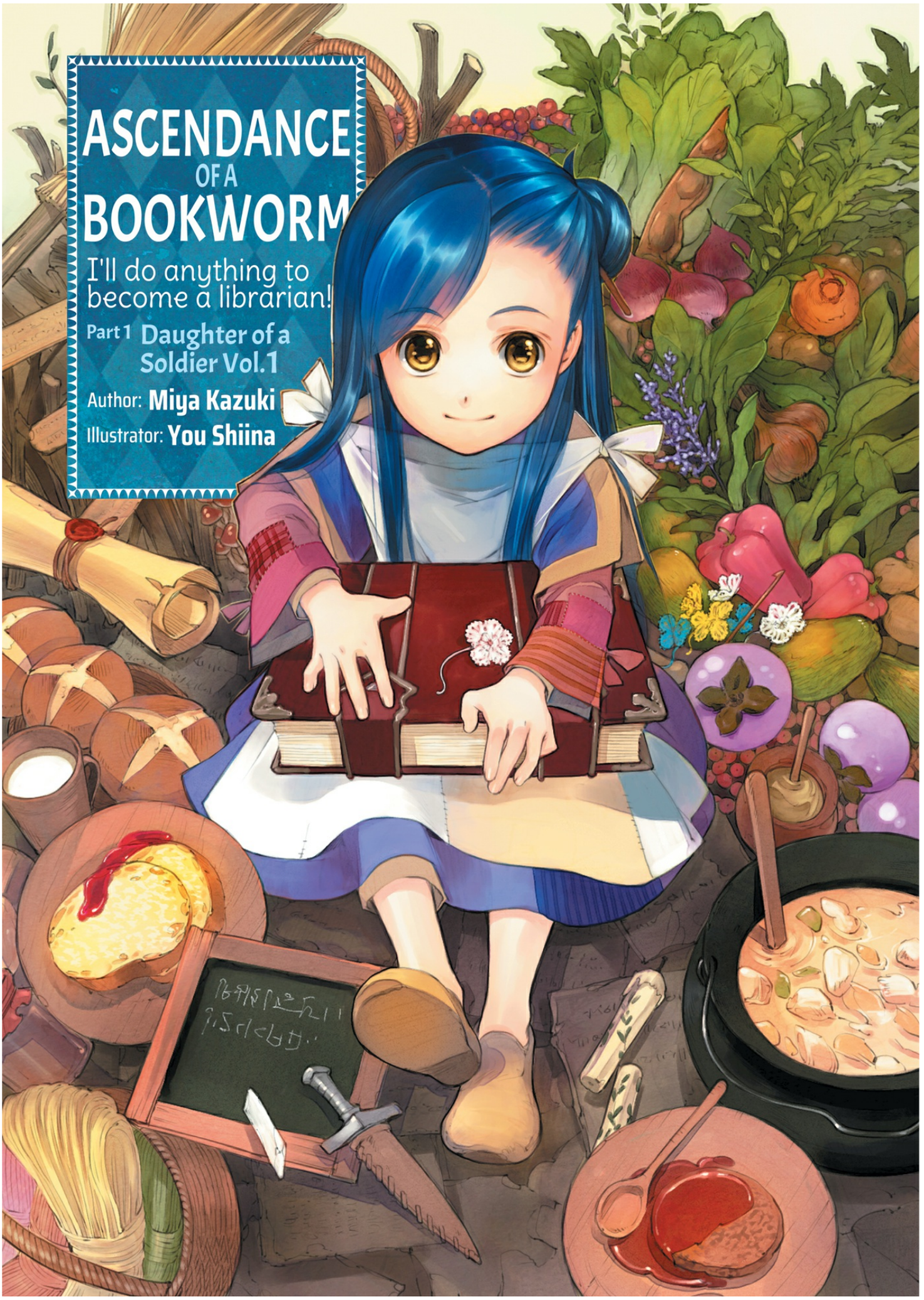

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM
I'll do anything to become a librarian!
Part 1 Daughter of a Soldier Vol.1
Author: Miya Kazuki
Illustrator: You Shiina





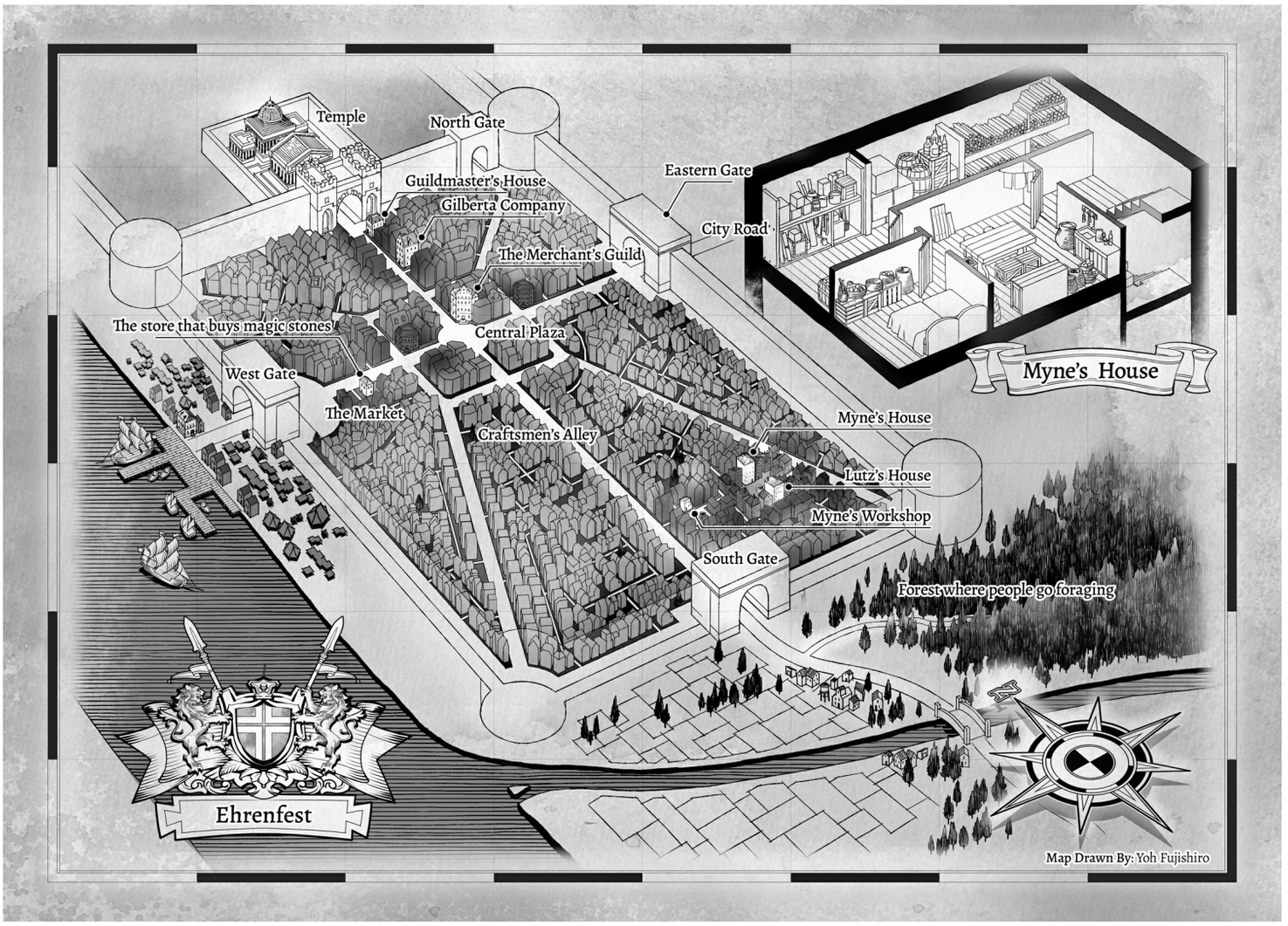

Temple
North Gate
Guildmaster's House
Gilberta Company
Eastern Gate
City Road
The Merchant's Guild
The store that buys magic stones
Central Plaza
West Gate
The Market
Craftsmen's Alley
Myne's House
Lutz's House
Myne's Workshop
South Gate
Forest where people go foraging
Myne's House
Ehrenfest
Map Drawn By: Yoh Fujishiro

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Prologue

Urano Motosu loved books. Psychology, religion, history, geography, education, anthropology, math, physics, geology, chemistry, biology, art, language, fiction... Books were filled with the knowledge of all humanity and she loved them from the bottom of her heart.

She felt rewarded whenever she read a book packed with facts and trivia new to her. Looking upon worlds unbeknownst to her through maps and picture anthologies made her feel the intoxicating bliss of her world expanding. She was even interested in old tales and myths from foreign countries, as she felt like they gave her a glimpse into different cultures of ages long past. They were rich with history and she couldn't count how many hours she had lost to unraveling their mysteries.

Urano loved the distinctive scent of old books packed into the storeroom of a library, and even the dusty air enticed her so much that she would always head straight for the back rooms of whichever libraries she visited. She would slowly fill her lungs with the old, musty smell and look over the aged books, feeling elated from that alone. Of course, she also loved the smell of new paper and ink. She had fun just wondering about what would be written on those pages, what new information awaited her.

Above all, Urano just didn't feel right when her eyes weren't scanning the lines of a book. In order to survive she always kept a book close at hand, whether she was taking a bath, using the bathroom, or even just walking around. She had lived this way from childhood to her college graduation, clinging to books with such fervor that everyone who knew Urano called her "that weird bookworm." They said that she loved books so much it was damaging her life.

But Urano didn't care, no matter what they said. She had books, and that was enough to make her happy.

A large truck passed in front of Urano, spewing the smell of exhaust behind it. The warm wind flew past her, rustling her bangs. But she paid them no mind. All she cared about was hurriedly holding down the pages of her book before they flipped and she lost her place.

“Urano, c’mon, that’s dangerous. Stay close to me.”

“Mmm...” Urano pushed up her glasses and gave a lazy response, focusing more on the words in front of her. She noticed that her rustled hair was getting in the way and quickly brushed it aside. An exasperated sigh drifted into her ears and she felt someone pull on her arm, a little hard. Her brows furrowed. “Shuu, that hurts.”

“Complain all you want. A little pain is a lot better than getting hit by a truck and dying, yeah?”

“That’s true. I wouldn’t want to die from anything but an avalanche of books.”

Urano wanted to live her entire life surrounded by books. If possible, she wanted to spend her whole life inside a book storeroom, where there’s no sun to damage the pages but just enough airflow to keep things comfortable.

Time not spent reading books was time wasted.

Even if people said her skin was gross and pale and laughed at her for being weak due to lack of exercise, even if her mom yelled at her for forgetting to eat, she had no intention of ever letting go of her books.

If she had to die somehow, she may as well die getting crushed by an avalanche of books. That’d make her a lot happier than a slow death in a hospital bed. Urano sincerely believed that.

