in the southern district," Karel replied.

"Ah, that envelope with wings is the insignia of the postal service, right? I'd

like to stop by that office to send my report and the scales you guys let me have. Would that be alright?" Dale asked.

"The shop has a green flag raised to distinguish it, plus it's alongside the main street, so you can just catch up to us later."

"It looks pretty crowded, so that'd be a big help. Plus it ended up even bulkier than expected," Dale said while holding up the bundle of documents. By this point, it was more of a small parcel than a letter. And since he had also included the agate-eyed dragon scales wrapped carefully in oil paper, that only strengthened that impression.

After separating from the party, Dale entered the postal building through a door that was every bit as showily adorned as you would expect from such a large town. And true to his first impressions, it really was bustling, with a great number of people coming and going. However, the reception desks were well-staffed, meaning he didn't have to wait as long as expected.

As Dale was filling out the form to have his report sent back home at the time, he didn't directly observe what happened next. But when he heard about it later, it was something he hadn't expected at all: Kenneth, who was supposed to be visiting that shop for the first time on business, was hitting on the waitress.

When Dale finished with the postal service, he found the bar known as the Dancing Ocelot, which was denoted by the green flag with a winged horse on it that was the symbol of Akhdar. And when he approached, what he saw was the rest of the group looking clearly at a loss, while Kenneth was there in the center with a sloppy smile on his face.

With that, he was informed of what had happened.

It was just too unbelievable for anyone who knew Kenneth as he usually was, so Dale was also left dumbfounded and uncertain how to handle the situation.

"Huh?"

"Ah, I mean, it's just that he looks awful happy for someone who got chewed out in response."

"Eh? I don't really get it..."

“No worries there. Even those of us who were there the whole time don’t really understand it.”

“I don’t really get Kenneth hitting on anyone to begin with...” Dale muttered, and everyone else agreed.

“It was our first time seeing it ourselves.”

“Yeah.”

However, the question a troubled-looking Dale asked next was far from what anyone expected.

“What does... ‘hit on’ mean?”

It was just such an unbelievable question that nobody wanted to give him a straight answer.

“I mean, can’t you figure it out from context?”

“Why did you do something like that, Kenneth?”

With that, Kenneth shot him a wide grin, seemingly paying no heed to the fact that they were still out in public.

“I had no clue up till now either, but it looks like there really is such a thing as love at first sight.”

“Huh?”

“Like I said, it was love at first sight. So I tried to woo her.”

“Huh...?”

“I know that they say that haste makes waste, but I made a strategic decision that the saying that the early bird gets the worm took precedence.”

“Huh...”

From the look on Dale’s face it was clear that he wasn’t keeping up with what was happening, but then Kenneth broke out in a smile that said that he was going to leave the lad even further behind.

“Becoming an adventurer was just a means to an end for me.”

“You said something like that before, too.”

“And after I one day retire, I’d like to run an inn or something, and end up having plenty of kids with a beautiful wife. That’s my goal in life.”

“...Huh...”

“Now that I’ve accomplished my goal as an adventurer, that’s what I should focus on. I finally remembered that!”

Around when Dale finally vaguely sensed he wasn’t the only one feeling out of the loop, the energy had fully returned to Kenneth’s expression as he stared up at the sky.

In all likelihood, the rest of the group was probably also thinking to themselves that they were glad to see him back on his feet, but also that they hadn’t at all expected the circumstances that would bring it about.

At the same time, the girl Kenneth had confessed to hadn’t gotten a handle on the situation at all, either.

As the only daughter of the couple who ran the Dancing Ocelot, Rita was tasked with handling a portion of the affairs of her parents’ combination bar and inn.

The shop had been granted an affiliation with the temple of Akhdar, and an information terminal, but the task of using it couldn’t just be entrusted lightly to some outside employee. And so, that fell upon the owners of the place. As her parents’ only daughter, Rita had made up her mind at a young age that she would take over the business, so she underwent higher learning at an Asfar temple in order to polish up the essential skills like accounting. All of that was because she was the shop’s heir, and would have to take charge of it in the future.

She was still a young woman, but that was the sort of enthusiasm that drove her as she sat behind the shop’s counter.

Since she had grown up in a bar, she was used to being teased by drunk customers and having statements with a hint of sexual harassment thrown her way.

And yet... Or no, perhaps precisely because of that...

“I’ve fallen for you. Let’s get married.”

“What’re you saying? Is your brain busted?”

Having someone she just met propose to her with a totally serious look on his face was definitely a new one for her.

“It’s destiny. I can feel it.”

She could swear she shot him an icy glare, but it didn’t seem to get through to him at all. It seemed even her sharp tongue wasn’t enough to shake him.

“I hear death’s the only cure for stupidity, so how about giving that a try?”

“If the undead are what you’re into, Rita, then I’ll give that some serious consideration.”

“Then we’ll have to make sure to use thorough enough purification magic that there won’t even be a single ash of you left behind.”

She had thought she had built up a tolerance for drunks and vulgar jerks, and believed she could ward them all off. Perhaps that was why she didn’t know how to handle him staring straight at her like this.

Her thoughts were all a mess.

And so...

“Rita...”

Unable to bear his gaze any longer, her hand shot out reflexively.

Despite the resulting dry, light bang reverberating through the air, for some reason the large man in front of her was still staring at her with a look of complete and utter satisfaction.

The men accompanying him must have realized it would be bad if this blew up into an incident, as they dragged him out of the shop and closed the door.

And in that instant, Rita was unable to hold herself back any longer and yelled out, “What in the world was that?! Seriously, what the heck?!”

“Huh...? I mean, he was hitting on you, right?” a bearded regular called out while taking a drink, seemingly finding even Rita’s rage amusing.

The regular had made a name for himself as an adventurer, earning enough fame and fortune to become well known around town. Normally, you would expect someone like him to patronize a high-class shop in the western district, amongst all the mansions. The owner being his childhood friend, and his interest in watching over the man's daughter, were likely both reasons he preferred frequenting this cheap bar in the southern district.

Doing business with ruffians like adventurers carried some risk even for an adult man, yet Rita had decided from a young age that she would take over the shop from her parents. And unsurprisingly, she ended up thinking of her father's friend as "Uncle Sylvester."

That was how long the regular had known her for, and yet even he had never seen her this out of sorts.

"And my hand hurts!"

"That's what happens when you slap someone as hard as you can," Sylvester said with a grin.

Honestly, he had some interest in the fact that the man was skilled enough to not only track the course of Rita's slap, but also close his eyes in response. He had never seen the man in Kreuz before, but Sylvester suspected he belonged to a mid-level party with a good bit of experience.

"I don't know him, but I wonder if he'll be coming here for work from now on..."

"I don't care in the least!"

"You say that, but if he's an adventurer based out of Kreuz, then I'm sure you'll be seeing plenty of him in the future."

"Ugh..."

"The doctrine of a shop with an Akhdar flag is that they're supposed to be open to anyone seeking information, right? You can't just go around choosing your customers based on your personal feelings. If you do, it'll be just like your old man says..."

Rita was clearly shaken, yet when Sylvester said that she put on a bold front

and replied, “I know, he always says it’d be impossible for a woman to run this bar. I’m sick of hearing that. I can easily ward off a flirt or two.”

“Oh, I see.”

Having heard just the response he expected from Rita, Sylvester had nothing else to say, so he just held out his now empty cup towards her.

Kenneth wasted no time at all and came walking through the door of the Dancing Ocelot the very next day, as if to prove what Sylvester had said. Today he was accompanied by a boy with black hair that had a bit of brown mixed in, and he seemed to pay no attention to Rita’s murderous glare, as they just parked themselves in front of the notice board. The board displayed local information and bounties sent by the temple of Akhdar, as well as requests posted by folks from around town. Looking at the two of them gave the impression that the youth was something of a novice being given a thorough lecture.

As he looked intently over the posted requests, the boy, Dale, voiced his thoughts.

“There sure are a lot of extermination jobs.”

“There’s a forest near this town where a lot of magical beasts live. There’s a lot of demand for ingredients from them, so apparently a good number of merchants interested in such things gather here in town.”

“Having a reliable supply of ingredients is essential for craftsmen, too...” Dale muttered, then he made a request of his “big bro.” “Could we try taking jobs like this for a while?”

“It sure is rare, hearing you say something like that.”

“I think I really am most suited to hunting-style work like this. And so I’d like to build up more experience, for when I eventually start working separately from you all.”

At first Kenneth couldn’t hide his surprise at this unusual request from his “little bro,” but then he went and ruffled Dale’s hair.

“Don’t treat me like a kid!”

“I do have to praise you for saying you’ll still rely on us rather than suddenly run off on your own.”

“It just sounds to me like you’re talking to a child...”

“When you’re managing a party, dividing up roles properly is a crucial skill. And I really did mean it when I said that was praiseworthy.”

Rita, having started listening in on the conversation at some point, thought to herself that they got along rather well. But then she came back to her senses and looked back down at the documents in front of her.

After all, it was like she was actually interested in him of all things, with the way she was looking their way and wondering what they were discussing. It was downright stupid paying him any heed. Like the sort of nonsense a drunk would ramble on about.

Yes, it was totally foolish to be the only one paying any attention.

She didn’t seem to realize that the fact she was trying so hard to act like she wasn’t paying any attention to them meant she actually was quite focused on them. As he gave an awkward smile at that side of the girl that he had never seen before, “Uncle Sylvester” moved from his usual table to the counter and called out to the pair of newcomers.

“I’ve never seen you before. I’ve been hearing tell around the eastern district that someone’s brought in dragon parts to town, but was that you folks?”

Dale wore a look of suspicion upon being suddenly approached by the stranger, but Kenneth put on a faint diplomatic smile.

“We just got lucky.”

“No need to be modest.”

“We managed to quickly find a prospective buyer, too. I guess that’s the second most prominent town in all of Laband for you.”

“Sounds like business is going smoothly, then.”

“Yeah, fortunately. So much so that I’d love to treat you to a drink after you introduce yourself, but I seem to have gotten on the waitress’s bad side, so I suppose I’d better leave that for another time.”

“Right,” Sylvester replied, lightly raising his hand in response.

Then, having finished with such pleasantries, Kenneth turned around and prompted Dale to head out of the shop.

However, at the very last second, he looked at Rita, who was still pointlessly shuffling around documents.

“Well then, see you later, Rita.”

“I’d prefer it if you never came again.”

Kenneth grinned wide, seemingly just happy to have gotten a response. As a result, Rita wasn’t able to look straight at him, and felt a sense of defeat that was hard to put into words.

“Well then, shall we start off by handling the request from the alliance of healers?” Kenneth asked with a smile as soon as they were out the door, but Dale was left with a number of questions. They weren’t anything serious, though, so he could just ask on the way. And so, that was just what he did, keeping up his pace so as not to fall behind the larger man.

Kreuz was laid out so that the main streets formed the same cross shape as the town itself, so it was easy for even outsiders to grasp more or less where they were, unless they wandered down the narrow alleys. It really was helpful, as it meant you needed to spend far less effort memorizing roads.

“There are other requests, so why did you pick that one?” Dale asked first, choosing a question related to work rather than one driven purely by curiosity.

“We’re not familiar with the layout or the state of the area. But if we can get some information from local parties who frequently head into the forest and match that up with jobs, then that’s killing two birds with one stone.”

“I see...”

His “little bro” looked innocent in a way that was fitting to his age as he nodded along, much as the lad would hate to have that pointed out. In fact, Kenneth had to force himself not to smile at how adorable the boy looked.

“So do you know that old-timer?”

“Not exactly, but he matches the details of someone I’ve heard rumors about.

I guess that's Kreuz for you, for a big shot like Mr. Delius to be hanging out like it's only natural."

"Delius...?"

"Even you must have heard of the adventurer named Sylvester Delius, right?"

"Huh...? A-Ah! Wait, he was a real person?"

"Yeah, most folks react like that."

"When you come from out in the country like me, he sounds just like a character out of tall tales meant for kids."

Minstrels sung tales of adventurers and epics. And the great tasks sung of in such stories often crumbled the boundaries between fact and fiction. Dale hadn't become an adventurer out of admiration for such tales, though, so he had never paid much attention to the adventurers who really did exist.

"When exactly did you have time to chase gossip anyway, Kenneth?"

"I managed to gather plenty of different bits of information even while you were staring at that notice board. Like in regards to Mr. Delius, let's see... He was seated at the same table both yesterday and today, so he shows up at the shop enough to have a fixed spot. And from how much attention he seemed to be paying to Rita, they're probably pretty close."

"So Rita's the name of that woman behind the counter...? When did you ask her that?"

"I didn't, I just heard other folks calling out to her. It's a wonderful name, isn't it?"

Apparently he had managed to gather all that crucial information in such a short period of time. That level of skill was worthy of praise, yet Kenneth had that sloppy grin on his face the whole time they were talking, so Dale ultimately just awkwardly averted his gaze. As he still hadn't spent all that long as a "little bro," he didn't have any clue how to properly quip at this entirely unfamiliar side of his "big bro."

Meanwhile, back in the Ocelot, Sylvester was holding out his empty cup towards Rita.

“You just haven’t had enough to drink.”

Rita’s cheeks were still a bit red as she silently filled up the cup.

Despite feeling somewhat complex emotions upon seeing that, Sylvester continued on, “Apparently, someone brought parts from an aquatic dragon into the eastern district yesterday. The passionate youngsters around there are even saying that because they don’t seem to have gone bad at all, it must have been a case of that group exterminating it rather than just stumbling on the corpse. That would definitely take some serious skill.”