“I’m always telling you not to read while you walk. If I weren’t here, you definitely woulda walked straight into the road and died in no time. How about a little thank you?”

“But I say it all the time. I’m so, sooo thankful.”

“That don’t sound too sincere to me.”

“I am, I am. It’s thanks to you that I can read books while doing chores, Shuu. But even if I did die, I’d ask a god to reincarnate me so I can keep reading books

in my next life. Isn't that smart? Ahaha."

"Life ain't that convenient, moron."

Their conversation continued until they reached Urano's house. Shuu entered with her rather than going into his own house next door. As they were childhood friends and went to the same daycare, they had been raised like siblings practically since birth. He always referred to Urano's place as home, and nobody questioned that.

"Mom, here's what you wanted. I'll be in the book room. Call me whenever dinner's ready."

"Right, right. What about you, Shuu? Is your mother planning on making anything?"

"Nah, I'm eating here tonight. She's got work. Urano, I'm borrowing your TV to play some games."

"Uh huh, go ahead." Urano raised her voice so Shuu could hear her as she headed straight to the book storage room left behind by her father, who had died when she was young. She opened the door and turned on the lights.

The book room had a window for ventilation purposes, but it was tightly covered by a thick light-blocking curtain to protect the books from sunlight. There were bookcases packed with books on all sides and a desk with a huge stack of books on top of it, as Urano had bought so many new books that the shelves couldn't hold them all.

Urano smoothly sat onto the desk chair without looking up from her book, and kept on reading. Suddenly, her vision shook. She concluded that an earthquake was happening and kept on reading as always. The shaking was harder than usual, which made it difficult for her to read.

Her brows furrowed and she looked up, frustrated at the earthquake, only to see books dominating her vision. "Hyaaah?!"

Books tumbled from a tilted shelf and rained right down onto her. Unable to dodge them, Urano could only stare with her eyes wide open as she was buried beneath them.

A New Life

...It's so hot. It hurts. I hate thiiis...

A child's voice cried out directly into my head, filled with pain and suffering.

Well, what do you want me to do about that? I had no idea what to do, and over time the voice grew increasingly quiet.

The moment I realized I couldn't hear the child's voice anymore, the bubble-esque thing that had been encapsulating me disappeared with a burst, and I felt my consciousness slowly rising up.

At the same time, I felt a hot fever and pain spread throughout my body as if I had been afflicted with influenza. I nodded and agreed with the child, *This certainly is hot and it certainly does hurt. I hate it too.*

But the child's voice didn't reply.

It was so hot. I tried moving around to find a colder spot in the bed. Maybe due to the fever, I couldn't move my body like I wanted to. But I struggled on regardless, and in the process of wiggling my body, heard the sound of something like paper and grass rubbing together beneath me.

"...What's that noise?" My throat should've been sore due to the fever, but a childish and high-pitched voice came out of my mouth. It was clearly not my own voice, and it sounded just like the child's voice that I'd heard in my head a second ago.

I wanted to keep sleeping since the fever was making me feel so sluggish, but I couldn't ignore the fact that I was in an unfamiliar bed and that my voice wasn't my own, so I slowly lifted my heavy eyelids.

My fever must have been enormous, as my eyes were wet and my vision twisted. Thankfully, though, my tears were apparently serving as makeshift lenses, as I could see far farther than I usually could without my glasses.

“Wha?” For some reason, I could see the small, unhealthy-looking hand of a child stretched out in front of me. *Weird. My hand should be a lot bigger than this. I have the hands of an adult, not a small, malnourished child.*

I could move the child’s hand like my own, clenching and opening it. This body that I could move at will was not my own. The sheer shock of that revelation made my mouth dry up. “...What’s, happening?”

Making sure to keep the tears from dipping out of my wet eyes, I moved my gaze around while keeping my head still. It didn’t take long to notice that I wasn’t in my own room. The bed beneath me was hard and lacked a mattress; it was using cushions made of something prickly and rough instead. The dirty blanket thrown over me had a weird smell, and my whole body was itchy as if it were infested with fleas or bedbugs.

“Hold on, wait... Where am I?” My last memory was getting crushed by an avalanche of books, and it wasn’t likely I had been rescued in the nick of time. At the very least, I was sure no hospital in Japan would treat patients on such a filthy bed. *What’s going on?*

“I... I definitely died, right?” All signs pointed to yes. I had died being crushed by books. That earthquake was at best a three or four on the Richter scale. It wasn’t the kind of earthquake that killed people. So my death had definitely ended up on the news, something like, *“A college girl nearing graduation was crushed to death by books in her own home.”*

...That’s so embarrassing! I died twice that day, once physically and once socially. I felt so embarrassed I tried rolling around on the bed, but out of fear for my heavy and pained head, I decided to double facepalm instead.

“I mean, okay, I definitely joked about it. I definitely thought that, if I was going to die, I may as well die getting crushed by books. I honestly did think it’d be better than dying a slow death on a hospital bed.” But this was all wrong. I had dreamed of a happy death at the end of a life surrounded by books. I honestly hadn’t expected an earthquake to happen and crush me to death so soon.

“This is awful. I’d just gotten hired, too. Oooh, my sweet college library...” In this troubled age of high unemployment, I had just managed to land a job in a

college library. Through guts and determination to fulfill my dream of a happy life surrounded by books, I passed all the necessary tests and interviews and finally secured victory. This job would involve spending far more time around books than any other, and the library even had plenty of old books and documents.

My mom, who worried more about me than anyone else, even started crying after hearing the news. *“That’s wonderful. Urano, you actually found a respectable, good job. I’m so proud of you,”* she’d said, tears dripping out of her eyes. And days after that, I just up and die?

My mind drifted to thoughts of how my mother must have cried after learning of my death. She, the mother I’d never meet again, would definitely be mad. I could say with confidence that at some point she'd screamed, *“How many times did I tell you to get rid of some of those books?!”*

“I’m sorry, Mom...” I lifted up a heavy, sluggish hand to wipe away my tears.

With great effort, I slowly lifted my head and sat my burning hot body up before looking around the room to obtain as much information as possible, paying no heed to my hair sticking to my sweaty neck. The room had only a few dressers for storing things and two tables, apparently beds, each covered with filthy blankets. Sadly, there was no bookshelf in sight.

“I don’t see any books... Maybe this is just a nightmare? A death nightmare?” If a god had granted my wish and reincarnated me, there should have been books nearby. My wish was to keep reading books after being reborn, after all. While thinking things through with my feverish, foggy head, I stared at a spider’s nest hanging off the dark, soot-stained ceiling.

Soon, however, the door opened and a woman came in. Perhaps she heard me moving, or perhaps she heard me talking to myself. But, either way, she was a beautiful woman with a triangular bandanna tied on her head who looked to be in her upper-twenties. She had a lovely face, but she was dirty. So dirty that I would assume she was homeless if I saw her in the streets.

I don’t know who this woman is, but she really should wash her face and keep herself clean. She’s wasting her good looks.

“Myne, %&$#+@*+#%?”

“Hyaaah!” The moment I heard the woman’s incomprehensible speech, a mental dam burst and memories that were familiar, yet not my own, came rushing through. In the span of a few blinks, the accumulated years of memories belonging to the girl named Myne had crashed through my mind like a flood and beat against my brain, causing me to reflexively clasp my head in horror.

“Myne, are you okay?”

No, I’m not Myne! I wanted to protest, but I couldn’t. I was overwhelmed by the indescribable sensation of this strange, dirty room and these weak, small hands becoming familiar to me. I got goosebumps as the language I previously couldn’t understand became fully comprehensible.

The huge flood of information sent me into a panic, and everything I could see before me screamed one thing: You’re not Urano anymore. You’re Myne.

“Myne? Myne?” The woman called out to me, worried, but to me she was just a stranger. Or she should have been, but for some reason, it felt like I knew her. It even felt like I loved her.

The love felt gross and alien. It wasn’t my own. I couldn’t yet manage to obediently accept that the woman in front of me was my mother. As my repulsion and love ground against each other, the woman kept calling out my name. Myne.

“...Mom.”

When I looked up at this strange woman I had never met before and called her “Mom,” I ceased being Urano and became Myne.

“Are you okay? You look like you have a headache.”

I instinctively didn’t want to touch my mom, she who existed in my memories yet was someone I didn’t know, and so I fell back onto the stinky bed to avoid her outstretched hand. I then shut my eyes to fully shut off all visual stimulation. “...My head still hurts. I want to sleep.”

“Okay. Rest well, dear.”

I waited for Mom to leave the bedroom and got to work trying to grasp my situation. My head was messed up from the fever, but I wouldn't be able to sleep peacefully while panicked like I was.

I had no idea how things had ended up this way. But it was more important to think of what to do next, rather than get stuck on the past. Knowing how this happened wouldn't change the fact that I had to do something.

If I didn't use Myne's memories to fully understand my surroundings, my family would quickly get suspicious. I began to slowly digest Myne's many memories. I tried thinking as far back as I could, but her memories were those of a very young girl with a weak grasp on language. She didn't clearly understand everything Mom and Dad said, so there was a lot she didn't know. My vocabulary was so lacking that over half of these memories were meaningless.

"Oh gosh, what do I do...?"

From the visuals of her memories, I determined a few things. One, my family consisted of four people: My mom, Effa; my older sister, Tuuli; and my dad, Gunther. It seemed like Dad was working as a soldier or something.

The most shocking thing of all, however, was that this world was not my own. My memories of my bandanna-wearing mom showed that she had light green hair, a color best described as jade. It wasn't an unnatural dyed green, either. She really had green hair. Green so realistic I wanted to pull her hair and make sure it wasn't a wig.

By the way, Tuuli had green hair and Dad had blue hair. My own hair was dark blue. I didn't know whether I should be happy my hair was close to black as I was used to, or sad that it wasn't actually black.

There were apparently no mirrors in this residence — something like an apartment located on the upper floor of a tall building — so no matter how much I explored my memories, I couldn't find any details on my appearance beyond that. If I were to guess based on how good my parents and Tuuli looked, I probably didn't look half bad myself. Though my appearance had no relevance to me as long as I could read books, so I wasn't that worried about it. I didn't look that amazing as Urano, after all. I could live without being cute.

“Haaah. Really, I just want to read books. I feel like my fever would vanish if I had a book in hand.”

I can survive anywhere as long as I’ve got books. I’ll endure anything. So please. Books. Let me have books. I placed a finger on my chin and began searching my memory for books. *Let’s see. I wonder where they’re hiding all the books in this place.*

“Myne, you’re awake?” As if to intentionally interrupt my thoughts, a young girl that looked about seven years old stepped lightly into my room.

It was Tuuli, my older sister. Her green hair, tied into a slightly misshapen braid, was so dry I could immediately tell she wasn’t washing it at all. Just like Mom, I wished she would wash her face. She was also wasting her good looks.

The reason I thought that was probably due to my upbringing in Japan, a country so fixated on cleanliness that other countries considered us to be obsessive. But I didn’t care about that. There were more important things in the world. And right now, there was one thing I needed to prioritize above everything else.