“There haven’t been any requests to exterminate a dragon around here lately.”

“Right, and I’d imagine we should hear more before long. After all, it’d be a serious issue if their habitat shifted.”

“That’s for sure...”

“The guy in charge of the adventurer party who brought those parts in is called Tarnat. That’s the same name as a guy who I’ve heard specializes in guarding merchant caravans, and he has a pretty good reputation.”

“Huh...”

Rita kept acting as if she didn’t care at all, showing her overall stubborn personality. And so she started using the nearby Akhdar message board, seemingly looking for some sort of information among what came from the temple.

The daughter of his friend of many years had never reacted to someone like that before, so Sylvester found it no surprise at all that she was investigating him.

For folks without much rumors and reputation about them, if they were trying to keep it that way it was best not to openly take jobs around Kreuz, and they certainly shouldn’t come anywhere near this shop. So since he hadn’t done so, it certainly made things go easier.

And yet, though Kenneth and his friends did indeed have a reputation, she couldn’t find anything bad said about them no matter how much she dug. And

considering they were being requested by name for a number of guard jobs from merchant groups, they certainly seemed to have plenty of trust placed in them.

But considering the circumstances, the fact that there was nothing wrong with him was a problem in and of itself.

“I’d like to avoid having her hate me, but still... What should I do?”

Sylvester had known her for so many years now that he knew she wouldn’t back down even when dealing with hot-blooded, wild adventurers. With that thought, his old friend’s face came to mind and he gave a faint sigh.

After that, Kenneth’s party stopped taking on the guard jobs that were supposed to be their specialty, and instead began heading out into the forest where magical beasts dwelled, to the south of Kreuz. And yet, their reputation remained rather impressive all the while.

Since the magical beasts weren’t that common in the areas surrounding Kreuz, there was a strong tendency for the weak ones to gather in the forest. That went to show just how many adventurers gathered in the town. And in turn, that resulted in the forest having a greater variety and number of magical beasts than in regions where adventurers were never seen, making it far more dangerous.

If a party was able to venture deep inside, that was proof of just how skilled they were.

When they first took jobs in Kreuz they stayed on the outskirts doing basic hunting and gathering, but in no time at all they were going mid-way deep.

“Your magic sure is handy,” Helmut stated one day after they started working around Kreuz, sounding half astounded.

Dale’s Earth magic was almost *too* helpful when it came to exploring the forest. Even when it was an area they were supposedly visiting for the first time, Dale would never get lost or choose the wrong path. And on top of that, he could even grasp the terrain to a certain degree.

Those abilities really were a big reason they were able to proceed deep into the forest so unusually quickly. And his skills from growing up in Tislow were

even more effective in a forest or on a mountain.

However, Dale himself understood firsthand that wasn't the only reason.

"I think I probably personally have a strong affinity with this place."

"What do you mean?" Helmut questioned, while as magic users, Karel and Scipio immediately looked jealous.

"You mean an affinity with your divine protection, right?"

"I've heard magical beast habitats are generally brimming with the energy of the gods."

"By divine protection, do you mean that stuff that priests have? Does it really have that big of an effect?"

"My divine protection has a strong affinity with magic in the first place. And the divine energy from around here is from Quirmizi, Azraq, and... I think probably Akhdar. So yeah, it's having a pretty big effect. It's super easy for me to weave the mana I need."

Dale had received a portion of miraculous power from the gods Quirmizi and Azraq, but even he was surprised at how strong of an affinity he had for this place.

Normally, it wasn't recommended for adventurers to act on their own. The unusually high affinity of this land was a big reason that Dale would later come to carefreely do just that on a daily basis. In terms of earnings a guard job with a merchant caravan was more profitable, but since he was always able to catch his prey and turn a profit, it wasn't half bad.

As for Dale's training at the time, he was steadily getting some on-the-job experience at negotiating sales of his catches with the veteran merchants of Kreuz. At first, the merchants always managed to strike a one-sided bargain, but by now he was able to earn a definite profit.

He was getting such fulfillment from his everyday life, and yet from Dale's point of view at least, Kenneth's romance didn't seem to have made any progress.

"Rita, I'd like to hear about the fine details of this request," Kenneth called

out to Rita like it was only natural when visiting the Dancing Ocelot.

“The rule is that you are to negotiate directly with the client. Our shop doesn’t get in the middle of such things,” she answered in an incredibly blunt tone.

However, Kenneth just briefly replied, “I see,” and walked further into the shop. “Sorry, Sylvester, but I wanted to ask about this job. Do you know anyone who would be familiar with where the magical beast in question can be found?” he asked the regular.

Sylvester didn’t look displeased to be bothered in the least, and he placed his hand on his chin as he mulled it over.

Seeing how Kenneth and Sylvester had gotten so friendly at some point caused Rita to furrow her brow even further. However, the pair just kept on seriously discussing the job, paying the waitress’s bad mood no heed.

It was unbelievably frustrating.

Unable to suppress that feeling, Rita instead turned it into fuel to passionately tackle her work.

They were completely earnest. More so than any other party of adventurers Rita knew, they were totally serious about their work.

Whenever Kenneth addressed Rita, he had impeccable manners for an adventurer seeking work. If he uttered even a single vulgar word she was prepared to curse him and toss him out, but he always remained a perfect gentleman.

The dragon parts his party had brought into Kreuz had come from a port town by the name of Wal. Apparently a rare beast known as an agate-eyed dragon had taken up residence in the harbor and brought the town’s business to a screeching halt until they took it down. Thanks to their careful preparations in fighting it, they managed to defeat the massive dragon with hardly any damage to the town, and apparently a number of minstrels were already singing a new epic song based on the event. They asked for their just reward to be the remains of the beast, but they didn’t ask for any further payment from the town. Since fishing had stopped, the economy of Wal had also stalled out, and

so it would have a serious effect on the town if they had to pay a fitting reward for taking down a dragon. The party's chivalrous actions in keeping that in mind was another big reason their tale was getting sung.

Their reputation around Kreuz was also steadily on the rise.

Even Sylvester's friendly reception was based on what he had seen of their work ethic.

It really did seem like no matter what job they took on, they would fulfill it quickly and honestly. By now they were getting repeat clients, with some of them even occasionally inquiring if they could ask for the group by name. Rita had never heard of such requests coming in this short of a period of time before.

Rita slid her hand over the Akhdar message board again today, clearly unable to hide her irritation all the while.

If she hated him, then she just had to not look and have nothing to do with him.

And yet, Rita was abusing her position to gather information, for some reason she couldn't explain. Ultimately, her excuse to herself was that she was just being picky and feeling a need to deal with the questions that occasionally came to mind.

"It'd be a bad joke if someone were to say it's because I have feelings for him..." she muttered without thinking.

Then, she reaffirmed it. That was a joke. Yes, of course it was... After all, ever since they first met, he didn't try to hit on her or flatter her.

And she didn't want that either. No, definitely not.

But still, it was frustrating. It just wasn't fair, that she was the only one worrying so much about it.

"Well then, I'm off, Rita."

"I hope you never come back."

That was why she had thrown such words back at him again today. It was clear that she had completely given up on offering the sort of friendliness you

would expect of someone in the service industry.

But still, if he came again tomorrow...

“This job looks like it’s going to be a bit of trouble. You mind worrying about me a bit, Rita?”

“Of course I won’t. In fact, it’d be refreshing never having to see your stupid face again.”

She didn’t have any expectations, of course. But still, if he came yet again...

It was quite sudden when Kenneth’s party stopped showing up.

He had just said he would come again tomorrow, then he left the shop like normal. How had she responded to him, though...?

She had known for some time that the party wasn’t exactly based out of Kreuz to begin with. And it wasn’t exactly as if she could ask as to their whereabouts, either.

The days passed by, but she was too afraid to gather information on them.

She was well aware that adventurers would often disappear suddenly. It was a job that sat side by side with danger, and since she was born as the daughter of this shop’s owners, she had always known what that meant.

And so, she covered her ears. There could be all sorts of information flying about this shop that she didn’t want to hear.

And Sylvester was always in his regular spot, but he wasn’t there today. A few days prior he had received some information and left the shop with a heartbroken look on his face, and it seemed he had been around to various places since then handling some sort of work.

Even in the middle parts of the forest, powerful magical beasts would at times wander through from deeper in. Countless parties of adventurers had been wiped out through such run-ins.

When Sylvester and his allies heard that such a magical beast had reached the shallowed parts of the forest, they hurriedly rushed to come up with a plan to handle it.

Among the parties that fell victim to it were those who could even manage just fine midway into the forest. And so, they entered a state of high alert, barring inexperienced adventurers from entering the forest at all.

Even skilled fighters were falling.

One may have the skill needed to defeat a dragon, but if they were suddenly attacked in an unexpected place, there was no guarantee they would be able to deal with that.

Plus, Rita knew without having to ask that this incident had occurred around where Kenneth's group was most active.

She was well aware of all that. And yet, she didn't want to face the reality.

"If things were going to turn out like this, should I have at least told him to come back safely...?" she whispered, surprising even herself with how weak her voice sounded.

Kenneth at last appeared again before the emotionally overwhelmed Rita half a month later.

"You're alive...?"

Kenneth tilted his head at that sudden question, clearly not understanding where it was coming from.

As for Rita, she was shocked at how much her voice trembled as she confirmed what she was seeing.

"Seems like it's been pretty crazy here in Kreuz. We've been on a request from a merchant caravan we're acquainted with, escorting them to the capital, but I heard plenty of rumors along the way," Kenneth stated in sympathy, assuming Rita's trembling voice had a different cause entirely.

To Rita's ears, even those words felt totally unreal, and she sat there in a daze.

"I heard it was a massive enough snake that it could swallow large trees whole, right? And apparently a big group banded together in order to take it down. Dale from our party really wanted to participate, so he was disappointed not to get the chance. Ah right, I had been hearing there were some bandits

active lately along the highway, but we didn't run into anything like that on the round trip. Could you update that information?"

Kenneth had kept on talking away because Rita hadn't replied, but when he looked at her face again, he was taken aback. She was so strong-willed and always wore a look of confidence, but now tears were streaming down her face onto the counter.

He had no idea whatsoever what he had done to cause her to cry. And he was utterly disgusted at himself when he realized he wasn't even being caring enough to offer her a clean handkerchief to use.

"R-Rita...?"

"It's nothing."

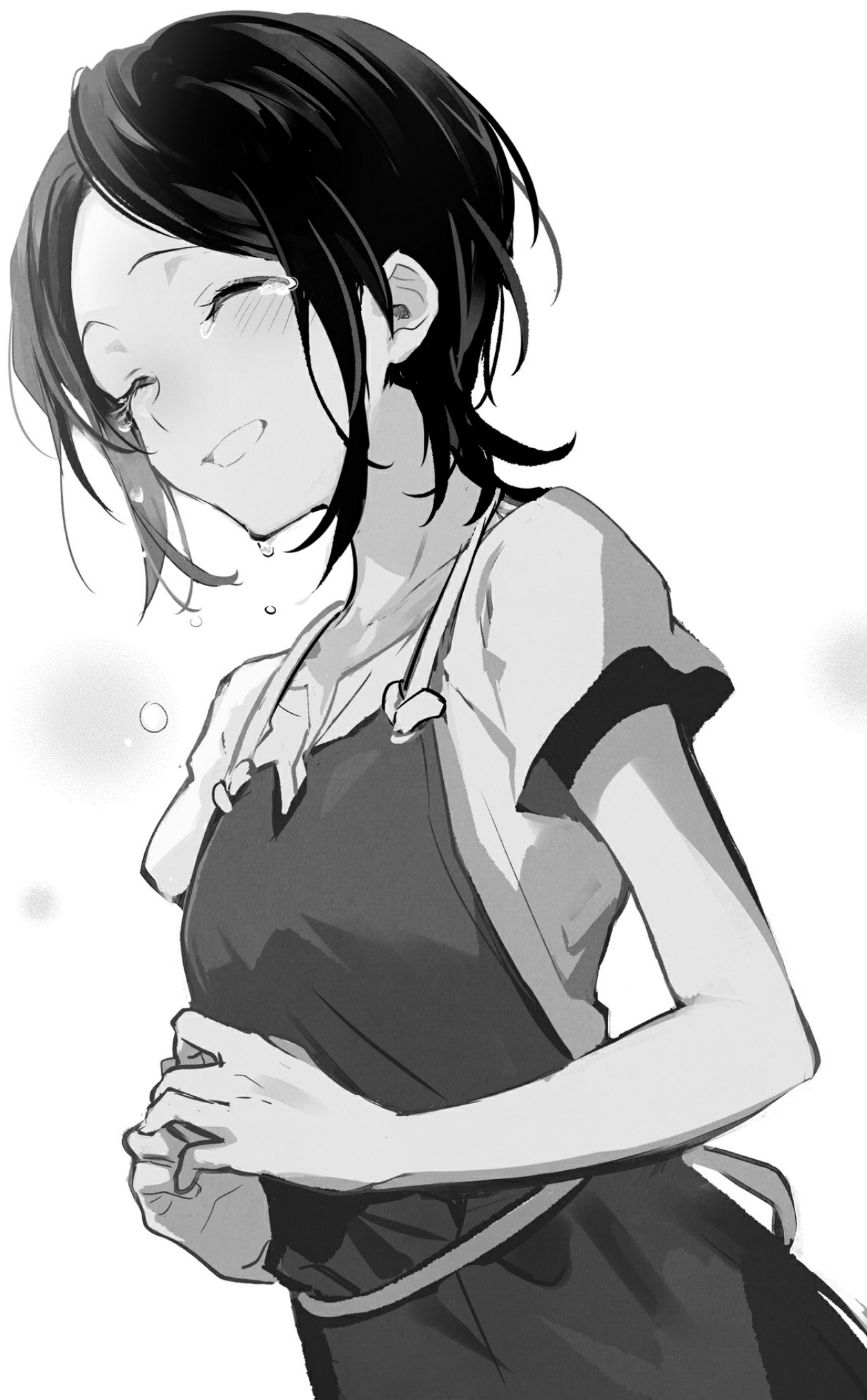
"You say that, but I mean, look at you..."