“Tuuli, would you bring me a (book)?” My older sister was old enough to know how to read, so surely there were at least a dozen picture books lying around. I could still read despite being sick and bedridden. *It’s a miracle I got reborn like this, since I care more about reading the books of this different world than anything else.*

Unfortunately, Tuuli just looked at me in confusion despite my sweet smile. “Huh? What’s a (book)?”

“You don’t know...? Ummm, they’re things with (letters) and stuff (written) on them. Some have (illustrations), too.”

“Myne, what are you even saying? Can’t you talk properly?”

“I’m telling you, a (book)! I want a (picture book).”

“What’s that? I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Apparently, words that weren’t in Myne’s memories ended up coming out as Japanese, so Tuuli just shook her head in confusion no matter how hard I tried to explain what I wanted.

“Aaah, geez! (Do your job, auto translatooor!)”

“Why are you mad, Myne?”

“I’m not mad. My head just hurts.”

Looks like my first job will be to pay attention to everything people say and try to learn as many new words as possible. With Myne’s youthful brain and my college graduate wits and knowledge, learning this language should be a piece of cake. I... I hope it’ll be cake.

Even when I was Urano, I worked hard with a dictionary in hand to understand foreign books. If I thought of learning this world’s language as a means to read the books here, I wouldn’t mind the effort at all. My love and passion for books was so great that it pushed people away from me.

“...You’re mad because you still have a fever?” Tuuli reached out her dirty hand, likely trying to feel how hot my forehead was.

I reflexively grabbed her hand. “I’m still sick, you’ll catch it too.”

“That’s true. I’ll be careful.”

Safe. By acting like I was worried about her, I could avoid things I didn’t like. I managed to avoid getting touched by Tuuli’s dirty hand using the advanced social techniques of adults. She wasn’t a bad older sister, but I didn’t want her to touch me before getting clean. Or so I thought, before looking down at my own filthy hands and sighing.

“Haaah. I want to take a (bath). My head’s itchy.” The moment I murmured that, Myne’s memories informed me of the unfortunate truth: The best I would get was a bucket of water to dump over my head and a tattered rag to rub against myself.

Noooo! You can’t call that a bath. Also, there’s no toilet here?! Just a chamber pot?! Give me a break. Attention, whichever god put me here... I wanted to live somewhere modern and convenient.

My environment was so bad it honestly made me want to cry. When I was Urano, I lived in a very normal household. I never had any problems with food, clothes, using the bathroom, or getting books. This new life was a huge

downgrade.

I... I miss Japan. It was filled with so many wonderful things I took for granted. Soft washcloths, comfortable beds, books, books, books... But no matter how much nostalgia I felt, I had no choice but to live in this new world. Crying wouldn't get me anywhere. I had to teach my family the value of cleanliness.

As far as I could tell from my memories, Myne was a weak little girl who often had fevers and ended up bedridden for days at a time. Most of her memories involved the bed. If I didn't improve my environment, I would probably be dead before long. I could imagine from the poor conditions I was put in while sick that it would be ideal to avoid needing medical attention at all costs.

...I need to clean up this room and figure out how to take baths ASAP. I'm the kind of lazy person that avoided chores as much as possible even with convenient modern electronics. I cared more about reading books than helping my mom. Am I gonna be able to live here?

I shook my head to get those thoughts out of my mind. *No, no. Like I said, it's a miracle I got reincarnated at all. I need to be more positive. How lucky! I get to read books that don't even exist on Earth! ...Okay. I'm getting enthusiastic again.*

First, in order to focus on reading books without worrying, I had to take care of my body. I slowly shut my eyes so I could rest. As my consciousness faded into darkness, one thought dominated my mind:

I don't care what it is. I just want to read a book as soon as possible. Aaah, whichever god put me here, please pity me and grant me a book! Also, this might be asking for a bit much, but I want a library filled to the brim with books too.

Exploring My Home

Three days had passed since I became Myne. Those were three very intense days. I had survived several brutal battles I couldn't talk about without crying.

First of all, I snuck out of bed to try and look around the house for books, but Mom found me and forced me back into bed. She got super mad. I tried several times to escape but failed every time. Every single time. It got so bad that she'd put me back in bed every time she saw me unless I was using the bathroom!

In the end, I didn't get any chances to look for books. Not only that, but even though using the toilet was the only freedom offered to me, it too ended up as a terrible struggle. The "bathroom" in this place was a chamber pot in the corner of the bedroom.

To make matters worse, Myne apparently couldn't use the toilet on her own before now, so I had to relieve myself while a family member watched. No matter how much I screamed *"I can do it on my own! Don't watch!"*, nobody budged. They got mad at me, asking what I'd do if I got pee everywhere.

I ended up using the pot while crying, and believe it or not, Tuuli complimented me. "Wow, Myne! You've gotten really good at this. Soon you'll be able to do it on your own," she said. I could appreciate that she was happy for her little sister growing up, but my pride, dignity, and self-respect as a human being were in tatters.

By the way, not only did my family use the bathroom in a chamber pot, they even dumped it right out the window. Unbelievable.

Changing clothes was a fearsome struggle as well. I tried doing it on my own, but my dad, who I barely knew all things considered, took charge and changed my clothes for me. That was so embarrassing I actually started to cry, insisting I could do it on my own, but he just interpreted that as me throwing a tantrum. Absolutely unbelievable.

Since my original dad had died when I was young, I didn't really understand

how to interact with a father. Although Myne's memory told me I loved him, I could only see him as a mean-looking muscular guy. He was super strong thanks to working as a soldier, and all my resistance was crushed before his might.

Three days of constantly losing to my family resulted in my young maidenly heart and sense of shame getting torn to shreds.

I'm a young girl. My family has to take care of me. This is just how things have to be. ...If I don't think like that, I'll just die! I can't take this any longer! This life is too much! Or so I screamed in my head, but there really was no helping my situation. Even if I ran away from home, a weak and sickly girl like me wouldn't be able to do anything on her own. I'd just end up running through the streets in search of a shower, screaming in horror amid the waste raining from above, until I eventually died miserably of hunger.

Although it may have sounded like I'd experienced nothing but failure here, that wasn't the case. I had my own small victories. For example, after being unable to bear my own filth, I asked Tuuli to wipe my body over with a warm cloth each day and she accepted. I mean, if I'm going to get stripped anyway, why would I not have her wipe me clean? I'm past the point of shame here.

I wonder if the people of this world have something against wiping each other's bodies. Tuuli looked at me really weirdly each time she did it, but I felt great. The hot water in the bucket ended up filthy the first day, but lately it always ended up a lot more clear. That said, my head was still itchy. I knew we didn't have any, but I wanted shampoo.

There was something else I managed to get, too: a hair stick to keep my hair together! I asked for a wooden stick to keep my long, straight hair from getting everywhere, and Tuuli actually carved one out of a piece of wood for me.

Well, the first thing I did was find Tuuli's doll and ask if I could snap it's leg off, which made her cry. I do feel bad about that. But to be fair, even though it was precious to her with pieces carved out of wood by Dad and clothes sewn by Mom, it just kinda looked like a cheap toy to me. I didn't know it was so important at a glance.

Anyway. I rolled my hair into a bun, but Tuuli told me that only adults wore all of their hair up like that, so I settled on a half-up hairstyle. *This world's culture*

sure is different.

I was stuck humiliating myself every day, so the only thing left for me to do was get on my two feet and improve things however I could. To that end, I needed books.

The first step to improving my life here would be getting books. With books, I wouldn't mind spending my whole life in bed, and I could deal with the harsher aspects of life. I could, and I would.

So, I decided to explore my home today through any means necessary. I hadn't read any books in a long time and withdrawal symptoms were beginning to show. It wouldn't be long before I started screaming *"Books, give me boooks! Waaah!"* while sobbing and flailing.

"Myne, are you asleep?" Tuuli opened the door and popped her head in. After seeing that I was still quietly lying in bed, she nodded to herself in satisfaction.

Over the past three days, I had constantly snuck out of bed after waking up and tried looking for books, so both Mom and Tuuli — who had been taking care of me most of the time — were completely on guard. Tuuli in particular was desperate to keep me in bed while Mom was at work throughout the day, since she had been entrusted with babysitting me. My small body was incapable of beating Tuuli, no matter how hard I tried to run away.

"One day, I'm gonna (ascend) out of here."

"What was that, Myne?"

"...Mmm? I just said that I can't wait to grow up."

Tuuli, naturally not noticing the true intent behind my sugar-coated words, gave a troubled smile. "You'll get a lot bigger once your sickness goes away. You're sick all the time, so you barely eat. Sometimes people think you're three years old even though you're already five."

"What about you, Tuuli?"

"I'm six years old, but a lot of people think I'm seven or eight, so I think I'll be okay."

We were born a year apart and there's this much of a difference between us?

Looks like my ascension might end up being a little harder than I thought. But I won't give up. I'll clean this place up, eat carefully, and get healthy in no time.

"Mom went to work, so I'm going to go wash the dishes. Don't get out of bed, okay? No matter what. You won't get better if you don't sleep, and if you don't get better, you won't grow."

I had been acting nice for the past day in order to loosen up Tuuli's guard, quietly waiting in bed for the moment she left.

"Okay, I'm going. Be good while I'm gone."

"Okaaaay." I gave Tuuli the answer she wanted and she shut the bedroom door.

Heh... Heh heh heh...! Now, hurry up and leave.

I quietly waited for Tuuli to gather the dishes into a basket and take them outside. I didn't know where she washed them, but I knew she generally went outside for thirty minutes when doing so. Our home didn't have water, so I could extrapolate that there was a shared source of water outside somewhere. I heard the clink of the lock and then listened as Tuuli's footsteps disappeared down the steps.

Okaaay... It's hunting time. Tuuli's definitely old enough to have a few picture books around the place. I'll find some books in no time once I start looking. Definitely. No way there's a house without books in it. I probably won't be able to actually read the book, but I'll be able to imagine what's going on from the pictures and guess what the words mean.

Once Tuuli's footsteps had completely vanished, I stealthily slipped out of bed. I winced a little after my feet touched the floor; it was covered in dirt and felt grimy. My family had made it filthy walking around with their dirty shoes, and although I dreaded walking on it with my bare feet, Tuuli had taken away my clog-like wooden shoes to prevent me from going anywhere. I had no choice.

Well... Finding books is more important than keeping my feet clean, anyway.

The bed which I had been locked in for days due to my unrelenting fever had a basket beside it filled with children's toys made from wood and straw, but no

books. “It would be a lot easier for me if they were just in here...”

I could feel dirt rubbing against the bottom of my feet each time I walked. It was normal in this family to keep shoes on in the house, so I knew nothing would come from me complaining. I knew it, but I couldn’t help myself.

“Would someone bring me a broom and rag, pleeease?” Naturally, no one responded to my call, and neither a broom nor rag magically appeared from nowhere.

“Ngggh! Am I already in trouble?” To me, the biggest hurdle to exploring the house was the bedroom door. I could kind of reach the doorknob if I stretched really, really hard, but actually turning it was a lot harder than I expected.

I looked around the room for something I could step on, and noticed the large box that contained my clothing. “Nmmn...!” I would have had no problem moving it back in my Urano days, but my hands were so small now that I couldn’t make it budge no matter how hard I pushed. I thought about turning the toy-filled basket upside down and standing on it since I was so small anyway, but I was still probably heavy enough that it’d end up crushed.

“I need to grow up fast. There’s so many things I can’t do with this body.”

I looked around the room and, after thinking about what I could move, settled on balling up my parents’ comforter to use as a stepping stool. I would hate putting my own comforter on this dirty floor, but as my parents were used to living in this filth, I was sure they wouldn’t mind me using theirs. Definitely. *Um... I’m sorry, Mom. Dad. There’s nothing I won’t do if books are on the line, even if it means I’ll get yelled at later.*

“Oof.” I got on the balled-up comforter and somehow managed to turn the doorknob using all of my body weight.



The door opened with a creak. toward me.

“Bwuh?!”

I had been pulling down on the handle with my body weight, and the door shot toward me. I hurriedly let go before it hit me in the head, but it was too late. I fell backwards and rolled down the balled-up comforter before hitting the floor with a loud thump.

“Oooow...” I stood up, holding my head, and saw that at least the door had stayed open. *This head pain is a means to a noble end.*

I slipped into the open crack and shoved the door all the way open, sliding my parents’ comforter across the floor. It looked like that part of the floor had suddenly gotten cleaner, but I pretended I hadn’t seen anything. I hadn’t intended to make the comforter that much dirtier.

I’m... I’m really sorry.

“Oh, it’s the kitchen.” I left the bedroom and saw that there was a kitchen right outside it. Well, it wasn’t exactly fancy enough to be called a kitchen. It was like a place you could choose to cook, but wouldn’t really want to.

There was a smallish table in the center of the room with two three-legged chairs and a long box that likely also served as a seat. On the right was a cabinet with a handle, probably with dishes stored inside. The wall closest to the bedroom had nails in it with metal pots, ladles, and pans hanging off of them. There was a furnace near them that probably worked as a stove. A string connected two walls and had dirty rags hanging off of it — they looked so dirty they’d probably make whatever they touched even more unclean.

“Yuuuck. I think I know why I’m sick all the time.”

The corner opposite from the furnace had a large water jug and a sink-like water basin. As expected, there was no running water. To top things off, there was a large basket filled with potatoes, onions, and other food products. There were a lot of things I didn’t recognize, so it was possible that the potatoes weren’t actually potatoes at all.

“Hm? This one is... kind of like an avocado. I wonder if I can get oil from it?” I looked through the food and found one fruit in particular that interested me. If I could extract oil from it, I might be able to do something about my itchy head.

My mom from back in my Urano days had a habit of getting obsessed with one random thing after another. She could only be described as whimsical to a fault. She made whatever was in front of her at the time the focal point of her life: TV shows about saving money, magazine articles about living in nature, foreign activities in a cultural center, anything. She always dragged me along with her, saying she “wanted me to get interested in something other than books,” but I knew she only ever got involved with things that interested her. Having no other choice, I tagged along every time, and thanks to that I might’ve learned just enough to make shampoo on my own.

...Thank you, Mom. I think I might just survive over here. Encouraged by my findings, I looked around the room and saw that there were two doors other than the bedroom door.

“Eheh. Left or right door, which one’s the prize?” The kitchen didn’t look like it had a bookshelf anywhere. I saw that one of the two doors was cracked open, so I pulled it all the way.

“Mmm, a storage room? Guess this isn’t it.” It was a room packed with stuff I didn’t really understand the purpose of. There were shelves with stuff on them, but it was a real mess and it didn’t seem like the kind of place that would have a bookshelf.

I gave up on it and tried opening the other door. It made a clicking sound when I pulled on it, signaling that it was locked. Minutes of trying to open it yielded no results. The door would not open.

“...Wait. Is this the door Tuuli left from? Wha? Is that all?” If this door led outside, then our home had no bathtub, no toilet, no running water, and no bookshelves. It had nothing. No matter how hard I looked, I couldn’t find any other rooms.

...Um, God, do you hate me? Is this a cruel joke? I asked to be reborn so that I could keep reading books even after I died. I didn’t intend to be transported to another world with my Japanese memories and customs, forced to live in a

home with no bathtub, no toilet, and no water. I thought for sure you'd take me to a world filled with books.

"...Maybe books are expensive here?" According to my knowledge of history, books were extremely expensive until the invention of the printing press led to their mass production. Those not born into a rich or noble life would generally never read a single book in their lives. In which case, this wouldn't be the kind of world where you give your neighbor's kid a picture book as a birthday gift.

"Ngh, fine. I'll start looking for letters first instead." I didn't absolutely need books in order to study this world's writing system. Posters, newspapers, manuals, calendars, and all sorts of things naturally had letters written on them. Or they did in Japan, at least.

"...Nothing. There's no letters anywhere! Not a single one!"

I had walked around the rooms searching every shelf and cabinet I could find, but not only had I not found any books, I didn't even find anything with a single letter on it. I couldn't find letters or paper.

"What's going on here?" My head started to hurt, as if a fever had burst up within me out of nowhere. My heart throbbed and I could feel it screaming out, valves tightening. I dropped to the ground like a doll with its strings cut. My eyes burned on the inside.

Well, okay, I got crushed by books. No helping that. That was basically my dream of dying buried by books. Fine. And it was true that I myself had asked to be reincarnated. I understand all that.

...But you know, there aren't any books here. There aren't even letters. Not even paper! Can I really live in a place like this? Do I have any reason to live?

A tear dripped down my cheek. I had never even once thought about a world without books. Such a thing was unfathomable to me. And yet here I was. Unable to think of a single reason to live on in this world as Myne, I felt my insides go hollow. I couldn't stop crying.

"Myne! Why aren't you in bed?! Don't walk around without your shoes on!" Tuuli had gotten home at some point and, seeing me on the kitchen floor,

shouted with her blue eyes open wide in anger.

“...Tuuli, there aren’t any (books)?”

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling okay?”

“Tuuli, I want (books). I want to read (books). I want to read them so much, but there aren’t any (books).”

Tuuli called out to me, worried, as tears dripped down my cheeks. But she was completely used to a world without books. She wouldn’t understand my pain no matter what I said to her.

...Is there anyone out there who can understand me? Anyone who knows where I can go to get books? Someone, tell me. Please.

Exploring the City

Yesterday, I cried and cried and cried. My parents got mad at me for dropping their comforter on the ground, and dinnertime came, but I just kept crying without reacting that much. When morning came, I had cried so much that my eyes were dry and puffy. My head pounded with pain.

But my fever had gone down, and I didn't feel nearly as sluggish. Plus, I felt a lot better in general since I had cried my heart out. Though my family basically had no idea how to treat me at breakfast.

"Mmm, looks like your fever has gone down." Mom touched my forehead with a hand that was cold from having just washed dishes. She also lightly pressed it against my swollen eyes. The cold felt so good. "If you're feeling better, Myne, would you like to go to the market with me? One's being held today."

Wait... Didn't she say something about this being the busiest time of the year at her dyeing job, and that she had to go to work even while I was sick with a fever?

Mom, seeing my confusion, lowered her eyes sadly. "It's been so long since Tuuli's had a chance to go outside instead of taking care of you, and she was so worried yesterday when you wouldn't stop crying. The only thing we could think of was that you got lonely on your own, so I made the effort to convince my coworkers to cover for me today."

Upon hearing that, I gasped. *I can't believe I actually cried all day with people watching! I want to dig a hole and jump inside of it.* Not much was worse than calming down and realizing how hard you embarrassed yourself the day before.

"U-Um, I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize, Myne. We all feel weak-hearted when we're sick." Mom rubbed my head gently, consoling me, but the kinder she was the more guilty I felt.

I'm really, really sorry. I cried exclusively out of despair over the lack of books. I didn't feel lonely without you at all. Tuuli was that worried about me, but I just cared about her leaving so I could look for books. I'm so sorry.

"Tuuli's going to the forest with everyone else, but you're still too weak for that. Want to go shopping with Mommy?"

"Uh huh!"

"Oh my, I wonder where that enthusiasm came from." Mom smiled happily, thinking that I was excited to be spending time with her, and I responded with a bright smile of my own. "Ahaha, I knew you would be excited for this."

Mom looked so happy that I didn't go out of my way to correct her — my enthusiasm had just shot through the roof since I was excited about potentially finding a book outside.

I would go shopping with her and have her buy me a book. I didn't need a thick book in particular. Anything that I could use to learn this world's writing system would be enough. Honestly, I'd be fine with a workbook aimed at children. If a book was too much, I'd settle for a chart of this world's alphabet or whatever.

I'm sure if I say, "I won't be lonely if I have a book! I'll stay home alone all day every day!" in a really cute voice, she'll buy a picture book or two for her sick little daughter. Eheheh. I can't wait.

"Okay, Mom. I'll be back later!" Tuuli peered into the bedroom with a full smile. Since Mom was staying home, she didn't have to babysit me all day.

"Stay with the other kids, okay? Be careful."

"Okaaay." Tuuli strapped a large basket onto her back and skipped out of the house. It seemed like she was going out to play and have fun, but she was actually helping out the family in a crucial way: collecting firewood. She would also grab nuts, mushrooms, and other stuff while she was at it. Whether or not we had good, cheap meals each day depended largely on Tuuli.

Um... Do your best, Tuuli! My lunch is counting on you!

This poverty-stricken world didn't have any schools, so children largely helped

around the house or had jobs. Or at the least, schools never came up in Myne's memories. Once kids got a little older than Tuuli, they began working as apprentices. If given the choice, I would've preferred to work as an apprentice librarian, or apprentice book saleswoman. Going to the market would provide the perfect opportunity to gather information on this kind of thing. I'd find the nearest bookstore, befriend the owner, and become an apprentice there.

"Okay, Myne. Let's go shopping."

It was the first time I was leaving home since becoming Myne and my first time wearing anything other than pajamas. My outfit was made up of worn out hand-me-downs from Tuuli and I had to put on several layers of the thick clothing. I was so bundled up it was kinda hard to walk, but nonetheless I took Mom's hand and took my first step outside our home.

...So cold! So narrow! So stinky! Perhaps due to this being a stone building, it felt like cold air was flowing from the walls themselves and not even my several layers of clothing could stop me from feeling a chill. I really would have liked to have a fleece jacket or some hand warmers. Not to mention a mask to block the smell and help stave off a cold.

"Myne, be careful not to fall." Right outside our home was a staircase leading down the building. My body was the size of a three-year-old toddler's and each step was so large they filled me with terror. As Mom pulled me forward, I practically jumped down each wooden step one by one, listening to them creak as we spiraled down to the bottom of the building. For some reason, only the steps from the second floor downward were made out of pretty stone.