"I told you it's nothing, so it's nothing."

That reply at least had some of her usual toughness, which caused Kenneth to feel seriously relieved. As that showed clearly on his face, Rita shot him back a smile even as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"You made it back safely, so it's nothing... Welcome home."

That was the first time Kenneth saw Rita smile, and it was so charming that he felt himself fall for her all over again.



Dale's tale of the past seemed to have seriously stirred up Latina's curiosity.

She saw all the people around her as adults, but even they were once children. That observation was hardly profound, but she hadn't really considered it until now.

"Theo and Emma were babies, but they've grown so big. And I guess it's that way with everyone, but it still feels strange somehow."

"And you were so small that your hands couldn't reach the top of the tables, little lady," Sylvester said while his eyes narrowed.

Hearing that, Latina pouted just a bit as she held out a cup full of freshly poured tea.

From back behind the counter, Rita smiled a bit at the sight of Sylvester acting like a doting old man looking at his granddaughter.

The regular was as much a fan of drinking as he'd been when Rita's father ran the place, but thanks to a certain adorable waitress personally preparing it, now his usual glass of booze was replaced by a teacup half the time. Latina herself didn't seem to realize the impact she had there, though.

"Mr. Syl, you knew Rita when she was a child?"

"Since before that, even, since her old man and I were childhood friends. And even when I started heading all over for work, I would still make frequent stops in this shop to gather information, so we've known each other for a long time. Thanks to that, I've known Rita ever since she was born."

"Ooh, Rita as a baby...?" Latina questioned with a tilt of her head.

"I mean, even I was one once, yeah," Rita quipped back.

Even so, Latina still looked like she was deep in thought.

"Hmm... So was it like when Emma was that small?" Latina asked, seeming like she was pushing her imagination to its limits.

"Nah, she was just like little Theo," Sylvester answered, straight-faced.

"That must be because of the hair color, right?"

Their son had his mother's black hair, while their daughter Emma got her blonde hair from her father. And that fine, soft hair of hers wasn't too much like her mother, either.

"I wouldn't say that was all. Theo cried the exact same way, too. All of us old family friends thought for sure a boy had been born when we heard it and prepared a celebration, so we were left real flustered when we found out they had a daughter."

Apparently, Rita's strong nature had been there since birth.

"So you celebrated a girl... But Rita just isn't that girly, so I find it hard to imagine..."

"My dad wanted to put me in clothes like that. My own tastes certainly turned out differently, though."

Rita had no interest in girly clothing, but she didn't have a strong hatred for it or anything either. After all, there was no need to reiterate how deeply she enjoyed dressing up the adorable little Latina in cute outfits.

"Back when Rita was around Emma's age, she got dressed in frilly stuff."

"No way," Rita replied, looking shocked.

"What would be the point in lying about that?" Sylvester replied.

Watching that exchange, Latina returned to her original question, which she then asked while doing her signature little head tilt.

"Mr. Syl, did you know Dale back when he was a kid?"

"We didn't meet Dale till he'd already become an adventurer, and first visited this shop."

"Kenneth would stop by Dale's home village back when he lived there, so he should have known him back when he was a good bit younger."

"I see..." Latina muttered, then shifted back to a serious expression. "Hmm... It really does feel a bit frustrating, somehow..."

"If you keep saying stuff like that, you'll end up like Dale."

"Like Dale...?" Latina questioned.

Rita replied, sounding truly astounded, “I mean, he feels seriously competitive with your sister. Like, he was honestly frustrated whenever she mentioned how she knew how you were back in your old home and the like.”

“I think Chrysos is at fault there, too...” Latina advocated for her husband while trying to remain an impartial judge, since she knew her sister actively tried to stir him up.

“Actually, I should say he was more beyond all help rather than merely being frustrated, considering how insistent he was that you must have been absolutely adorable when you were even smaller than you were when you first got here.”

“Um...”

“You normally wouldn’t go saying stuff like that about your wife.”

“Ah, yeah... Even I have times where I’m not sure what to think, too.”

Ultimately, she didn’t go as far as to advocate for him. Hearing that, Dale slumped his shoulders.

But in the end, that side of Dale was an established fact, so that hardly came as a surprise.

“Well, I also figure you were definitely awful cute when you were that tiny, Latina.”

“I’m sure you two must have been the apple of your folks’ eyes when they saw you and your twin sister standing next to each other.”

“Huh?”

When Latina had first arrived they thought from her manners that she must have come from a good family, and knowing of her origins now, they could tell how much overflowing love her parents had for her.

Though she’d cruelly lost everything, she’d simply missed her parents and the sister that she was separated from, rather than feeling any resentment. And that kind of gentle kindness didn’t come simply from being born into a prosperous family.

She had grown a great deal under her parents, and they surely had loved her

greatly. Even that doting fool of a former guardian had to admit as much.

“Anyway, once you start talking about stuff like that, it never ends. I mean, it’s not like I know every single thing about Kenneth’s past,” Rita concluded, not realizing that Latina was staring at her with great curiosity. That was at least in part because she had already returned to glancing over documents, though.

“I see... So Kenneth met Dale before he met Rita?”

“That’s right.”

“So how did Rita and Kenneth end up getting married? Which one of you confessed your feelings first?”

Sylvester was silently sipping tea, but then he glanced at Latina and crossed his arms. Then, he immediately came to the conclusion that he shouldn’t go answering those questions.

“Maybe Kenneth would tell me if I asked him?”

Perhaps Latina didn’t have the idea to ask Rita because she had spent so long acting like a little sister to the woman.

Sylvester had been ambiguous about the matter out of consideration for the couple running the place, but in a way that hadn’t really been necessary.

“Kenneth, how did you end up marrying Rita?” Latina asked Kenneth as they were busy with preparations.

“I mean, it all started with me falling for her, of course,” Kenneth immediately responded, not faltering in the least.

“Wah...” Latina replied, blushing slightly at such a direct response.

“And after that, I didn’t give up until she accepted. That’s all.”

“I sort of get the feeling that I can really understand now that you were Dale’s mentor...”

“If you go around comparing me to him, then I’ll have all sorts of things to say about that.”

Even now that a few years had passed, it was still a topic of discussion around the shop that Dale’s reaction to Latina’s confession was feeling so shaken he

full-on retreated using work as an excuse. He was a historic hero who would charge off against a demon lord all on his own, but he wouldn't hesitate to turn tail and flee again if he ever got in a fight with Latina and made her seriously angry.

"If she full-on hated me, I would just have to politely withdraw. But still, Rita's stubborn side is pretty adorable..."

Latina thought to herself as she peeled potatoes that the pair hadn't hidden their affection for each other, even back when she was little. Despite all that, her hand didn't slip at all as she skillfully wielded her kitchen knife, no danger there.



“I could tell from her reactions that she didn’t really hate me, though. So all that remained was for me to do my best.”

“Your best?”

“I promoted myself while earning as much of a profit as I could, ’til her old man accepted me.”

“Promoted yourself...?”

“With my skills at handling the kitchen to start with, as well as managing inns and bars. Thanks to Sylvester making some introductions, I helped out from time to time whenever any restaurants or pubs around Kreuz were short-handed, and gradually built up a good reputation.”

“That sort of work sounds interesting...”

“Honestly, it was pretty informative being able to see how other kitchens did things. You’d be an immediate asset, so I’m sure anywhere would be glad to have you.”

Kenneth’s words sounded awful realistic, so Latina had a terribly serious expression on her face as she thought them over.

“I think Dale would say it was absolutely impossible, though. I can’t imagine he would be alright if you were holed up in a kitchen,” Kenneth added, making sure to put a stop to things before they went too far.

“That certainly could prove tricky.”

Since she had grown famous, there was no guarantee that she would be able to spend her time in peace in a shop that didn’t have so many people looking out for her, like this one. Latina seemed to realize that too, as she shot Kenneth back a bit of a disappointed smile as she replied.

And with that, Latina’s curiosity seemed to be satisfied at last. That was the conclusion Dale had come to when he looked at her.

It was Latina’s daily habit to report on what happened that day up in their personal room in the attic, but today, she seemed like she just wanted to wrap everything up with that summary. And as was his specialty, Dale found her unusual seriousness about the matter absolutely adorable.

“Personally, I find it hard to picture Kenneth back when he was an adventurer. But for you, he was the man who mentored you on the job, right?”

“I suppose that’s true, when you put it like that.”

“And also, I had a bit of a thought...” Latina said, trailing off for the moment and looking a bit bashful. Her cheeks were dyed red, and she was staring at Dale with upturned eyes. “Devils and humans have very different cultures, so I think my parents had a bit of a different sort of relationship... So to me, Kenneth and Rita were probably my role models in terms of what a married couple looks like.”

“Hmm... I’m not really sure how to respond to that...” Dale said, looking at a bit of a loss. Latina, however, just broke out in a smile like a blossoming flower.

“I guess my goal is for us to be so happy of a couple that we don’t lose out to them!”

Naturally, there was only one reaction Dale could have to that.

As the night stretched on, he didn’t even stop to quip that their passion had already surpassed that of the couple she had been following in the footsteps of.

3: A Small Secret Tale From Around the Story's End

"Right, got it. Hold on a minute. That won't do!" she boldly declared, slapping both hands down on the stone table.

"Rgh..." the young woman who ruled a nation replied, clearly discontent.

Due to differences in culture and a desire to gather information, the devil country of Vassilios had sent a group of envoys to their new ally, the nation of Laband.

This tale occurs just a bit before that.

Sylvia Fal had come to the nation of Vassilios to gather information, per the calling of an Akhdar priestess, about everything from social systems to customs, as well as the everyday lives of people there. It was a task that she both felt was worth doing and was in line with her personal desires, so she spent each and every day feeling greatly fulfilled.

One day, Sylvia received a summons from the Golden King who ruled the nation.

Sylvia was quite well informed. She already knew that Vassilios was in the process of selecting members for an envoy group, and that, though it would normally be unthinkable, the nation's ruler intended to accompany them. And so, she assumed she was being specifically summoned for her knowledge on the state of things in Laband.

The place she was summoned to was the king's personal office.

Devil culture favored simple furnishings, but the king's office was still quite luxurious. Yet it remained far from gaudy, with the impression coming more from the carved stone pillars and the table made from a massive gemstone, showcasing both exceptional craftsmanship and high quality materials.

It was in this office that Sylvia made her loud proclamation.

When she was told to calm down, she brought her forefinger to her brow and

sunk deep into thought. It looked a bit like she was trying to massage wrinkles out of her skin.

She had something of an aloof personality, and normally she would never get in a verbal argument with someone else like this. Plus due to Chrysos being her friend's sister, she felt close to the girl, but she still had her limits.

Ultimately, those words that slipped out without thinking were from pure agitation.

"I know that you're accompanying the envoys to Laband," she said, counting down on her fingers as she confirmed the facts of the matter. "And I get that you want to stealthily travel around Laband."

It was of course not standard at all for a nation's ruler to accompany a group of envoys to a country with whom they were just in the preliminary steps of opening relations, and on top of that Chrysos had declared she would be acting in secret on her own.

It was an utterly impossible state of affairs to accept. And yet, Sylvia had no doubts about all that. Taking into account Chrysos's personality and the fact that she was Latina's sister, there seemed no point in questioning it. In fact, it totally sounded like something she would do.

After all, she was aloof on a level that defied normal measurements.

"But that just makes this all the more impossible."

"Grr..."

"Even if you make that face, it won't change anything."

Chrysos's annoyed expression lacked any of the dignity you would expect from the ruler of a nation. Still, it had a childlike simplicity matching her age, a look that both she and her sister found quite natural.

Chrysos was wearing a cat-eared hood at the moment.

It was all well and good to be eccentric. If that was all, Sylvia wouldn't have been shaken in the least. And in fact, as she was an aloof beauty just like Sylvia's good friend, the look actually suited Chrysos rather well.

No, what Sylvia had a problem with was the fact that Chrysos proposed this as

suitable attire for blending in.

It would obviously draw attention. There was no way that Sylvia was wrong about that.

“The attire of Vassilios and Laband differ greatly.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“And there should be no issue with the members of a group of envoys wearing the clothing of their nation.”

“That’s also true.”

Understanding one another’s cultural differences was a key prerequisite for two nations opening relations. There was no need for one side to force themselves to follow along entirely with the other’s culture.

But that was different when the topic was stealth.

That was all about blending into where you were staying, attempting not to stand out any more than is necessary. And so, it was necessary to match your attire with that of the local culture.

With just personnel from Vassilios, it would be impossible to know what clothing would seem natural in Laband. That was precisely why Sylvia had been summoned, but the candidate presented to her was a cat-eared hood, which left her unable to give anything but a stern retort.

However, Chrysos’s face remained plastered with a confident look of triumph.

“This is the traditional, storied sneaking attire of Vassilios.”

Chrysos took the matter so seriously because her late mother, the highly talented priestess who she greatly respected, had once personally prepared such hoods for that purpose. Her high regard for her own mother was precisely why her expectations on the subject were so biased.