We all live in the same building, why do they get special treatment? I pursed my lips, pouting, as we finally reached the bottom and went outside. If my counting was accurate, we were in the apartment on the fifth floor out of seven. To be honest, for someone as weak, small, and sickly as me, just getting out of the house was enough to be exhausting. Now I knew why almost all of my memories took place inside. Even now, I was out of breath by the time I got outside. It seemed likely that I would just pass out before we reached our destination.

"Haaah, haaah... Mom, it's hard to breathe. Wait a second."

“But all we’ve done is leave the house. Are you okay?”

“I just... need a little, break...”

As I steadied my breath and reminded myself I needed to shape up if I wanted to reach a bookstore, I looked around to get a grasp of my surroundings. A short distance away from our housing complex was a small plaza with a well in the middle. Only the ground around the well was paved with stone, and I could see several older women talking while washing their clothes. That was definitely the well Tuuli used to wash dishes and get our daily water.

“I’ll carry you on my back, Myne.” Mom, who must have thought our shopping would never get done if she waited for me, somewhat forcefully plopped me onto her back and started walking away. I couldn’t remember this myself, but judging by how she had something like a baby carrier on her back, she was probably used to carrying Myne around.

The plaza with the well was surrounded by tall apartment-like housing complexes on all four sides, with just one path leading to the outside. After passing through the narrow, dark alleyway, we emerged onto a large road.

Wow! This looks exactly like one of the old European cities I’ve seen photos of. An unfamiliar scene spread out before me, with carts pulled by horses and donkey-like creatures passing each other by on a wide cobblestone road dotted on either side by stores. I spun around, looking everywhere like a tourist in my quest to find a bookstore.

“Mom, which store are we going to?”

“What are you saying, Myne? We’re going to the market. We almost never go to any stores.” According to Mom, most of the stores near ground level sold products for relatively rich individuals and had little that poor commoners like us could buy. We bought the majority of our daily goods at an actual marketplace.

Mmm, in other words, a bookstore is probably a ground floor store just like these? I looked around for a bookstore while Mom walked, and soon saw an especially large building that would serve as a solid landmark. It was made of white stone and, despite its simple design, there was a sort of majesty to it that made it stand out.

“Um, is that a castle?”

“No, that’s the temple. You’ll be going there to be baptized when you turn seven.”

Aaaah... A temple. It sounds like religion is enforced here, which sucks. I’ll try to avoid that place as much as possible.

My instincts and knowledge from my past life made me want to keep my distance from religion. But I didn’t know if this world would be too kind to an atheist, so I kept my mouth shut and looked at the walls surrounding the temple.

“Mom, what are those walls?”

“Those are castle ramparts. Inside is the castle where our lord lives, and the mansions where nobles live. Well, in the end, nothing behind those walls has much to do with you and me.”

The tall stone walls looked more like the gate to a prison than grounds where royalty lived within a castle. Maybe it would look even more like a prison if the guards were ever on high alert and defending against something. The blank white walls continued on either side, and although it looked like they had been designed with imposing dignity in mind without any artistic flourishes, they didn’t quite feel like the brutish walls of a fortress. It felt like they had been built only for the purpose of separation, and would be defenseless if ever actually attacked.

Mmm... They do look a little different from the European castles I’ve seen in historical films and stuff.

“Okay, Mom. What about those other walls?”

“Those are the outer walls. They protect the city. You know Gunther works as a guard at the southern gate, don’t you?”

I knew from Myne’s memories that Dad worked as a soldier, but I didn’t know that he guarded one of the gates to the city.

Hm... There’s a castle where the lord of these lands lives, and there’s both outer and inner walls here. I guess it’s safe to consider this a capital city? It

doesn't seem like that big of a city, judging by the length of the walls and how many people are walking around. But I shouldn't think on the scale of Tokyo or Yokohama anymore.

It would be a huge city in comparison to the historical fortress cities I read about in my past life, but in this world where it's normal to have green and blue hair, there were no guarantees that my Urano knowledge would remain accurate. It would be risky to settle on the idea of this being a large or small city before I learned more about the world.

...Aaah, the size of a city will change what kind of bookstores it'll have, but I don't understand what makes a big city here! Is this city big?! Is it small?! Tell me, someone!

"Myne, we need to hurry to the market. Everything good will get snapped up before we get there."

I looked around desperately in search of a bookstore on our way to the market, but most of the stores on either side of us just had simple drawings on their signboards. The signs were either wooden with the art painted on, or metal with the art engraved into them, but either way I didn't see anything resembling letters. That was good for someone like me, who couldn't read the letters anyway, but a cold chill was starting to run up my spine.

...Wait. Um, I don't think I've seen a single letter in this whole city. Is the literacy rate that low? Or does writing itself not exist in this world? The very idea made my blood run cold. I hadn't even considered the possibility of a world without letters. Without letters, books couldn't exist in the first place.

We reached the market while I was still stunned. I lifted up my head at the cacophony of noises and saw a lively bunch of stands lined up next to each other with plenty of people passing through. It looked so much like a Japanese cultural festival that I felt a little nostalgic. I subconsciously smiled and, after peering into a nearby fruit stall, saw something that shocked me to the point of smacking my mom's shoulder.

"Mom, look! What's that board?!" A board with some symbols written on it was stuck into a box with fruit in it. I couldn't read them, but at the very least, that confirmed that this world had letters or numbers or something. I was so

starved for letters that the mere sight of such symbols was enough to make my face flush with excitement.

“Oh, that’s the price. It tells us how much we need to pay.”

“Hey, Mom. What’s it say?”

Mom looked surprised at how excited I was getting, but I didn’t care about that. I had her read out the numbers on each board I saw, and I could feel them start to connect with the letters I already knew.

Okay, great! Keep it up, my precious synapses!

“Okay, so this says thirty Lions?” After Mom had read out several numbers to me, I tried reading some numbers on my own while gauging her reaction. I must have been right, given how she turned her head around to look at me while blinking rapidly.

“I’m really surprised you learned them that fast, Myne.”

“Eheh.” There were ten distinct symbols for what seemed to be numbers, so I assumed operating with base-10 math would be fine. *I’m really glad they don’t use base-2 or base-60. I should be able to do math no problem if I can just memorize all the symbols.*

...Oh wait, am I going down the child prodigy path here? At age ten I’ll be God’s gift to mankind and at age fifteen I’ll be a genius, but once I hit twenty I’ll just be a normal person. Oh well.

Books: Unobtainable

“Okay, we’re getting meat next. We need to buy lots of it and then salt or smoke it to make it last.” After buying some vegetables and fruits, Mom headed deeper into the market. The stands selling meat were apparently closer to the outer walls.

“Why are we buying lots of it?”

“We need to prepare for winter, don’t we? It’s late autumn, so all the farms are butchering most of their animals and leaving just enough to survive the winter. More meat is sold now than at any other time of the year. Plus, animals tend to pack on weight in preparation for hibernating. Tasty, fatty meat is a lot easier to get right now.”

“...Umm, does that mean the market goes away during the winter?”

“Isn’t that obvious? There’s hardly any crops you can farm in the winter. The snow’s terrible too, so barely any markets are held during the winter.”

It was obvious now, but I hadn’t thought about that at all. Even in Japan, back in the time before home greenhouses became popular, fruits and vegetables were seasonal and would disappear from store shelves until they were put back on the market later. In an age before freezers and refrigerators made it possible to store food in a fresh state, people had to make non-perishable food in their own homes. So basically, in this world, it’s natural to buy and cure food.

To be honest, I didn’t really see myself being that helpful with any of that. *I’m really glad I was reincarnated as a little girl that won’t get yelled at for not being a help around the house.*

“...I-It stinks.” The foul air got worse the closer we got to the meat stands. I had to hold my nose to bear it, but Mom kept walking forward without batting an eye. I could hardly believe it. The smell was so bad not even holding my nose closed was enough; it snuck through my mouth and hit me so hard tears formed in my eyes, and yet she didn’t seem bothered at all.

Has meat always smelled this bad? Ngggh, I've got a bad feeling about this.

We reached the meat stands. Strips of bacon and ham were hanging from the top, plus completely recognizable animal corpses that had obviously just had their skin peeled off. Within the stands were dead animals hanging off hooks, being drained of blood, and beneath them were wide-eyed rabbits and birds.

"HIGGYAAAAAAAAH!" I may have seen pictures of skinned animals before, but all the meat I ever saw in real life had always been pre-sliced and put in packs. The meat stands of this world were far too shocking for me. Goosebumps rose across my skin and tears dripped out of my eyes. I wanted to shut my eyes to block it all out, but my eyes remained locked open, as if I had forgotten how to close them.

"Myne?! Myne!" Mom shook me a little and spanked my rear end. But a second later, I saw a pig squealing in fear as a butcher prepared to chop it up. A crowd of grinning people surrounded it, eagerly awaiting the moment of its death.

"Ah!" I let out a small cry and, right before the pig's last moments, passed out on my mother's back.

Something flowed into my mouth. It was a liquid that smelled so strongly of alcohol I wanted to gag. I didn't want to drink it, and the unexpected liquid went into my windpipe. Coughing hard, I shot up while blinking rapidly. *Cough!* "Ngggh!" *Cough, cough!*

Um, was that alcohol?! Who in the world would give an innocent little girl strong alcohol like that! What'll you do if I get acute alcohol poisoning?! I opened my eyes wide and saw my mom, holding what looked like a wine bottle.

"Myne, you're awake? Thank goodness. The stimulant really did work."

Cough! "Mom...?" She was holding me with a really relieved look on her face, so I couldn't just say it out loud, but allow me to rant a little on the inside.

Stimulant or not, why the heck would you ever give a child alcohol that strong?! And I mean, a weak little girl that's always sick and just recovered from a bad fever that nearly killed her, too!

“Okay, Myne. Now that you’re awake, let’s go buy some meat.”

“Bwuh?!” I shook my head on instinct. What I had just seen was already burned into my retinas. It was so horrible I’d probably have nightmares about it, and just thinking about it gave me goosebumps. I never wanted to go there again. “...Ummm, I still feel kinda sick. Can I stay here? You can go on ahead, Mom.”

“What? But...” Mom furrowed her brows.

I looked around and decided to ask the older lady managing the stand behind us for help. I needed somewhere to stay before Mom dragged me away.

“Um, ma’am, can I please stay here for a little bit? I’ll be still and won’t get in your way.”

“You sure are a polite little girl, aren’t you? Your mother bought some alcohol from me, so I don’t mind. Miss, go ahead and finish your shopping. You don’t want to pull your sick child around and make her pass out again, do you?” The alcohol-selling lady, who had seemingly sold mom that “stimulant,” cackled to herself and easily accepted my request.

The middle-aged man running what looked like a pawn stand nearby looked at me sympathetically and gestured me over. “You can come stay behind my stand. Nobody will kidnap you back here.”

I went behind his stand and sat on the ground without hesitation. The strong alcohol from before was stirring around in my body. It’d be dangerous for me to walk around in that state.