There was, of course, no tradition of cat-eared hoods being used for stealth in Vassilios, but there was a definite risk of Sylvia taking the claim seriously, considering how Chrysos had presented it.

Their mother Mov was one thing, but their father Smaragdi would have

assuredly chimed in. He would have clarified that while Mov certainly chose that style of clothing, it was not at all due to some sort of tradition.

“And it holds great significance that they are cat ears, not bear ears.”

It was clear from her expression that Chrysos was being deadly serious. Sylvia, therefore, opted to change the subject, even if she was a little forceful in doing so. After all, if she let Chrysos head towards Kreuz dressed like that, she would have a lot of explaining to do.

She talked a lot about sneaking around, but ultimately if she made it to Latina’s place, there shouldn’t be any further issues. After all, there would be plenty of people to look after her at the Dancing Ocelot. So even if she stood out a bit after that point, it should be fine. The folks who gathered there would surely figure something out. And so, she could just wear the cat-eared hood then.

Having come to that conclusion, Sylvia then decided to make a clear strike at one of Chrysos’s weaknesses, which she had learned through her relationship with the king up until now.

“You see, Latina likes dresses like this...”

“Hmm?”

Just as expected, she took the bait. This demon lord really did have a serious sister complex.

In terms of clothing, Latina preferred lightly colored, feminine, well-coordinated outfits. When she was little she wore a lot of dresses with frills and ribbons fitting to her adorable appearance, and it seemed that was ultimately the sort of fashion she preferred.

Plus Latina’s aloof nature seeped out into her appearance, making such outfits really suit her.

As she looked at Chrysos once the girl tried on the dress in question, Sylvia thought to herself that if she had already gone and prepared clothing in the Labandese style, she should’ve just worn that to start with.

And also, she couldn’t help but think that the king in front of her now really

did closely resemble her good friend.

The light-colored dress with flowing sleeves undoubtedly suited Chrysos well. It was the sort of look that would be fitting for the daughter of a well-off family.

“Hmm...” However, Sylvia tilted her head and crossed her arms. “Is it because your personalities are different...? It looks good, but still... Something’s off...”

And yet, she couldn’t put her finger on just what it was.

She couldn’t help but feel that if her other friend who specialized in such things were here, she would be able to point it out right away.

Is Chloe doing alright...? Well, I suppose there’s no need to worry about her, of all people.

She was surely back on her feet by now, considering Latina had returned safely and all her concerns were dealt with. She came to that optimistic conclusion because of the information she had obtained and the fact that her friend wasn’t the type to go about whining about things.

“If you’re talking about sneaking around, it may be good to prioritize clothing that’s easy to move in...”

That meant a sporty style with pants. Then, match that with a top that wasn’t overly flashy.

“Or since you just need to make it to Kreuz, you could dress like an adventurer...”

This time, Sylvia went with a robe that covered her whole body and was equipped with a large hood, making her look like a magic user. The hood definitely made sense as a way to hide her horns without having anyone question it.

With that, Sylvia clutched her head in her hands again.

Every last one of them suits her...!

She had had such thoughts regarding Latina in the past, too.

The twins had incredibly beautiful figures and long, pale hair, so every style imaginable looked good on them. That went for everything from sporty looks to

everyday clothes from about town, to even elaborate dresses worn in the uppermost extremes of high society.

They all suited her, but something felt off about each of them. And that was why she hadn't yet come to a decision.

"Hmm..." This type of stuff really was more Chloe's field. "What would Chloe say at a time like this...?" she muttered, her friend's face popping up in the back of her mind as she did so.

For Latina, bolder colors tended to suit her. They gave a stronger contrast that really let her platinum hair shine. She also tended to prefer flowing dresses, but something tighter that showed off her curves would obviously look good on her. But because of her childish tastes, pretty much all the stuff she wore had frills and ribbons and the like. Still, it wasn't like it inherently made you more mature to choose outfits with a high level of exposure.

Well ultimately, when it came to fashion, it was also fine to just wear what you prefer however you like. The folks who made the clothing probably simply preferred that people wore clothing that suited them, and looked good in it.

She got the feeling that she had been told all that with a great deal of enthusiasm at some point in the past.

"Hmm...?"

Now that she thought of it, she recalled there being a time when Latina consulted with Chloe about wanting to try out mature, high-class designs different from her typical attire. That speech she was just remembering had come from back then. So that was it.

"Huh?"

Chic colors that made platinum hair stand out... Simple contours with frills and ribbons, making for a girlish outfit... Even setting aside Latina's personal preferences, stuff like that looked good on her. And thinking back to Latina at that time, even though she was a bit less curvy than most, she was able to deal with that.

"Hmm?"

Chrysos and Latina were a lot alike.

So that's it, Sylvia thought to herself as she looked at Chrysos.

A dress in a deep color with a simple design. And yet, one that was finely and delicately crafted, and had very feminine curves to it. Matched with that, a brilliant red bolero. It also had a simple design, but had a lustrous texture that displayed what wonderful material it was made of.

Wearing a hat to cover her horns was an effective defensive measure, so as not to draw unnecessary questioning gazes. The one for the outfit was made out of the same material as the bolero. It had a small brim and was actually initially meant for men to wear while hunting, but thanks to its rounded design it started to see use among female adventurers and then women in general. And so, it wouldn't cause her to stand out in any sort of problematic manner.

From what her one friend had said, it also made sense for a woman to appeal to the fact that they were an adventurer and magic user when traveling alone, as a way to keep away any trouble. And so, Sylvia added a magic user's staff to the ensemble.

"I think that does it..." Sylvia said with a sigh of relief, having finally decided on a direction.

When she saw Chrysos in the outfit she had entirely coordinated, Sylvia felt she had earned a passing mark. In the back of her mind, she could see Chloe giving her a thumbs-up and saying, "Good job!"

"You should be good to sneak around dressed like this."

"I see."

"You're unlikely to stand out to an unusual degree in Laband."

She was obviously sure to stand out somewhat due to her personal appearance and actions, but the folks at the Dancing Ocelot would figure out something to do about that. Or at least, Sylvia wrote it off as such and left the problem for them to deal with.

She had avoided the cat-eared hood. And so, she had done her part of the job. But she pleaded in her mind that if she decided to wear it anyway, they

would handle it.

As that thought ran through her head, she suddenly wondered to herself just what would happen if her friend's doting fiance found out about the existence of the cat-eared hood.

"..."

He was sure to have an annoying reaction.

The man may have been hailed as a champion by the world at large, and his accomplishments and overall character were fitting of that praise. And yet, Sylvia also knew that he had earned the nickname of "deplorable hero," too. Ultimately, Dale's words and deeds had just been far too awful here in Vassilios.

"Did I actually go and do an amazing job here...?" Sylvia muttered without thinking.

"Hmm?" Chrysos questioned with a tilt of her head, but paid it no heed in the end and soon set about giving orders for heading out to Kreuz as soon as possible.

In this way, Sylvia and Chloe managed to prevent an incident of a certain deplorable running wild before Vassilios and Laband could open official relations. It was a great service done that would surely never appear in the annals of history, and Chloe herself had utterly no idea of her involvement.

4: A Certain Tale of the Little Girl From Around the Story's Start

Ever since Latina was little, she had shown a great fascination with food.

The state of her birth country of Vassilios was actually a big reason for that. It was an arid region unsuited for farming, and was still heavily influenced by the conservative rule of the previous demon lord. As it had shut itself off from other nations and wasn't involved in trade, that had left it lacking severely in culinary tradition.

Thanks to all of that, the food she had known ultimately prioritized providing the nutrition needed to live above all else.

Latina didn't learn what delicious food really was until she first came to Kreuz.

She couldn't help feeling that, while she had been cruelly exiled from her home nation and had met with great misfortune, she had at least been fortunate when it came to food. And she felt blessed to have gained Kenneth as a mentor, too. He may have run a bar in the rough part of town, but the level of skill he showed off at the Dancing Ocelot was far greater than one may expect from that fact. He could likely get hired at a high-class restaurant if he wished, but instead he preferred to use his skills as he pleased, as a doting husband.

Adding to that the harmonious nature of the place, it really may have been the perfect environment for the young Latina to be raised in.

By nature Latina was a bundle of curiosity, but also quite serious and a hard worker. And when she first ate Kenneth's cooking, it left an impression so powerful it could be referred to as culture shock. So it really was no surprise that she ended up so fixated on the matter.

One day when Latina was not yet nine years old, Kenneth asked her a question.

"Do you have any interest in the animal farm where I get supplies from?"

“Farm...?”

She may have been smart, but she was still so young that it was no surprise that there was lots out there she didn't know.

And so, Kenneth maintained his polite manner as he kept talking to his little disciple.

“To be precise, it's actually a farm that has a contract with the butcher I use. But it's a place where the livestock who become meat are raised.”

“Meat,” she repeated with a nod, absorbing what he had said. Since she had a different mother tongue, Latina often took some time to understand and reply, but she sure looked like an adorable little animal all the while.

“Meat is yummy,” she firmly stated while clenching her little fists, which was a bit different than the reaction Kenneth had expected.

“Do you know what sorts of animals live on a farm?”

“Cows, pigs, chickens... And sheep and goats...” she replied, counting out on her fingers as she named them. When he had heard enough, Kenneth went ahead and tapped her second and third little folded fingers.

“Do you want to go see where pigs and chickens are kept? Does that sound interesting?”

“Animals!” Latina exclaimed, her eyes sparkling now that she understood the proposal.

Kreuz was a town, so pretty much the only animals around were those kept as pets and the like. And so, in her everyday life Latina generally only got to see dogs and cats, as well as the horses and donkeys used for transport. However, as she was quite fond of reading picture books and the like, she was familiar with many more types of animals than other children her age.

And so, her strong curiosity meshed together with her love of all sorts of creatures.

“Latina wants to see animals!”

Perhaps because she understood her position as a young child, Latina tended to politely hold herself back, so it was a nice change to see her openly

expressing her desires.

As that thought ran through Kenneth's head, he also carefully thought out his words so they would be easy for the girl to understand.

"It's important to properly understand where the things we eat each and every day come from. Do you get that?"

"Hmm. Studying the important steps before cooking?"

"So that's what you're thinking, huh? Well, that's not wrong either."

The fact that she was able to think up such an answer despite her youth showed that she had a promising future ahead of her. Sensing that, Kenneth smiled and patted his young disciple on the head.

However, though Latina showed clear interest in Kenneth's proposal, the young man who acted as her guardian disapproved.

"Isn't Latina still a little young for that...?"

Surprisingly, the reason Dale was knitting his brows actually wasn't because it would mean Latina enjoying herself somewhere where he wasn't around.

Dale took his eyes off of Kenneth, who had just finished explaining, and turned around. There, he found Latina with a picture book spread out atop the shop's counter. Naturally, it was one containing portraits of animals. It seemed she was getting in a quick study session to prepare. After that glance at the young girl greatly enjoying herself, Dale turned back towards Kenneth.

"Latina's a big animal lover. But it's not like farm animals are kept because they're cute. I was born and raised out in the countryside, so I was always used to the sight of what happens to game and livestock, but that's not the case for kids who grow up in town."

He didn't want to see Latina's pure, gentle heart get hurt.

As always, Dale's doting upon his foster child showed clearly in his every action and word, causing Kenneth to give an awkward chuckle. Dale was certainly overprotective, but that clearly came from genuine concern for the girl. And honestly, this wasn't a completely misdirected worry for a guardian to have.

“Still, Latina really does have her act together, so I decided she should be able to handle it. Plus, my go-between got me permission to come observe, but they have their own schedule to worry about too, so there’s no telling when the next opportunity may be.”

“I guess that’s true.”

Dale could understand Kenneth’s points, so his expression softened a bit. Because he was such a doting idiot, he could tell that the proposal would be a good opportunity for Latina to learn.

“Ziege isn’t that far from Kreuz by carriage. In fact, it’s a rare opportunity to head out of town, and it’s close enough to be just a day trip.”

“Right. Ziege, huh?” Dale said with a slight understanding nod, repeating the name Kenneth had mentioned.

Ziege was a neighboring town to Kreuz. It was a land where agriculture thrived, and alongside Haase to the north, it supplied food to Kreuz. And since it was closer than Haase, it provided the majority of vegetables that passed through the town.

Thanks to the flow of goods, the highway between the two places was also well maintained. As long as they rode in a carriage, there would be no issue taking the young Latina on such a trip.

“Normally I’d want to go introduce myself to them to start with, so I came up with the proposal of bringing Latina along while I was heading there. I’ll take responsibility and watch out for—”

“I’m going too.”

“Ah, but it’s close, and it was such a sudden decision. You don’t have to trouble yourself to—”

“No, I’m telling you I’m going too, so it’s fine. I’ll watch out for Latina.”

Dale worked diligently as an adventurer, taking on jobs pretty much every day. That was why Kenneth had intended to take charge of Latina as long as he got permission, but Dale firmly rejected that consideration.

“It’s Latina’s first big outing.” He had expected such a statement. However,

Dale then drew closer with a deadly serious expression on his face, not showing even a hint of a smile. “Heading out of Kreuz will be a fresh experience for her. Something that she’ll remember for years to come. As if I’d let something like that happen without me around. I could never accept such a thing.”

His gaze was fixed.

However, Kenneth had certainly foreseen this possibility, so it didn’t exactly come as a surprise.

When Dale was a pain, he was *really* a pain. And since he would probably be the same way when they got there, Kenneth had been hoping he could take charge of the outing on his own.

And so, Kenneth went ahead and chose to hurriedly distract Dale’s attention.