“I’ll be right back. Myne, don’t go anywhere, okay?” As Mom hurried off to finish her shopping, I stayed sitting down and lazily stared at the wares of the two stands. This was apparently the season where she got new shipments of fruit wine, so customer after customer walked up to buy small barrels of it from her.

On the other hand, not many people stopped by the pawn stand. *Hm... I wonder what people even pawn in this world?* I took a look at the wares surrounding me and I didn’t recognize what more than half of them were used for.

I pointed at the stuff lined in front of me and asked the older man what one of them was. “Mister, what’s thiiis?”

“You haven’t used one before? It’s something you use when weaving cloth. And this is a trap used for hunting.” The older man seemed a little bored from the lack of customers, so he gave me explanations for everything I pointed at.

Almost everything considered normal for daily life in this city was something I didn’t recognize. Even when searching through Myne’s memories, I found that she hadn’t been familiar with any of them either, maybe due to a lack of interest.

I looked at his line of products, letting out awed murmurs at their various purposes, and eventually reached the corner of his stand, where I found a thick and heavy stack of papers bound tightly — just like a book.

The binding was masterfully done, with gold carvings pressed into each corner of the cover. It was about forty centimeters tall and looked exactly like something I would have seen in a glass case back in the libraries I used to go to.

A book? Um, wait, isn’t that a book? The moment I realized the bound papers were actually a book, the world around me lit up in pink. My heart brightened and I felt as if the dark clouds that had surrounded me for days had finally been swept away.

“M-Mister! What’s this? What is it?!”

“Oh, that’s a book.”

...Yes! I finally found one! Here’s a book! It’s just one, but it’s here! In the midst of my despairing over whether or not books even existed in this world, I had finally found one. I looked at the bound paper while trembling with emotion.

It was a fairly large and heavy-looking book with rich decoration. I wouldn’t be able to carry it with my weak, sickly arms. Plus, it definitely looked expensive, and I knew for sure my mom wouldn’t buy it no matter how hard I begged. But if books existed at all, that meant for sure that there would be smaller, easier to carry books out there.

I spun around and began interrogating the older man with clear desperation.

“Mister, do you know where they sell books?”

“What, like in a store? There aren’t any stores for books.” The older man looked at me, baffled at the mere idea.

My excitement immediately plummeted. “...Um, why are there books, but not stores that sell them?”

“You have to copy each book by hand to get a new one. They’re so expensive, there’s no market for them. Even that book is just something a noble pawned to pay back a debt, it’s not for sale. It’s looking like he won’t be paying me back in time, and although I’ll start selling it soon, only nobles will be interested, I’ll bet.”

Grrr, friggin’ nobles! This means I could’ve read books too if I were reborn as a noble, right? Why’d you make me a commoner, God? I felt a slightly murderous rage toward nobles. They were unfairly blessed to live surrounded by books from birth.

“Is this your first time seeing a book, little girl?”

I nodded over and over without looking away from the book. It was the first time I was seeing a book in this world, anyway. *And since only nobles deal with books, plus the lack of bookstores, this might end up being the last time too. Which means!*

“M-Mister! I have a request!” I clenched my fists tightly and, after standing up straight, immediately knelt onto the ground.

“Hrm? What’s this all of a sudden?” The older man opened his eyes wide in surprise as I grovelled on my hands and knees before him. It was just basic stuff that you need to show your sincerity when making a request. And the ultimate form of sincerity was pitiful grovelling. With my head held low, I told him my true feelings.

“I know that I can’t afford this book, but please, at least let me touch it. I want to rub my cheeks against it. I want to sniff the book and inhale the scent of its ink before it’s taken away from me!” Despite my passionate request, the only thing that followed was painful silence. He wasn’t replying to me.

I timidly rose my head bit by bit and saw that, for some reason, the older man

had a shocked and disgusted look on his face, as if he was looking at an unbelievable pervert up close. *Um...? It kinda feels like my sincerity didn't get across to him.*

"I-I don't know what's gotten into you... But I get the feeling I shouldn't let you touch that book."

"N-No way!" I tried to ask him again, but before I could, my time limit ran out.

"Myne, I'm back. Let's go."

I nearly cried after hearing Mom's voice. There was a book so close, but I hadn't read it. I hadn't touched it. I hadn't even smelled its scent.

"What's wrong, Myne? Did he do something to you?!"

"N-No, he didn't!" I hurriedly shook my head after Mom suddenly glared at the older man. If I didn't clear the misunderstanding up fast, I would be bringing trouble to the nice man who had sheltered me from the butcher and taught me about books. "My head feels weird. Mom, what did you make me drink? I've felt weird since waking up."

"...Aaah, the stimulant may have been a bit much for you. You'll be fine if you drink some water and rest when we get home." Mom nodded to herself, but didn't seem to regret making her child drink alcohol. She took my hand and pulled to get me walking home.

I twirled around to the two stand owners and smiled brightly. "Thank you for letting me stay here." It'd be bad for my mental health if I didn't thank them. According to Myne's memories, it wasn't customary to bow in this world, so I just settled for smiling and waving. Smiles were important in making human interactions successful. They saw me off with smiles on their faces too, so it must have worked.

"Myne, do you still feel bad?"

"...Mhm."

We talked little on the way home, me on Mom's back again. I looked again along the way, but there really weren't any bookstores. I had thought that I would beg for a child's picture book and slowly learn letters, but the day ended

without me getting anything.

All I learned was that there weren't any bookstores. I now lived in a city with a castle and magnificent stone gates, but it didn't have a single bookstore. Since that man said that books weren't really for selling, it was possible that this city wasn't special. Maybe there were no bookstores in the whole world.

This is awful. I loved books so much I could go days without eating as long as I could read, and now you're telling me to live life without books, God? That's just cruel. Even if I told my parents I wanted to become a noble in order to read books, they'd just treat me like a cute kid with big, silly dreams.

I couldn't tell them I didn't want to be born in this family. But at the very least, I would have liked to be born in a family with enough wealth to fish through a fallen noble's belongings and maybe get a book that way. My family's circumstances are so awful that I've already been beaten down by them. I know I won't get a book no matter how hard I cry or how many tantrums I throw. With no bookstores, I have no way of getting books.

...And what do I do if I can't get them? Well, what choice do I have but to make them myself? When the going gets tough, the tough get going. I'll get books no matter what! I won't let life beat me!

Lifestyle Overhaul

If there aren't any books, I'll just have to make them myself. My mood brightened with optimism after I came to that conclusion.

But unfortunately, there was no paper in my home. I had confirmed that while searching it for books. In short, I had to go buy paper, but I didn't know where it was sold. And once again, there were unfortunately no convenience stores, department stores, supermarkets, or office supply stores in this city.

So, where might paper be sold? Since the older man back at the pawn stand said that each book had to be copied by hand, it was possible that books with blank paper inside were sold somewhere. But where might that be?

Maybe there was a store that only sold paper. If I were in Japan, I could bind sheets of loose-leaf paper, write in notebooks, staple together copier paper, or do any number of things to quickly make my own makeshift books, but things were not so easy in this world. There was simply no paper at all in my home, so to make books, I first had to begin a search for paper.

We arrived home from the market as those thoughts spun through my mind, and coincidentally, Tuuli had just gotten back from the forest. Apparently, she had gone to get firewood, nuts, mushrooms, and various herbs to use for seasoning the meat.

"Hey, Tuuli. What'd you get? Lemme see, lemme see." I peered into the basket containing Tuuli's spoils and soon found one of the things I was looking for. She had gotten several of the avocado-like fruits I had found when searching the house earlier. I saw Mom crushing it for oil, so I knew for sure I'd be able to get fruit oil from it. "Wow! Can I have one of these?"

Tuuli thought about my request for a second before saying, "You want a meryl? Okay, you can have a couple," and giving me two of them.

“Thank you, Tuuli!” I rubbed my cheek against the meryl while going into the storage room to grab a hammer. *I can make shampoo with this!*

Excited, I brought the hammer down. *Slam!* The meryl exploded with a heavy squish, spraying juices all over both me and Tuuli, who had followed me to watch.

“...Hey, Myne. Why’d you do that?” Tuuli, without even wiping the juices off her face, gave me a bright smile with cold eyes.

I jerked a little in fear of her blatant anger. *Uh oh, this isn’t good. Tuuli looks really, really mad.* “U-Um, Tuuli. You see, ummm, well. I wanted oil, so...?”

“That’s not how you get oil from fruit! What’s wrong with you?!”

Geez... I can’t help that I don’t know the proper method. The Myne in my memories would always look away whenever Tuuli tried teaching her. Everything she’d said ended up so distorted I couldn’t understand it. Myne was apparently jealous to the point of frustration at Tuuli, who was healthy, energetic, and capable of doing everything she couldn’t.

So many of Myne’s memories were buried in her thoughts of “no fair,” it made me kind of not like her. *I mean, Tuuli’s such a nice older sister. She takes good care of me and teaches me what I did wrong even when she’s mad.*

I started to clean up the exploded meryl while Tuuli complained to me, but before I finished, Mom came back from the well and went red with anger after seeing what a mess the walls were. *She doesn’t care about the floor no matter how dirty it gets, but she cares this much about the walls?* I later learned that nobody really cared about dirt or soot, but fruit juice would eat into the wood of the walls and hurt them, which was a big deal.

After I finished cleaning, I looked between the crushed meryl, Mom, and Tuuli. I wanted oil as soon as possible, but I wasn’t sure if I should ask Mom or Tuuli for help. When in doubt, go for whoever’s less angry. I stealthily whispered to Tuuli. “Tuuli, Tuuli. How do you get oil from the fruit? Will you teach me?”

“Mom, can I teach Myne?” Despite my whispering, Tuuli just let out a loud sigh and called out to Mom.

“Haaah. Who knows what she’ll do if you don’t teach her. Go ahead,” said Mom while pointing at the storage room.

Really, I don’t think I can be blamed for messing up things I was never taught to do. If Myne’s memories were better, I wouldn’t make so many mistakes like this.

I followed Tuuli into the storeroom so she could teach me. The tools for extracting oil were all in there.

“The fruit’s juices and oil will seep into our table since it’s wood, so you can’t just crush it like that. You need to put this metal stand down first. Start by putting a cloth over it. Then wrap the fruit in the cloth. If you don’t, the oil will spray everywhere. But since most of a meryl can be eaten, we usually get oil from the core after eating the rest. I’ll teach you how to extract the oil after we get the seed out.”

“I know why you only want to use the seed for oil, but I don’t know how much of it I’ll need. I can’t wait that long. I’ll get oil from the rest of the meryl too.”

With that declaration made, I wrapped the meryl in the cloth as instructed and started hitting it with the hammer on top of the metal stand. The hammer was so heavy I could barely lift it, but after some hard work I felt the fruit gradually breaking apart. *Wow... Am I maybe amazing?*

“Is this how it’s done? Eheheh.” I squeezed the cloth to get the oil out, twisting it with lots of enthusiasm. A dark stain spread throughout the cloth. But that was all. A single drop of oil dripped through, but there seemed to be exactly no chance of me getting as much oil as I needed.