“About Latina’s outfit for the outing... It’ll be important to choose something easy to move in that can get dirty, right?”

Even he thought that shift in conversation was way too much of a stretch. And yet, Dale stopped and seriously thought about it, going so far as to deeply furrow his brow and cross his arms. All the while, he stared at Latina, who was enjoying her picture book so much that she had moved on to drawing pigs and sheep and the like on a big sheet of paper.

After not moving for a bit, Dale muttered in a low voice, “A dress with an apron...!”

Not that Kenneth cared in the least.

“We haven’t had lamb for a while, so how about we go with that for dinner tonight?”

The sheep Latina had drawn was extremely round and looked like it must have had wonderful meat.

In addition to stocking up, he would also have to visit the butcher to ask them to inquire about what time and date would be most convenient. And so, he would pick up some lamb meat then. With that thought in his head, Kenneth stood up and prepared to head out.

Latina must have been quite fond of the lamb meat roasted in breadcrumbs

and herbs and served on the bone, as she normally was a small eater, but this time around she asked for seconds.

The gentle rays of sunlight streamed warmth down upon them. Combined with the peaceful clopping sound of hooves and the gentle swaying of the carriage, it really did invite tiredness. The effect was so great that Latina had gone rapidly from jumping up and down with excitement to now wobbling unsteadily.

“If you’re tired, then you can just go ahead and sleep.”

“No...” Latina replied with a shake of her head, turning down Dale’s proposal even though she was nodding off.

Dale broke out in a bit of a strained smile, as he knew the reason she was so tired was because she got so excited for this outing that she couldn’t sleep properly last night.

For Latina, even this bit of transport was something she had been looking forward to. And so, she surely saw it as a waste to just go to sleep.

The one-horse carriage they had rented for today was a small one, having only two adult-sized seats in addition to the one for the driver. However, Kenneth sat up front and took the reins, so that meant there was enough space for both Dale and Latina to sit. And Latina was so small that there was plenty of room to spare. However, on the other hand, Dale brought along a lot of cushions. He had done so out of consideration for if Latina got sleepy along the way, but apparently she had no interest in such things.

Still, the tranquil sight of the bright blue sky and low vegetation stretching out around the highway was enough to incite drowsiness in anyone, not just Latina.

I could sleep, too, but... I just can’t get enough of watching Latina! So I’ve got no time for that.

Kenneth didn’t seem to be having any issues up in the driver’s seat.

Dale wouldn’t have minded a quick nap if he had the time, but he ultimately didn’t linger on that thought. After all, it would be one thing if he was resting alongside Latina, but as her guardian, he couldn’t miss out on the adorable sight of her desperately trying to stay awake.

“I don’t think she needs to be pushing herself, but I also want to applaud how she’s giving her all. It’s a tough one...” Dale muttered to himself.

“Hmm...?”

“You may be awake, but you’re talking like you’re half asleep,” Kenneth quipped from the driver’s seat.

They still weren’t far from Kreuz, but the scenery kept growing more and more tranquil. The seeds for the season must have only just been sown, as the rows of black soil stretching on for some distance looked incredibly soft. Past that was a field with buds and sprouts, and even further out were vegetables that were almost in season, just waiting for the harvest.

There didn’t seem to be a lot of land devoted to growing grain. However, since she had been taught it was the main ingredient in the bread she ate each and every day, Latina watched with great interest as budding stalks swayed along, not yet having turned golden.

As he watched over her, Dale felt like he understood why Kenneth had gone out of his way to bring Latina out of town.

Ziege wasn’t exactly remote enough to call completely out in the country. It wasn’t all that far from the large town of Kreuz, and a lot of people traveled there for both business and pleasure.

And so, the appearance of the town was carefully designed.

The outer walls of many of the town’s buildings were made from bright brown bricks. And the roofs were colored a slightly murky red, which gave the whole town a unified, bright aesthetic.

On the way there, they passed a great number of wagons. The fruits and vegetables heaped into them would surely show up at market in Kreuz soon enough.

“Latina, even if something catches your interest, don’t go running off on your own into the other fields.”

“Because they’ll think Latina is a thief?”

“That’s not all there is to worry about. But well, even with Kenneth, if a

stranger suddenly wandered into the shop's kitchen, he'd throw them out even if they weren't doing anything."

"For farmers, fields are where they work..." she said in understanding, giving an adorable little nod.

There were a number of reasons to be concerned about such matters, but as a young child, Latina didn't need to understand all that. She wasn't the sort to pull pranks, but she was still a little bundle of curiosity. So Dale was still concerned about what she may do, even if she wasn't really trying to cause trouble.

Before long, Kenneth stopped the carriage outside a house on the outskirts of town.

The buildings in Ziege were spaced out a great deal more than the ones in Kreuz. And their destination had not only a main house, but also other structures like sheds for livestock and storage. For Latina, this was all brand new to her.

"Wah..."

Unable to contain herself, Latina hopped on out of the carriage as soon as it stopped and she saw Kenneth get down from the driver's seat. As she did so, her green checkered skirt and frilly apron fluttered vibrantly in the wind.

The justification for the outfit was that it was alright to get dirty, but ultimately Dale was more finding excuses to dress Latina in cute clothing than anything. And it most certainly accomplished that goal.

Latina followed hot on Kenneth's heels as he hurried along, but sure enough her attention was darting all across her surroundings as they went. That included farm equipment that looked like it was in the middle of being used, a wheelbarrow full of feed, and even the unique smell coming from the livestock shed. Latina wanted to take her time and really take in each and every thing she noticed along the way. She looked genuinely torn between her desire to investigate and her attempt to keep up with Kenneth.

Dale, meanwhile, trailed along at the end of the line. That was because he wanted to both keep an eye on Latina to make sure she didn't get lost, and

watch her enjoying herself.

Out in front of the main house, there was a little home garden full of various plants that likely weren't meant for sale. That certainly caught Latina's attention, but she closely followed Dale's warning and didn't try to touch anything or even get unnecessarily close.

When he saw that, Dale couldn't help but break out in a bit of a smile.

Before Dale could act on his desire to hug Latina tight and praise her, there was a response to Kenneth's knocking. The door to the main house opened wide, and Latina's attention turned that way. In Kenneth's mind, that really had been just in the nick of time.

The house's owner was a quiet man who looked to be older than Kenneth. His rough, rugged fingers and tanned appearance were proof of a life of hard labor. The clothing he wore certainly wasn't extravagant, but it also showed no signs of being patched up. It may have been meant specifically for greeting guests, but still, that outfit alone was evidence of the house's wealth.

The butcher had gotten in contact in advance, but Kenneth and the man who introduced himself as Yang shared a brief, ordinary greeting. Afterwards, Kenneth turned around and called out, "Latina."

"Latina thanks you for this opportunity today," she stated clearly and politely after taking a step forward, despite being a bit nervous about meeting this new person for the first time.

Upon seeing that, Yang shot her back a bit of a smile.

"For now, step inside and have some tea."

"Ah, no, I already feel bad for taking up so much of your time."

After that brief exchange, Kenneth asked if they could be shown around first. He had told Rita that she could go ahead and close the shop down for the night, but he still wanted to get back before it got dark.

Yang didn't seem to mind at all, and took off walking at the head of the group after giving a slight nod in agreement.

Meanwhile, at the back of the line, Dale questioned why Kenneth had

suddenly thrown out this opportunity to fulfill Latina's curiosity about food production, but his uncertainty was short-lived.

"I see, so you mix that into the feed..."

"Dale, what is 'feed'?"

"It's food for farm animals."

Kenneth was actually listening a lot more intently than Dale had expected as they were shown around the livestock shed. Apparently bringing Latina along had just been an extra bonus alongside his real objective.

"The distribution seems different compared to normal feed, too."

"I've found through trial and error that the pigs end up nice and fatty this way."

It seemed like Kenneth's passion was contagious, as Yang had started out rather quiet, but was now clearly getting more and more into it.

"The piggies get a different dinner than elsewhere?"

"Ah, Latina... I'm actually not that knowledgeable, myself... Sorry..."

The young disciple seemed to have inherited some of her mentor's passion, so she tried asking her guardian to explain as she didn't understand all the words. Unsurprisingly, though, animal husbandry wasn't Dale's field of expertise.

Of course, Dale had seen farmers raising animals and tending fields back in his home village, as the land was well-suited to it. But as he'd been training to be the next clan head, he hadn't personally done such work.

"I only ever helped out when things got really busy..."

"Hmm."

Latina didn't know why, but she felt satisfied with that answer.

She didn't appear at all discouraged, but Dale still felt down about it. After all, he earnestly wanted her to see him as a reliable guardian who knew anything and everything.

"The piggies are really big."

“Yeah.”

Honestly, Dale felt relieved to see her express such childish interests. After all, he had been afraid that, deep down, Latina’s previous question had been driven by the same kind of professional curiosity that Kenneth had been displaying.

Latina stared at the pigs with their noses shoved in the feeding trough, chowing away, then she looked up at Dale with a big smile and said, “They’re really cute.”

“Yeah, but you’re even cuter,” Dale replied in very much his usual manner.

Immediately afterwards, Latina seemed to realize something and ran over to the neighboring fence, her eyes positively sparkling with glee.

“Piglets...”

Inside the fence was a grown mother pig surrounded by a number of clearly smaller ones. And those little ones all had faces that seemed somehow charming and innocent.

“Baby piggies... They’re so adorable...!”

Upon seeing her like that, Dale’s initial concern came boiling back up. Since he had known the man for many years now, Dale sensed that Kenneth would surely ask to see where the animals were dissected next. Of course, Dale couldn’t imagine even him showing animals getting slaughtered to such a young girl, but if she saw animals like the ones she just called adorable getting turned into chunks of meat, that could definitely leave some trauma.

How should he broach the subject, though?

As he worried to himself, Latina was leaning in so close she could practically touch them as she admired the piglets.

“Latina...” Dale called out.

“What is it?”

“So the piggies are cute?”

“Yeah!”

“Then it’s a good thing you got to see them.”

“Yeah!”

He wasn't exactly getting any closer to the question at hand.

After all, what he was trying to ask her wasn't exactly nice. And even if it was ultimately for her sake, it was a question that carried a risk of making her upset with him, so he didn't want to go throwing it out there lightly.

“It all started with me trying something with stuff that was set aside for disposal...”

“Right. Now that I think of it, I'd heard there was a pretty big harvest that year. So those were local specialties from around here, huh?”

It seemed Kenneth and Yang's conversation was still going strong. Dale had absolutely no idea what they were getting so worked up about though.

There was still time. Still, he couldn't use that as an excuse to keep avoiding it. After all, this was also his duty as her guardian.

“Hey, Latina...” he called out, firming up his resolve.

“Hmm?”

“Those cute animals you're looking at now are where the meat we eat each night comes from...” He didn't quite manage to pick his words properly, so he ended up hitting on the matter rather directly. But he couldn't take it back and he didn't have time to regret it, so instead he continued on. “Will you be able to keep on eating meat after seeing them alive like this, Latina?”

Dale was getting this nervous and taking such care because he knew how extremely kindhearted of a girl she was.

Living meant devouring other lives. That was true for all creatures, but Dale still didn't want to say something that would cause her gentle heart to suffer.

However, Latina's reaction wasn't what Dale had expected.

“Um, Dale...” she said before stopping for a bit to think, and then she voiced her opinion. “Being cute and tasty are different matters.”

“Huh...?”

It was just way too unexpected of a statement.

“They’re cute, but tasty too, so there’s no helping it. Food is important. If you don’t eat, you’ll die.”

Latina was always so cheerful, so it was hard to imagine such a dark statement coming from her. Even her gray eyes that normally sparkled with curiosity had darkened like she was staring into an abyss.



Ultimately, this showcased a side of Latina that Dale had forgotten, but Kenneth had firmly grasped.

In a way, Dale's reaction was understandable because Latina spent each and every day overflowing with joy, but she had almost died once from lack of food. If Dale had been even a bit later in finding her wandering around the forest after her father passed away, she could have been in real danger. Everyone who gathered in the Ocelot understood that. That was just how weak and malnourished Latina had been when she was brought to the shop.

Devils were a naturally hardy race, so once she was given proper nutrition and a place to rest, she recovered quickly. It likely also helped that Kenneth was in charge of cooking, as he was able to employ his sizeable knowledge to make sure she got suitable meals.

Latina had become so fixated on food not just as a result of culture shock, but also as a result of having been so food-deprived during the time she was alone and trying to survive.

Taking all that into account, her harsh and overly grounded reaction made sense.

"Even things that look strange are fine, as long as there's no poison," she muttered, sounding far too serious.

"Eh? Hold on, Latina...?"

"And if you're starving, you can eat grass. It's bitter, but it's fine if there's no poison."

"So the only thing that matters in determining if it's edible or not is if it's poisonous?!"

By the way, Latina was able to tell clearly whether or not a plant or animal was poisonous thanks to a sort of sixth sense she'd been born with. That power was also what had saved her when she entered the forest with her father, Rag, and had helped her survive after he passed away.

Dale had no idea she possessed that skill, though, so he came to the conclusion that she had done things to survive that most people never

considered. Honestly, he felt compelled to try lightening the mood with a joke or something.

But then, Latina started talking again, her eyes still looking like she was peering into an abyss.

“Even if it’s not tasty, you need to eat or you’ll die.”

“U-Um...”

“And so, there’s no helping it when something’s yummy.”

“Umm... yeah, I feel like I somehow have something I have to apologize for...”