“Myne, that’s not good enough. Your aim is bad, you’re not hitting it hard, and your swinging posture is all wrong. You crushed the fruit, but the seed’s definitely not broken at all.”

“Awww... Tuuuuulii...” *I did my best, but it just wasn’t enough...* I looked at Tuuli for help, and she took the hammer from me after sighing in exasperation.

She tightened her grip around it and lifted it up high. *Slam! Slam!* With each heavy thud, the fruit and seed were crushed much faster and more thoroughly than when I hit them. “Dad can use juicing weights to get lots of oil without

using a hammer, but they're too heavy for us, so we have to break up the fruit bit by bit like this." Apparently, growing boys became entrusted with work for adults once they became strong enough to use juicing weights.

"Once the seed's completely crushed, you just squeeze the cloth like this, and..." The cloth had only gotten damp for me, but once Tuuli started squeezing, oil dripped steadily out of it into the small bowl below. I felt my respect for Tuuli grow three sizes as I watched the oil build up.

"Wooow! Tuuli, you're amazing! Thank you!"

"Remember to clean up once you're done, Myne. Come on, clean up."

I mean... I don't know what you mean by clean up, here. After seeing me kind of flounder in confusion, Tuuli shook her head and started showing me how.

She really does like taking care of people, I thought to myself while putting the tools away. Once I was done cleaning up, I peered into the bowl of thick, white oil and inhaled deeply. The stronger the scent, the better it would be for shampoo.

"Hey, Tuuli. Can I have some herbs too? Whatever smells the best."

"Just a little, okay?"

"Okay!" With Tuuli's permission, I took out some of the herbs from her basket and sniffed them one by one, picking the best ones and crushing them between my fingers over the bowl. If I could get their scent into the oil, the shampoo would probably end up smelling great. *Once the smell carries over, add a little salt...*

I started to think about how best to make the shampoo when I noticed Tuuli suddenly take the bowl of oil and start carrying it over to where Mom was making dinner.

"Tuuli! No, don't! What're you doing?!" I hurriedly snatched the bowl of oil away from her and squatted down, holding it close to my stomach protectively.

Tuuli, seeing that, put a hand on her hips. She was clearly angry. "It'll be ruined if we don't eat it soon, right? The oil will taste nasty if too much of the herb smell gets in it."

“You can’t eat this!” *I’m going to make shampoo with it, I won’t let anyone eat it!* No matter what Tuuli said, I had no intention of giving up my one shot at making shampoo. I had suffered with dirty hair for too long.

“Myne! Tuuli went out and gathered those herself! Don’t be selfish!” Mom got mad alongside Tuuli, but I had gotten her permission for both the meryl and the herbs, so they were mine. They weren’t hers anymore, they were mine.

“I’m not being selfish! She gave them to me!” I shook my head and prepared to defend my oil to the death. My head was so itchy I couldn’t bear it any longer, and a way to make shampoo was right in front of me. Nothing would get between it and me.

As if sensing that I wasn’t going to give it up no matter what, both of them sighed in exasperation and turned around. I inhaled deeply in relief at having protected my oil and mixed a pinch of salt into it. With that, the shampoo substitute I had made with my old mom when she got addicted to “natural living” was complete.

“Mom, can I have some hot water?” I laid out a waterproof cloth, usually for use when bathing, and put the bowl of oil onto it before bringing a bucket to Mom. I had been asking for some of the hot water she made with dinner each day, so she nodded and filled the bucket, which I then put on top of the waterproof cloth as well.

I reached out, ready to start washing, but stopped at the last moment. I wouldn’t be able to rinse my hair after rubbing the shampoo in like normal, since I only had one bucket. *How should I do this?*

“Mmm, I guess I’ll just try diluting it first.” My only choice was to dilute the shampoo until leaving some of it in my hair wouldn’t be an issue. I haphazardly poured the completed faux-shampoo into the bucket and stirred it up.

“Myne?! What’re you doing?!”

“Er? Washing my hair?”

Tuuli looked completely baffled. But given how I hadn’t seen any of them use shampoo once since I got here, I could assume that shampooing one’s hair wasn’t really a thing in this world, and thus she wouldn’t understand no matter

what I said. Instead, I would just show her what I'm doing. Seeing is believing.

I pulled my hairpin out, dipped my hair into the bucket, and began cleaning. I rubbed my hair within the water and repeatedly splashed water onto my head so that it would get all the way to the roots of my hair.

Then, I began gently massaging my head. My hands were weak and my arms short, which made it difficult. But even so, I repeated the motions until I was satisfied before squeezing my hair and wiping my head with a flimsy cloth that was a towel in name only.

After wiping my head several times to get as much shampoo off as possible, I ran a comb through my hair. My hair had gotten almost black with filth, but now it was closer to its original dark blue color.

Wow, this is actually looking pretty good. I ran my fingers through my hair and sniffed. It smelled slightly of jasmine. My life recently had involved living in the midst of body odor reeking of sweat and mud. The mere act of smelling something other than my own stink made me a little happy. Mission success.

"What? Huh? Myne, your hair's all pretty and dark blue now. It's like the night sky. And your eyes are like moons!"

Hm... I guess my eyes are gold or yellow, then. Now knowing the color of my eyes, I looked at Tuuli's blue ones and briefly thought about hereditary genetics before deciding it would be a fruitless waste of time.

"Myne, what's this?"

"Mmm, it's (simple all-in-one shampoo). Do you want to try it too? There's enough for us both." I noticed Tuuli's curious gaze and gestured her over to the bucket. We both slept in the same bed and it'd be better if we were both clean. Plus, her pretty face was wasted underneath all that dirt. I wanted Tuuli to be clean and maybe this would encourage her to make more shampoo for us.

"You're the one who gathered the meryl and herbs, Tuuli, so don't worry. You even squeezed out the oil for me."

Tuuli gave a bright smile at my urging and began undoing her braid. She must have been watching me the whole time, as she immediately dunked her hair in the bucket and began washing it just like I did.

...Aaah, she's missing a spot. I stuck a hand into the bucket and scooped up some hot water to put on a hard to reach part of Tuuli's head. *Clean, clean, get super cleaaan.*

"Tuuli, I think that'll be enough." I handed her the rag and she wiped her head repeatedly before running a comb through her hair, just like I had done. Her green hair had gotten super silky. It rippled down in natural waves that looked like they'd been styled, and the light made an angel's halo on the top of her head. Basically, her cuteness had multiplied in an instant.

"Wow, your hair's super pretty now. And you smell nice." *Mhm. Cute girls deserve to be nice and clean.*

Tuuli kept combing her hair as I nodded in satisfaction. We didn't have enough for me to wash her hair every day, but maybe it was now my duty to wash her hair every few days and keep it clean.

I started to clean everything up since we were both done, but Mom rushed forward, said "Stop right there," and started using it herself.

At this rate, I'm guessing Mom and Tuuli won't mind me taking some meryls to make shampoo with. My goal is to keep my family clean.

I fell asleep, satisfied at how not itchy my head felt.

Ever since coming here, the first thing I saw after waking up each day was a spider web. I had gotten myself clean, and next I wanted my surroundings to be clean. But despite getting all pumped up about cleaning my room, it was too much for me. The best I could do with my tiny, weak body was attempt to clean my own bed.

Since Dad had taken the day off, I asked him to dry my blanket on the window. "Dad, once the blanket's dry, can you clean that spider web up?"

"The spider web? What's the big deal...?" He was so used to spider webs that he didn't even consider them dirty.

After a bit of hard thought, I squeezed Dad's pant leg a little. "I-It's scary." That wasn't a lie. If I ever woke up to that spider hanging right above my face, I would scream so hard all those present would liken the sound to a miniature

Vast Glub. Just thinking about it scared me. The sooner that dangerous web was gone, the better.

“You’re afraid of spiders, Myne? Alright then. Let Daddy take care of it.”

“Yaaay! Thanks, Dad. I’d be really happy if you cleaned around it, too.”

“Yeah, yeah. You just want all the spooky spiders out, right? Leave it to me.”

Okay, ceiling done. Dad brushing the ceiling down took down the one obstacle I really had no chance of dealing with myself, which meant that from now on I just had to do what I could where I could, bit by bit.

“Mom, where’s the broom?”

“Right here. Why? Did you spill something?”

“I want to clean our room.”

“Okay. If that’s what you want to do, feel free.”

I gripped the broom and started sweeping it across the bedroom floor. Dust puffed into the air. As someone who grew up in a culture where nobody wore shoes inside, it was baffling to see a bedroom with a floor so dirty the filth was visible.

I really wanted to sleep in a clean bedroom, no matter what it took. I kept sweeping the broom back and forth, pushing a growing mound of dust forward. The sweeping itself wasn’t a big issue, since our home barely had anything in it.

Ngh... I really need to get stronger. Just sweeping a little was enough to make my head feel dizzy. I gave up on cleaning for the moment and took a break. At this rate, who could say how long it would take until I could live in a clean home?

“Now now, Myne. Why clean the bedroom if you’re going to leave a pile of filth by the kitchen? You need to sweep it out the front... Myne, you look sick.”

Mom peered into the bedroom after seeing the pile of filth I had swept into the kitchen and sighed. She then put me into bed and took the blanket out of the window to cover me with. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, but you need rest right now. If it’s just going to get dirty again, why worry about cleaning it now?”

Mom... That's exactly why I need to clean right now. I need to stop it from building up. But despite my determination, my body just couldn't keep up. I was stuck lazily cleaning up what little I could each day. I rolled to my side in bed and touched my hair after it flowed down in front of my face.

Well... Now that my hair's clean, I need to focus on finding paper.

Neighborhood Boys

Mom went to work, leaving Tuuli and I alone at home. Naturally, that meant Tuuli was the only source of information available to me.

“Tuuli, do you know where (paper) is sold?”

“What’d you say, Myne?”

“I said (paper)... Ah!”

Tuuli tilted her head, braid shaking, in a gesture that felt very familiar. She was making the same expression that she did when my words ended up as Japanese and she didn’t understand. I didn’t know how to say “paper” in this place’s language.

Oh no...! I should have asked that pawn stand guy what paper is! “Um, Tuuli, you don’t know what (paper) is...?”

“Sorry. I don’t. The word sounds kinda funny though.”

My shoulders slumped and I let out a heavy sigh. In truth, finding a store that sold paper for books wasn’t my only problem. I didn’t know where to get pens or pencils either. Judging from my home and the anachronistic state of the city, I doubted I would find any ball-point pens or mechanical pencils anywhere. It was very possible fountain pens didn’t even exist yet.

What, then, should I use as a writing utensil? And how could I get my hands on such a utensil? Either way, my most immediate hurdles were my lack of money and the physical strength necessary to go searching for materials. Things weren’t going to be so easy for me.