Dale didn’t know what to say to a child that had been forced to acknowledge such harsh realities at such a young age.

Meanwhile, as Dale was learning about this new side of his adorable adopted daughter, Kenneth had apparently satisfied his curiosity.

The reason Kenneth had come all the way out here to Kreuz was because he noticed just a portion of the meat on offer at his usual butcher was clearly of a different quality. And according to the shop’s owner, all of it had come from the same farm.

“I figured there had to be some clear difference in how they were raised or fed. That’s why I wanted to come see in person.”

“Wah...”

“So you didn’t notice, Latina? I’ll have to prepare a meal where you can taste and compare them sometime.”

“Yeah!”

Latina looked incredibly cute as she responded, however Dale still had a bit of an awkward look on his face due to what she had said earlier.

When they were led to the chicken coop next, Latina once again looked to be really enjoying herself.

The birds were raised free range in a rather large open space, and they seemed rather wild even to an adventurer like Dale. And yet, Latina unsurprisingly showed no fear at all.

Yang then rather daringly grabbed a newborn baby chick and placed it into Latina's hands.

"Waaaaaaaah...!"

She could clearly feel the tiny bird's fluffiness and warmth.

Latina was obviously moved by the feeling of the tiny life atop her hands, but she didn't seem to know how to move, as she hadn't shifted in the least since the chick was handed to her.

It was Yang's first time meeting the girl, yet even he seemed to be quite charmed by the chain of events. She was polite, and didn't try to pull any pranks or tricks. In addition, she also appeared truly interested in everything that she was seeing for the first time. She may have been quite young, but it was clear that she truly wished to learn.

And so, Yang decided to have Latina help feed the chickens.

Normally it would be impolite to put visitors to work, but Latina was just so overflowing with curiosity about the livestock that he wanted to give her more of a chance to interact with them. However, Latina was a natural workaholic. And so, she took to it far more diligently than Yang had expected when he made the suggestion.

He only had to explain once about things like the type and amount of feed, location of tools and the like, and how to use everything and she would immediately understand.

And she certainly seemed happy as she got to observe the chickens up close throughout their large enclosure. She darted all about, working so quickly that you would think she had done the job countless times before.

She was just such a quick learner that everyone felt oddly willing to let her work to her heart's content.

That was likely the cause.

"Dale."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Now that I think of it, lately you've been..."

The question wasn't anything important. And yet, thanks to Kenneth calling out to Dale, all of the adults present had taken their eyes off of Latina.

It couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes in total.

She wasn't trying to do anything wrong, but Latina happened to exit the shed as if she'd been waiting for that very moment. It was just that she had run out of feed, so she was going to get some more. She had already done so several times, so she hadn't expected anyone to object.

However, something unexpected happened: Latina spied something moving out of the corner of her eye.

"Hmm?" she muttered, tilting her head.

Her assumption was that one of the chicks must have gotten loose. She had taken care when coming and going, but nothing was ever absolutely certain. Thanks to her quick-witted nature, she thought much more in terms of risk management than other children her age, causing her to hurriedly approach.

She peered into the grass. However, whatever it was that was moving seemed to be bigger than a chick. That at least caused her to feel relieved for the moment. At the same time, that meant that the tension drained from her body. And as that happened, she caught sight of the creature in question.

"A bunny..."

It was a small wild rabbit.

Latina was unable to hold back her excitement, and her expression positively sparkled.

Rabbits had such a cute appearance that they frequently were the subject of fairy tales the world over. And as an avid reader, Latina was familiar with many such tales and picture books. She had seen them many times in illustrations or as anthropomorphized characters, and they always looked so incredibly fluffy.

However, this was her first time ever seeing a rabbit in person.

"Bunny...!"

Even the way that it hopped away was just like she had seen in picture books. And so, it was only natural that Latina was feeling excited.

As a result, Latina ended up fixated on chasing the fleeing hare. Any thoughts of Dale or Kenneth objecting had completely vanished from her mind. Right now, her top priority was just not losing sight of the rabbit in front of her eyes.

“Light brown... Is it growing new fur...? The picture books said they make homes when raising their babies, so maybe Latina will be able to see little bunnies?”

The piglets she had seen just a bit ago were so very cute. And fluffy baby rabbits were sure to be even cuter.

Her head was full of such thoughts about rabbits.

Latina may have been a clever girl, but she was still young. And so, it was no surprise that she would act so carelessly due to something catching her interest. In a way, this was the downside to being such a bundle of curiosity.

And so, Latina ended up running in a completely different direction than the chicken coop, the plentiful frills on her apron fluttering as she went.

Meanwhile, Dale ended up being the first one to notice Latina's absence. However, he didn't have any concerns about that at the start. After all, he had already seen her leaving and returning with both hands full of chicken feed multiple times.

Naturally, he had decided not to interfere as she gave her all, simply watching over her instead.

A bit of time passed. However, Latina didn't return, and Dale started to have doubts.

She was such a serious young girl that he couldn't imagine her shirking work to go off and play somewhere. The only time she got distracted was when she saw a cat off to the side of the street or something. No, something was off here.

That was the conclusion that Dale reached at the time.

It was a rabbit rather than a cat, but he had more or less called it. And that miscalculation was born of the fact that he spent each and every day not only doting on Latina, but also carefully observing her. When it came to acting as a guardian, he had his act together to a surprising degree.

“Kenneth, Latina’s not coming back.”

“Hmm? Now that you mention it, you’re right... How long has it been?”

“2.8 times longer than what’s been average up till now. Something may have happened.” He was rather shockingly precise on that time estimate. “I’m going to have a bit of a look around.”

With that, Dale exited the chicken coop, then broke into a bit of a jog as he circled the surrounding area. After confirming that she wasn’t there, he then returned to check the feed storage she had been making trips back and forth from.

“She’s not here...”

His expression growing a bit more serious, Dale then returned once again to the chicken coop. This was Yang’s property. And so, he would need to get the owner’s permission in order to search for Latina.

Fortunately, Yang seemed to understand that Latina wasn’t the sort of kid to just run off and play, so he understood Dale’s concern. It likely helped that unlike the regulars of the Ocelot, he didn’t know of Dale’s usual sickeningly sweet doting idiot mode, so it just seemed like a natural concern for a guardian to have.

“Latina!” he yelled out as he searched the surroundings. There was no response, so he yelled it again.

As that cycle kept on repeating, his unease started growing deeper and deeper.

Latina was an incredibly adorable young girl. So much so that he couldn’t simply dismiss his fear that some unsavory folk had taken notice of her.

However, it would be difficult for anyone to lay a hand on her in Kreuz. It was already known throughout town that Dale, a famed adventurer, had an adopted child that he doted on. Plus Latina was also fairly visible as the idol of the Ocelot, and doing anything to her would mean making an enemy of that shop’s regulars. And the regulars’ eyes reached every nook and cranny of Kreuz.

It wasn’t good to be overconfident, but lots of people in Kreuz were watching

out for her.

They weren't in Kreuz now, though.

And so, Dale felt a need to reevaluate the situation, considering even the off chance that things had taken a turn for the worst.

Still, jumping to the conclusion, nothing criminal had occurred. Latina had simply not been thinking as she chased after the rabbit, and ended up arriving at a storage shed that didn't get used very often. And the rabbit must have made frequent use of this convenient hiding place, as it slid right on through a gap in the door.

Naturally, Latina followed after it. Thanks to her small size she was able to just barely make it through the gap, though she did get stuck a couple of times.

When she finally caught up to the rabbit and slowly closed the distance between them, the creature just stared back at her with a questioning expression.

Normally a wild rabbit would be on guard and easily frightened, but this one was showing no signs of trying to run. Something about Latina made it surprisingly easy for some animals to warm up to her, and apparently that skill also worked on herbivores.

"Wah..." she whispered, taking care not to raise her voice and scare it as she gently reached out her hand. The bunny's nose was twitching, and it looked to be observing Latina. "You're so cute!" Latina said with a delighted smile, but then she suddenly came back to her senses. Perhaps the reason that happened at that exact moment was because something subconsciously felt off, as there was no one around to say the usual line of, "Yeah, but you're even cuter!"

Latina hurriedly looked over her surroundings. She had been in a daze, and now she was in a place she didn't recognize. It clearly wasn't where she had been taught and given permission to come and go.

As soon as she realized her mistake, she hurried back to the door. However, something must have been jamming it, as she couldn't move it at all.

Rattling the door in a panic also turned out to be a mistake. She managed to budge it just a bit, but rather than opening the door, she only managed to

wedge it further shut.

“What should Latina do...?” she muttered to herself, sinking into despair.

Since she had gotten in that way, she should have logically been able to make it back through the gap. However, now it was so narrow that even someone as small as Latina couldn't squeeze through.

Her brow sunk pitifully with regret upon realizing her mistake, but Latina didn't start crying. She didn't yell or flail around either, instead choosing to sit atop a dusty wooden box.

Crying and yelling would just waste energy without doing anything to improve her situation.

That was one of the survival strategies she had already come to understand back when she was merely seven years old.

Her absolute trust in her guardians could be seen in her choosing that method, too. She was certain that if she just waited patiently, they would come find her. There was no doubt of that in her mind, thanks to the year or so she had spent living together with Dale and Kenneth.

“Latina will have to apologize for not helping properly...”

Her shoulders slumped when she realized how careless she had been when she got all excited. And so, as she sat there all alone, her thoughts started heading in a worse direction.

But just when Latina started beating herself up, a cute little ball of fuzz hopped up onto her lap, and all those negative thoughts went flying away.

Unbelievably, the rabbit had gone and approached her. And with that, her desire to touch and pet the fluffy creature sprung back to mind. And yet, she didn't want it to get upset and run away, so she was at a loss as to how to proceed.

Her brain wasn't able to catch up with this unexpected turn of events, and as a result, Latina was left frozen as the bunny sat atop her lap.

Still, just being able to look at the fluffy little critter up so close and personal was enough to fill her with joy. She couldn't move, but she was happy. The

warmth of the rabbit's body was heating up her lap. And yeah, she couldn't move. It was snuggly, but she couldn't budge in the least. Fluffy... and snuggly...

In the midst of that internal conflict, Latina ended up drifting off. The culprit was undoubtedly her lack of sleep the night prior.

Dale's voice surely would have reached that place as he ran around searching for her, but sadly Latina was unable to hear him in her slumber.

A little bit later, Yang found that a farming tool had fallen over and blocked the entrance to the storage shed, and inside he found Latina sleeping away, surrounded by three wild rabbits. Apparently the number of bunnies had multiplied at some point, but sadly Latina wasn't aware of that fact as she dreamed away.

And so ultimately, Yang was the one to find Latina in the midst of her midday nap.

As for what Dale was up to in the midst of his search for Latina... He was in the middle of rehabilitating a so-called gang of troublemakers who were somewhat infamous around Ziege, an experience sure to leave them a bit traumatized in the future.

There was nothing inherently wrong with Dale considering the worst when Latina disappeared. Considering her adorable looks, it was certainly possible she could have been targeted by a real nasty person. Plus her attire made it readily apparent that she had a well-off guardian who doted on her. After all, Dale spared no expense when it came to buying her clothing. And so, both the frilly apron and green dress she had on were far nicer than what you would expect a common towns person to be wearing.

That meant he couldn't rule out the possibility that she had been kidnapped for money.

And unfortunately for that gang of troublemakers, Yang happened to remember that they used a nearby dilapidated house as their hideout when Dale brought up the thought.

The gang drank, acted rowdy, and damaged property, so they certainly were a nuisance, but Yang hadn't ever felt afraid of them. But he was well aware that

their hideout was nearby, as they had caused plenty of damage around his farm.

That was why Yang had brought them up as potential suspects.

Of course, even Dale hadn't decided they must be the culprits based on that alone. He just decided to leave the search of the area to Yang as he and Kenneth went to go ask them some questions.

However, Dale specialized in wiping out his enemies. Perhaps that was a harsh way to phrase it, but that was the nature of most of his demon lord-related work.

"If there wasn't a chance Latina was inside, it'd be quicker to just bury the whole place."

It was a completely and utterly coldblooded statement. And yet, that was what he muttered to himself as he approached the dilapidated house. The road leading up to the place was definitely rough, but it wasn't overgrown enough to make walking it a problem. That was proof that a decent number of people frequented the place.

The pair split up before entering, with Kenneth circling around the back. As such, Dale walked slowly to give him time to make it around.

Before long, the targets came into view: the gang of troublemakers had gathered out in front of the entrance. However, they seemed to have noticed Dale too. At first their faces showed doubt, and then they shifted to clear displeasure.

Dale most definitely wasn't the sort to meet hostility with a smile. And so, there was a seriously intense air about him as he stated, "There are a number of things I want to ask you."

"Eh?"

"The heck? Just shut up and get outta here."

Unsurprisingly, they had no intention of being friendly towards Dale, either.

One of the men who made the gruff comment carelessly reached out towards Dale's chest. That was actually a pretty novel reaction from Dale's point of view.

In Kreuz his black coat and the gauntlet on his left arm were his trademarks, and he was well known as a skilled adventurer, so it was quite rare for a punk to go picking a fight with him.

He doesn't seem all that smart, seeing how he was telling me to leave, but now he's trying to pull me in closer.

Dale's body moved almost subconsciously as that thought ran through his head. He swatted away the incoming hand, and when his opponent faltered just a little, he swept his legs out from under him. Now that he'd already gotten started, he coldly noted that even if he took out one or two of them, there'd still be someone left to interrogate.

Dale's conclusion was prompted by the rage the other thugs had flown into, after seeing what Dale did to their friend. And so, they collectively rushed Dale despite how ineffectual it would end up being. They likely didn't understand how thoroughly outclassed they were because ultimately, they came from a small town where they'd only ever encountered people weaker than them.

When someone resorts to violence, all you can do is reply in kind.

To begin with, both Dale and those around him recognized that he was a doting idiot when it came to Latina. And so, there was no way he would be able to keep his cool when he didn't know where she was. He couldn't help being quick to anger and prone to rash decisions. In short, "irritated" was quite understating his current mood.

A blow from his gauntlet could prove fatal, depending on where it landed. And so, Dale took care with the angle of approach and held back so that he was only using enough force to pulverize a jaw.

As for his opponents' punches, they were sluggish enough for him to dodge purely on reflex. He stooped down, closed the distance, and then sent one of them flying. The man who'd been tripped back at the start was struggling to his feet, but was promptly bowled back over by the body of his friend.

Though his number of allies had dwindled in an instant, the last man standing pulled out a weapon. The fact that he hadn't lost his will to fight may have been less praiseworthy and more merely a case of him still not yet being willing to face the reality of the situation.

Dale squared off with the man, not even bothering to dodge the knife being thrust his way.

“Wha...?”

The man was left utterly dumbfounded, as his deadly weapon didn't even come close to carrying out its task, instead failing to leave so much as a scratch on the leather coat.

Dale's black coat was no ordinary garment, as it was made out of magical beast leather and was a defensive magical device. There was no way the blade of some punk could ever prove a threat to it.

As he stood there looking utterly baffled, Dale landed a blow on him in the next instant that left him in an unconscious heap.

There were still a good number of men in the dilapidated house, but the sounds of fighting, and how abruptly they'd gone quiet, had left the men in a state of panic.

Of course, they were all aware of how bad their behavior had been. And so, they came to the conclusion that one of the townsfolk must have brought in someone to deal with them. Plus, the man in front of them was far too dangerous. With that in mind, their decision to flee through the rear exit wasn't wrong in the least.

However, they soon found a large man barring their way.

As they looked at his face, they hesitated. And apparently, they came to the decision that it would be easier to deal with the young guy out front than this intimidating mountain of a man.

In actuality, since Kenneth had retired he certainly wasn't as big of a threat as the still-active Dale, but it seemed their powers of observation weren't keen enough to figure that out.

It took Dale no time at all to crush the fresh group that came flying out of the half-collapsed old house. However, that wasn't the end of their terrifying ordeal.

Dale lifted up one of the trembling men, then chanted healing magic in a low

voice.

“I believe I said I had some things to ask. Now behave yourself and answer.”

The man had no will left to fight and had been completely and utterly defanged, so of course he nodded in response. With that, Dale went ahead and finally set about taking care of what he had come here to do.

“Do you know anything about an unbelievably, overwhelmingly adorable little girl?”

It was around then that Yang found Latina in the middle of a midday nap, but the man had no way of knowing that. Still, they had gone and resorted to violence first, so it's not exactly like they were being unjustly punished, either.

The (likely) victim had finally realized at last the overwhelming power difference between him and Dale, then been healed only to be seriously asked about some little girl. Unsurprisingly, he had no idea whatsoever what was going on. If this guy had just declared he was an adventurer who had come to deal with them, this whole thing would make a lot more sense.

“Answer clearly whether you know her or not. She's a super cute, well-behaved little girl who looks adorable no matter what she's saying or doing.”



His totally serious expression drew even closer.

The man didn't feel like he would be believed if he honestly answered that he didn't know. And he had no idea what the intention was behind the question, either. Nor did he have any clue what the excess of modifiers was about.

Plus, it was frightening how he couldn't read the guy's expression.

In general, things that you can't understand are seen as frightening. In that way, Dale was absolutely terrifying at the moment.

Kenneth had circled around from the back and observed the situation, and apparently decided it was best to just stay out of it completely. And so when he ultimately came and released the man Dale had strung up, he wept like a child with relief.

Dale looked astounded, but honestly, Kenneth sympathized with the group a bit.

"Geez, so they didn't know anything? They should've said that from the start then," Dale complained with a click of his tongue as he employed Earth attribute healing magic. Thanks to his divine protection he was able to cast it endlessly without using up mana, and to the country youths, it really was so incomprehensible that it seemed quite literally like magic.

Even though he healed all the wounds on their bodies, he couldn't do that for the trauma carved into their hearts.

As a result, the vast majority of Ziege's gang of troublemakers mended their ways and started walking the straight and narrow. And even those who couldn't calm their rebellious spirits seemed to not act as awful as before, as if they were afraid of something.

Then, when they grew up and became parents, they all told their children the tale that if you cause trouble for others, a demon lord garbed in black will come for you. For better or worse, they never happened to see the champion called the Platinum Hero who conquered the demon lords, so they never had their image of the national savior crumble as they found out he was the "demon lord" they remembered.

When Dale and Kenneth returned to report that they hadn't found out anything, they learned that Yang had found Latina. She had unsurprisingly woken up by now, but even to an outsider like Yang it was clear how depressed she was feeling, so he gave an awkward smile.

"Dale, Kenneth... Latina's sorry for worrying you..."

"Latina!"

For the time being, Kenneth managed to hold Dale back as the younger man tried to go and hug Latina tight now that she had apologized and looked so sad.

"Do you understand what you did?"

"Latina didn't help out properly... She went somewhere that wasn't where she was told all on her own... And went into someone's place without permission..."

Yang was shocked to hear how readily she listed off her own faults, while Kenneth joined him in giving an awkward grin.

It was important to scold children when they did something wrong, but she was already aware of her mistakes and regretted them, so there wasn't much left to say.

"Mr. Yang, you went and let Latina help you out, but she just caused trouble. Latina is so sorry."

"All that doesn't matter. What's important is that you're alright, Latina."

"Latina screwed up, and did bad things... You can't say that doesn't matter, Dale," she replied, going so far as to reprimand her overly doting guardian.

Kenneth didn't feel up to scolding her any further now that it had come to that point. And so after giving Latina's hair a bit of a rough tussle, he turned towards Yang.

"I really am sorry. You were kind enough to offer your time, and yet we caused all this trouble."

Latina looked surprised at first to hear Kenneth apologize, but she then gave a firm bow, too.

“Ah, no, it was just a kid being a kid. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m really grateful to hear you say that,” Kenneth replied, then rustled Latina’s hair again. “What we discussed today was real useful and taught me a lot. And I hope to keep doing business in the future with you.”

Seeing that, Latina realized that she shouldn’t just be apologizing right now. And so, she lifted her head, faced Yang, and clearly stated, “Thank you so much for today.”

In the end, Latina’s memories of her first outing were just a bit bitter, as they contained her failures as well.

On the carriage ride home, Latina sat silently atop Dale’s lap.

Latina had said he should scold her, but Kenneth had already done that. And so, he decided it should be fine to just pamper her.

That wasn’t solely because he was a doting idiot, as it was also important to divide up roles. After all, if all the adults around her all scolded her, she would be left feeling cornered. And that was something that Dale wanted to avoid.

“Like I said, I’m just glad that you’re alright, Latina.”

“Dale... Latina is sorry.”

“I’m sorry for taking so long to find you, too.”

Then, he stopped and thought on what to say next. Dale didn’t want to have the outing Latina had been so looking forward to end with her looking so sad.

“Was it fun seeing all the animals...?”

“Yeah.”

“You can’t really see them in Kreuz, after all. What about the town of Ziege? It had a pretty different feel than Kreuz, didn’t it?”

“Yeah. It felt more easygoing than Kreuz, somehow.”

“I see. I’d like to go enjoy some other towns with you someday, Latina. You know, my home village is in the mountains.”

“Mountains?”

“That’s right.”

He had been attempting to shift the conversation in a direction that would interest her, and it certainly seemed to have worked. Dale went ahead and kept on talking, feeling relieved about that. After all, it would be a shame if she came away with just memories of her mistakes after all the enjoyable things that happened.

Kenneth could hear Dale’s intention as their voices leaked through to the driver’s seat, and he broke out in a faint smile as a result.

By the way, Latina still hadn’t yet firmly answered why she had entered the storage shed. That was because she knew she was at fault and it was essential to apologize, so she didn’t want to slip up and sound like she was trying to make an excuse.

And so, Dale only just now learned why Latina had lost control of herself back then.

“So there was a rabbit, huh?”

“Yeah. It was so fluffy and little. It was really cute.”

“Yeah, but you’re even cuter,” Dale replied with the expected line.

“Latina wanted to see it closer, so she chased it.”

“You really are an animal lover, Latina.”

It had been a rabbit rather than the cat that Dale had been thinking, but still, he could certainly understand how it happened now.

Latina rarely ever made mistakes, but she had gone and shown a side of herself that was very fitting for her age. She was admittedly a bit uncontrollable when it came to dealing with cats and the like, but considering how she acted normally, she was sure to grow up just fine.

“It’d be nice if you could see a bunny again, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll have to tell Rita all about it when we get back.”

“Latina will draw a picture. And write about it in her diary, too.”

“I see. Make sure to write a lot, alright?”

The rhythmic swaying of the carriage invited just as much drowsiness now as it did on the way there. However, unlike the trip out, Latina wasn't feeling as sleepy. It seemed her midday nap really proved effective there.

The setting sun was dyeing the scenery a pale yellow, just on the verge of giving way to a red.

Kreuz was surrounded by walls and full of densely packed buildings, so you couldn't easily see the sun setting in such a vast, open sky there. And so, it really was nice that they were getting a chance to do so now.

By the time you're grown, the little mistakes from childhood become nothing but amusing memories. That thought was running through Dale's head as he smiled and pointed down the path.

The town walls made for a splendid structure, with a strange sort of majesty to them. Latina always saw them from the inside, but she rarely got a chance to see them from the other side like this. And as soon as she recognized them, her expression lit up.

Big outings like this were able to be so enjoyable because she had such a place to return home to.

Latina's first big trip ended as such, full of mistakes and discoveries, as well as new experiences and growth.

And of course, Latina was able to safely make it back to the Ocelot in order to say, “Latina's home.”

5: A Certain Small Epilogue, After the Story's End

In Kreuz, said to be the second most prominent town in all of Laband, there was a combination bar and inn known as the Dancing Ocelot. Kreuz was very welcoming to travelers and adventurers, so a lot of outsiders tended to visit each and every day.

The green flag of a winged horse hanging by the entrance indicated the shop acted as a branch of the temple of Akhdar, the god who watched over travelers seeking to gather information. That made it a place where you could get ahold of a great deal of the information held by the temple, making it a facility used by many.

With all that said, that wasn't the only reason so many customers visited the Dancing Ocelot. The prices were cheap, and the food was also so good it was hard to imagine it was from a bar in the rougher part of town.

The owner who showed off his skills was rumored to have been an axe-wielding adventurer in his youth, and his physique certainly seemed to support that claim. The shop's chief clientele were hotblooded adventurers, but even after they'd had too much to drink, the proprietor was able to keep them in line.

"The food for the counter seat's ready."

"On it!"

The girl who had answered in that cheery voice and come carrying out plates moved every bit as briskly as you would expect of such a busy shop's waitress. She was carrying far more food and mugs than it looked like her slender arms could possibly handle, and she smoothly swayed through the complex maze of customers as she went.

"You're a real beauty, there!" a drunken customer called out along with a leer and an outstretched hand, which she smoothly dodged in a way that showed how much she was used to such things. She had been raised in this shop since a

young age, so she was plenty accustomed to handling drunks.

Most of the regulars recognized from the sight that the customer was a newcomer and broke out in wicked grins.

All of the regulars who had been around for a long time knew there was always someone truly frightening keeping an eye on her. He had been busy lately and hadn't had as many chances as usual to show up around the shop, but if he learned someone caused her even the slightest harm he would hunt them down all the way to the ends of the earth. He was so frightening that the regulars thought calling him a great demon lord would be fitting, as he was scarier than any of the regular ones, but he was known to the world at large as a champion.

"Latina, the next plate is up."

"Right!"

As she came back into the kitchen holding a stack of dirty plates, the platinum ponytail she wore bounced along behind her back.

Kreuz was a big town, but not just anyone could go out walking at night. There were only limited lights along the streets, so it was generally quite dark out in the town at that time of day. That had an effect on how safe it was, and also meant that even bars were limited in how long they could stay open. The Dancing Ocelot was also an inn, of course, but it still closed up before it got too dark out and the customers all headed for wherever they would be spending the night.

Latina gave a single sigh, but then she set to work on her next task. She skillfully wiped off the dirtied tables and got the floor nice and clean. It made sense to clean carefully during the times of day when there weren't customers around, but if she took too long it could eat into her sleep time and have an effect on her work the following day. But the movements were so drilled into her body and efficient by now that it didn't take all that long till she finished her work and gave a satisfied glance over the store.

"Are you already done cleaning the kitchen? I'm sorry I didn't make it in time."

“That’s nothing to apologize for.”

To be honest, she seemed to feel more disappointed than troubled. The man had known Latina for so long that he could sense that, so he broke out in a strained grin.

“Is Dale still gonna be a while?”

“Yeah. It looks like it’ll take a good while this time around. He complained a whole lot about how he didn’t like playing at being a noble, but he also couldn’t ask anyone else to handle it,” Latina said with a smile. Dale may not have been by her side, but that expression showed a clear trust in him. Their relationship really hadn’t changed in the least.

She looked incredibly happy as she held a cup in both hands. It was cream-colored and made of porcelain, and she had purchased it because she was fond of its slightly rounded shape. She had bought a similarly shaped dark brown cup along with it for Dale, and they fit together just perfectly, which had amused her.

“Dale’s cup slipped while I was washing it and I dropped it...”

“You were all depressed after that for a while.”

“Dale just smiled and said not to worry about it, though...”

“That’s because you were the one to crack it. If I had done it, he never would’ve stopped grumbling about it,” he added, thinking back on that time. Latina let out a little giggle in response.

He smiled again, as she really hadn’t changed at all from how he remembered. However, that smile couldn’t help but look ever so slightly pained.

That was what happened when a fact known since childhood was thrust in front of you.

“You were always playing pranks, and Dale always got angry.”

“Don’t you think it’s just down to Dale being immature?”

“Maybe so,” Latina replied with a big grin, then she looked him over with a gentle gaze. The smile on her face was almost like that of a mother as she

stared at the man who was now in the prime of his life and far taller than her.

“You know, you can still call me ‘big sis’ like you used to, Theo.”

Theodore looked more and more troubled upon hearing that. His “big sis” hadn’t changed at all since he was little, still looking like a young woman.

Theodore had inherited his father’s large frame, and when he was young he worked as an adventurer for a time. That was so he could be well informed about the job for when he took over the family business, and his big sis was more worried about him back then than even his own parents. The visual difference in their ages had long since reversed, but apparently she still saw him as someone she needed to watch out for.

“It’d confuse the customers who don’t know the circumstances, though.”

In terms of appearances, it wouldn’t be strange at all to think he was her father. And apparently Latina realized that too, as she smiled and nodded, then replied, “That’s true.”

“Plus, you’re technically a local lord’s wife, so that’s no way to be referring to you.”

“I mean, it’s just a tiny little town. Honestly, it just feels like running one big shop to me...”

The land Dale had been granted for his accomplishments was still being cleared away, and amounted to nothing but a town on the nation’s outskirts. There was so much to do and they were so removed from everyone else that the two spent their days enjoying a totally different lifestyle than your average local lord and his wife. As for Dale, he mingled in with the laborers and worked hard to clear the land. His argument for doing so essentially came down to the fact that the Earth magic he specialized in was well suited to such tasks.

“Dale and I both feel better working alongside everyone else rather than just giving orders...”

That statement also went to show that she was just the same as she used to be.

When Dale said he was going to the capital to go play at being a noble, Latina

decided to come to this familiar old shop until he was done. “I decided I wanted to enjoy my time off to the fullest,” she had told Theodore, only to start helping out in the kitchen and on the floor again like it was only natural.

He couldn't help but question how this counted as “time off,” but Theodore also felt it was just like her, so he broke out in a strained smile.



Besides, Theodore always had a weakness for his beautiful, kind big sis. Ever since he was little, he had positively adored her.

He had long since passed his rebellious period, so he was now well aware that it didn't help out to get overly bashful or awkwardly hold himself back. There was no point at all to refraining from showing gentle affection for your family.

She really didn't look like she had changed in the least. That would probably stay the same in the future, too. After he grew old, and even further on after that.

In all things, his time was limited. And so, all he could do was meet her affection in kind, and make her smile as much as he could.

As her "little brother," that was his response to that precious girl, who had also been his first love.

†

After a few days' stay, Latina packed all her things in a large bag and exited the Ocelot before the morning's preparations started. As she said farewell to Theodore out front, it was like she was just heading out into the neighborhood.

"Well then, Theo, I'll see you around."

"Yeah," Theodore lightly shot back. "You should go see Emma sometime, too."

"Right."

Theodore didn't see his little sister very often nowadays either, as she had gotten married and was living in a neighboring town. But most folks rarely ever left town to begin with. His big sis was quick on her feet, though, so she had more chances despite living further away.

When Latina turned to leave, Theodore gave a sigh and then added, "Dale too..."

"Hmm?"

"Tell Dale he should show his face around here occasionally, too. He won't just come out and say it, but I know my old man's always worrying about him."

“Right... I’ll tell him,” Latina replied with a smile. With that, she gave a wave farewell with her tiny hand and got going.

As Theodore watched her leave, it was just like when he had seen her off on a distant journey when he was little.

When Latina exited Kreuz, she found a young man in a black leather coat leaning against the wall and staring her way. It was a very familiar sight for her, but it was actually rare lately for him to travel in that outfit.

“Sorry, did I make you wait?”

“No, I just got here early.”

“Did you get proper rest...?”

Dale averted his gaze, seemingly not wanting to answer the question. He didn’t want to lie to her, so he was just openly avoiding the matter. It was incredibly childish, but such mannerisms had long since become part of his usual habits.

After accepting her pack, Dale ultimately dodged the question entirely and asked his own instead.

“Should I call for Vint to take us back?”

“No. I want to check how the road’s coming along, so let’s walk instead.”

“As soon as we get back, we’ll be throwing ourselves right back into work, huh?” Dale said with a chuckle, walking alongside Latina.

“Theo looked like he was doing well.”

“That so?”

“He said you should come see them sometime too. And that Kenneth was worrying about you.”

“Yeah... Right.”

At some point, Dale had started to avoid entering Kreuz.

When Latina realized that, she actually started taking more time to visit their old acquaintances. And so lately, she’d been going around visiting the people important to her enough to make up for how they couldn’t see Dale.

She felt like that was something that she had to do.

“I think you’d definitely regret not going to see him, so it’d be better to do it. I’m sure of that.”

“That may be so...”

Even so, there was a feeling that Latina tormented herself with, too. That Dale was holding onto his pain in a form of selfishness. And so, she wanted to save him from those feelings, even if only just a little.

“Don’t go making a face like that, Latina. I’m fine,” Dale said with a bright smile, clearly seeing Latina’s worries on her face. He grabbed Latina’s hand and pulled her in closer, then gently stroked her hair. “To be honest, it’s complicated. But even so, I really am glad that this isn’t something you have to face all on your own.”

“Dale...”

“And so, I’m fine,” Dale repeated with a smile. Latina looked up, staring straight at his face rather than averting her gaze.

And then, Latina smiled back. From her reflection in his black eyes, she could tell that she seemed to be managing it properly.

She knew the fear of being left behind by the passage of time more than anyone.

He was trying his best to shoulder some of that burden for her, and so for that, she felt thankful.

“Thank you so much for choosing to stay with me, Dale,” she said, her feelings overflowing from her words.

She would keep on telling him, never forgetting.

She wouldn’t forget that this joyous time together wasn’t something that just came naturally. It was important that she never forgot that.

And so rather than apologizing, she told him how happy she was. It was what she could do, and felt she had to do, but of course it could never possibly be enough to make up for the precious gift of him sharing her load.

“Right. And we’ll keep on staying together, too.”

As he replied, Dale gripped her hand tight, and they exchanged gentle smiles.

Then, they started walking back. One day, they would surely be able to call it their new home town. And it would surely become that for a great number of people, too.

It would certainly be nice if it could be a kind, gentle place where everyone could simply live their everyday lives, treating that as only natural. That was the sort of place they hoped to create.

And so, that was where the pair set off towards, walking hand in hand.



Afterword

I've said in the past that you can never predict what any event may bring, but when I said such a thing, I certainly never imagined anything leading to something this big.

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 ninth volume of *If It's for My Daughter, I'd Even Defeat a Demon Lord*.

As I mentioned last time around, this volume of short stories came about due to my responsibilities as an adult. Are any of you viewing this work now after seeing the anime? I'd be very grateful if that was the case.

Even now, I can't help but feel, "What happened here?" at the fact that so many people have now seen this series that started as something I typed out one-handed on my smartphone and posted to a corner of the net as just a hobby. It's become a series of novels, manga, drama CDs, gone overseas, and even turned into an anime. I feel truly honored and blessed at the fact that my work has been able to be seen in so many different mediums.

It's all thanks to the great many people who have joined me on this journey. Thank you so very much.

Back when I went to that sports day, I certainly hadn't the foggiest shred of an idea that this future would be waiting for me. And now, I can't help but wonder what event will help shape my life next.

This will be the last time, but thank you for always responding to my requests with more wonderful illustrations than I could ever have imagined, Kei. And to Truffle, who drew her so adorably as a young girl. To my editor, N, who likely worked even more passionately on this series than me. And of course, I give my sincerest thanks to the great many other people who helped make this series a reality.

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 series brought you at least a little joy, then I'll feel truly blessed.

August 2019,
CHIROLU

Bonus Short Stories

An Imaginary Story: Little Girl Version

**This is an imaginary story of what would have occurred if Dale had learned of the cat-eared hood in spite of Sylvia's wishes.*

"You sure do love animals, don't you, Latina?"

"Yeah!" Latina replied with a smile.

In response, Dale also broke out in a grin. It was already a well known fact among his acquaintances that he doted heavily on his adopted daughter, plainly evident in that he bought her far more than was necessary.

Thus it came as no surprise when he held out another bundle today.

"Then I've got a present for you today, Latina."

"Hmm?" she asked, with her usual adorable head tilt.

As he reveled in her cute response, Dale took out a small coat. When he'd seen it displayed on a street corner, he'd been so taken with it that he bought it immediately.

It likely went without saying at this point, but that coat had a cat-eared hood attached to it. When she tried it on, it proved a bit big for her small frame, so that her fingers only peeked out a bit from the sleeves.

"It's fluffy!"

It seemed Latina was more taken with the feel of it than the appearance, and as a result, she was happily rubbing the sleeves up against her face. Well, considering she had no way to look at herself where they were standing, the texture was far easier to notice than how she looked in it.

"Dale...?"

Thanks to that, the young man looking at her had a better grasp on that than the girl herself.

Latina stared questioningly at Dale's face, as he had gone completely silent. She was used to him excessively exclaiming how cute she was, so for Latina, it was quite unusual to see him like this.

"You're just too cute..." Dale muttered in a deadly serious tone despite the contents of his statement. He really was still his usual self.

"Hmm?"

Then, in a voice more serious and sorrowful than Latina had ever heard from him ever before, Dale continued on, "I can't believe this... It's *too* cute. This is too dangerous...!"

"Dangerous?"

"Yes! So dangerous it could destroy the very world itself..."

"Really dangerous...?!" Latina questioned, looking utterly shocked in a way that made it clear she had misunderstood what was going on. There was no way the young girl could quip back at the circumstances, and so, the cat-eared hood ended up getting sealed away due to the great danger it presented.

An Imaginary Story: Platinum-haired Maiden Version

**This is an imaginary story of what would have occurred if Dale had learned of the cat-eared hood in spite of Sylvia's wishes.*

"Our relationship with Vassilios is only going to keep on growing from here on out, and it's where you're from, too, Latina. So, I was thinking I should probably know more about its culture and the like..."

Dale's personal knowledge of the devil race wasn't all that great. He was aware that an extremely large percentage of the demons serving the demon lords who had been his foes tended to be devils. And so, he had purposefully avoided learning too much about them.

However, the antagonistic demon lords had been eliminated, and there were no threats at the moment for Dale to face. And so, he gained an interest in learning about Vassilios and the devils who lived there.

As a result, Dale sent for a variety of materials, which happened to include a hooded cape.

When Latina happened to spy it, she lifted it up and smiled ever so slightly.

“How nostalgic...”

“Nostalgic?”

“Yeah. Um, you know how devils have horns on the sides of their head, right?” Latina said, bringing her hands up to the remains of her broken horns. Perhaps she hadn’t pointed out her index fingers because her horns had a curled shape to them.

Dale felt warm and fuzzy just from watching her and broke out in a smile, but Latina continued on with her explanation.

“And so, hoods meant for devils are made with space left for the horns. And especially when they’re meant for children, there’s a strong tendency to use animal ear designs... Ah, see, this one has triangular ears.”

“I see. So it’s for a kid, huh?”

“Still, it’s on the big side. A small adult could probably wear it...”

Latina held the cape up to her chest and tilted her head a bit. It didn’t fasten tightly in the front, so it had a good bit of flexibility to it. And there seemed to be room in the hood, too.

Latina was rather curious by nature. And so, she ended up deciding to just try it on without thinking too deeply.

She swished the cape on, then pulled up the hood. Since it really was made for a child the hood felt like it would fall off, so she held it down with both hands.

“It was a bit small after all,” Latina said with a bit of an embarrassed laugh. Paying no heed to the fact that Dale had yet to respond, she looked at herself reflected in the window glass and gave a playful spin.

“Maybe this would help me get along with cats...?”

Her thoughts had certainly gone off the rails. And yet, the expression on her face grew totally serious.

“Has anyone developed a magical device that would do that...? I think when it comes to dogs and wolves, I could talk with Vint about what sort of things they may like...”

That would be far too narrow and specific of a magical device. She wouldn't care about whether or not such a creation could turn a profit, though.

“But in that case... If I could find a mythical beast that was like a cat, maybe I could ask them what sort of things they liked...?”

Latina had no idea of what was going on around her as her thoughts raced. She was simply enjoying herself too much.

“Could I go, like... ‘Meow’ and talk to them...?”

She had even gone so far as to mimic a cat, there. It was like she was intentionally trying to look as cute as possible.

By this point, it should go without saying what was running through Dale's head as he stood there silently.

...Of course, this is just an imaginary story. Thankfully, that means that Dale didn't truly use all of his strength and authority to do something utterly unreasonable to a poor cat-type mythical beast. There weren't a vast deal of resources thrown at developing a certain type of magical device, either.

This is all just a terrifying picture of what could have happened.



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If It's for My Daughter, I'd Even Defeat a Demon Lord: Volume 9

by CHIROLU

Translated by Matthew Warner Edited by Christopher Foxx

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