“Aaaah! I can’t believe Dad forgot this!” I heard Tuuli cry out from the kitchen and went to investigate. She was holding a wrapped up... something.

As I recall, Dad had sleepily asked Mom to *“get it ready for me, I need it at work,”* which ticked her off since she’s always so busy in the mornings and he hadn’t warned her at all. She went out of her way to find it for him, and he had

forgot it. My blood ran cold just thinking about how mad Mom would be if she found this out.

“Tuuli, Mom’s definitely going to get mad, right? Shouldn’t you go get this to Dad?”

“You think so too...? But, I can’t leave you all on your own, Myne...”

Leave me in my room to go clean dishes, I’ll sneak out of the bedroom and start sobbing. Go to the market with Mom, and I’ll pass out. My family’s faith in me had hit rock bottom and apparently Tuuli wouldn’t even consider leaving me home alone.

“But Dad will get in trouble without this, won’t he?”

“...Myne, can you walk all the way to the gate?” Tuuli decided to take me with her rather than leave me on my own. I was a little nervous, considering what happened when I went to the market, but I was more scared of how mad Mom would be.

I clenched my fist and pumped the air to show my determination. “I-I’ll do my best.”

“Let’s go, then.”

I put on several layers of clothes, just like I had done when shopping with Mom, and left with the bundled something. The layers of clothing weren’t me trying to be fashionable; it was entirely an effort to stave off the cold. Incidentally, to list all the clothes I owned: two pairs of underwear, two wool dresses, a wool sweater, two woolen trouser-esque pants, and two woolen socks. When going outside, I wore all of them.

“Tuuli, this is so heavy I can barely walk.”

“But you need to wear all of them to cover up all the gaps. Who knows where wind will blow from? You get fevers really fast, Myne, so you need to wear everything you can.”

I had hoped that Tuuli would be more forgiving than Mom was, but her strong sense of responsibility prevented her from letting me go outside without as warm an outfit as possible to keep me safe. I gave up and put everything on,

but it really did make it hard to move.

Tuuli didn't put on nearly as much since she was healthy. Not to mention that she had a lot of stamina thanks to her frequent trips to the forest with other kids and all the chores Mom gave her to do around the city.

I lacked both stamina and speed. All I had was the weight of my clothes.

"Are you okay, Myne?"

"Haaah, haaah... If, we take, it slow..." Just like last time, I was out of breath by the time we reached the bottom of the stairs. That said, I continued to walk at my own pace. I'd just make things harder for Tuuli if I forced myself to go fast and subsequently passed out. It was important that I slowly build up trust with her.

...Seriously though, it's really hard to walk on cobblestone. It was bumpy and I'd fall right over if I didn't watch my feet. I took Tuuli's hand and let her guide the way while I directed all my attention to my feet.

"Huh? Hey, it's Tuuli! What're you doing here?"

I lifted up my head after hearing a boy's voice sound out from somewhat far away. Three boys were racing up to us, carrying baskets alongside bows and arrows. Their hair formed a colorful rainbow of red, gold, and pink, respectively. It was kinda hard to look away from their heads.

Their clothes were all light gray, stained with mud and bits of food. The faded design on them showed that each of them were wearing hand-me-downs, and judging by how similar they looked to what we were wearing, I could guess that we were all equally poor.

"Ah, Ralph! Hey Lutz, Fey!" Tuuli seemed friendly enough, so Myne might have spent some time with them in the past. I rubbed my temples and went deep into thought, searching her memories. *Mmm... Ah, there they are. Huh. I guess they live in our neighborhood.*

Ralph was the same age as Tuuli. He had red hair and was the tallest of the three. He was something of a leader to the other kids, many of whom viewed him as a sort of older brother.

Fey was also as old as Tuuli. He had pink hair and the face of the most mischievous prankster in the world. Likely due to fear of accidentally hurting the weak and sickly Myne, he usually kept his distance from her. She didn't have many memories of him.

Lutz was Ralph's younger brother and had golden blonde hair. We were the same age. He usually tried to act like a tough older brother around Myne, which I thought was super cute. Like a kid stretching to look taller.

Tuuli generally went to the forest with them, and apparently they had brought Myne along a few times. Those sparse memories were a lot more clear than the other ones.

While I was digging through my memories, Tuuli was excitedly talking with Ralph. "Dad forgot something, so we're walking to the gate. Are you three going to the woods, Ralph?"

"Yep. Let's stick together 'till the gate."

Tuuli's beaming smile as she talked to Ralph made it clear that taking care of me was a big burden on her. Which made sense; going to the forest with everyone was definitely more fun than babysitting me.

Um... Sorry for being such a bad little sister. But my fever's been gone for the past few days, so I think you'll be able to go outside soon. By which I mean, go outside and help me look for a store that sells paper, if you would be so kind.

Tuuli's walking pace shot up the moment she joined Ralph and the others. Since we were holding hands, she basically dragged me behind her until I tripped.

"Oh no no no!" Tuuli stopped in front of me, so I didn't fall completely over, but I did end up on my knees.

"Sorry, Myne. Are you okay?"

"...Uh huh." I wasn't in pain, but it was hard to stand up after getting on the ground. I wanted to just go ahead and take a nap. *It's kinda hard to breathe*, I thought before someone stuck out a hand.

"Hey, Myne. Want me to carry you?"

...Lutz, you're such a good kid! I searched Myne's memories and saw that since Ralph and Fey always treated him like a little kid, he tried acting like a tough older brother around Myne despite being the same age. He would carry her stuff, protect her whenever she ended up exhausted, and do all sorts of things that made him seem like a fine young gentleman with a bright future. Not to mention that I was much more familiar with blonde hair than pink or green hair, so being around him was mentally calming in a way.

"Myne, you were sick again recently, weren't you? It must hurt. I'll carry you." I appreciated Lutz's good intentions. But although I was smaller than him, he was still my age. I'd feel bad making him carry me, and I was worried he might collapse under me. My internal debate over whether or not to accept was soon interrupted by Ralph sighing and taking off his stuff.

"We'll never get to the forest with Lutz carrying her. Here, Myne, I'll carry you. Lutz, take my bow. Fey can carry my basket."

"Ralph..." Lutz glared at Ralph with a little frustration. Maybe he felt like his good deed was being swiped away.

"You worried about me sooner than anyone, Lutz. You're really nice. Thank you. It made me happy." I smiled brightly and gave Lutz's hand a squeeze while showering him with praise.

Lutz, seemingly satisfied that someone had recognized what he had done, smiled a shy smile and quietly took Ralph's bow.

"Alright, c'mere."

"Uh huh. Thanks, Ralph." I walked up to Ralph and crawled onto his back, which was somewhat larger than Tuuli's. It was sad that a boy knew had to carry me, but Little girls such as myself had no need for shame. No need!

Ralph began walking firmly ahead with me on his back. The city looked a lot different with an extra forty or so centimeters to my height. To be more specific, I was previously spending almost all my time watching the cobblestones beneath my feet, but now I could see ahead and look at all the distant buildings. Not only that, but since he was walking at his own pace rather than my slow one, the buildings were passing by much faster.

“Wow, so hiiigh! So faaast!”

“Don’t get too excited, alright? You’ll get sick again.”

“Uh huh. I’ll be careful.”

Still though, boys who have to carry firewood home sure end up strong. He’s got a lot of muscles for a kid his age. None of my Japanese classmates in elementary school looked anything like him. Though that wasn’t a fair comparison considering our different living environments and whatever genetic differences separated them.

It was also important that I didn’t compare the city to Japanese locations. I shouldn’t judge these people for the filth flowing through the gutters, or how their donkeys are pooping while they walk through the street... *H-Hey, it’s not like I want to look at all this disgusting stuff! It’s all just so different from what I’ve seen in Japan that my eyes are drawn to it!*

We must have been passing through a craftsman’s street, since unlike the stores near the market, I couldn’t see at all into the first-floor stores. Those that just sold goods had glass windows to show off their wares, but the stores around here just had a single signpost hanging around the door and nothing else. Not only that, but all the buildings looked similar and were the same color. If not for that, the filth wouldn’t stand out so much and my eyes wouldn’t have been drawn toward it. *It’s not my fault!*

“Ralph, are you okay? Myne isn’t too heavy?” asked Tuuli, looking back and forth between Ralph and me with a worried look in her eyes.

Ralph shook himself a little to adjust my position on his back before somewhat curtly looking away. “I’m fine. Myne’s so small and light I barely notice her. And you’d get in trouble if she got sick from walking, right?” Judging by his embarrassed expression and tone of voice, he probably wanted to help Tuuli out. Or in other words, he wanted Tuuli to feel gratitude toward him.

Ohoho, my sweet young Ralph. Are you after my Tuuli? They do say that if you want to take down the general, you must first defeat his horse. Mmm, I don’t mind being the horse. Keep on growing, young romance! Of course, that could have just been my imagination.

But Ralph then took Tuuli's braid and smelled it, then said, "Tuuli, I dunno why, but you smell pretty good."

What are you, the protagonist of a shoujo manga?! I couldn't help but tease them on the inside. I mean, Tuuli replied by saying "Really? Thank you..." while blushing. Who could blame me?

They were both so young I doubted they were actually in love, but in a world without books as entertainment, I'd like you to forgive me for fantasizing a bit in my head. I hadn't experienced a trace of romance in my life despite being close to graduating college, and yet there was six-year-old Tuuli radiating youthful romance. I couldn't help but have a little fun fantasizing about it.

I know what you're thinking, but don't say it. "Maybe you'd be more popular with boys if you didn't just read books and live in fantasies all day." My family and even my neighbor Shuu said that exact same thing to me. I don't wanna hear it. Shuu's just a big dummy. Duuuummy.

While I was in the middle of remembering the frustrations I felt back as Urano, Tuuli and Ralph's childhood romance morphed into a more advanced love triangle.

"It's true. You do smell good."

"Lemme see."

Fey and Lutz both leaned toward Tuuli's braid and sniffed. If they were all boys and girls of the appropriate age, they would be about three steps away from battling to the death for Tuuli's heart.

"Your hair's really silky too. What'd you do?"

Eheheheh. Riiight? Right. Satisfied by the looks of surprise on their faces, I nodded repeatedly.

I was in the process of improving the cleanliness of my home. I dried nice-smelling flowers and put them in our clothing boxes, I had Mom boil the water we used for food before using it to cook, I wiped down Tuuli's body when we "bathed" together, and I brushed her hair after using herb oil on it. It seemed the fruits of my labor were already starting to show.

Although I had gotten a little used to everything smelling bad in this city, Ralph and the others still stunk a bit. I wouldn't say it out loud since Ralph was going out of his way to carry me, but I really wanted to scrub everyone down with soap. It was a shame that our home only had animal soap for use in cleaning furniture and clothes, no plant soap for washing bodies and leaving a nice smell. *Aaah... I want some nice-smelling soap.*

While I was in the middle of dreaming about a world that didn't stink, Lutz took my hair. He inhaled deeply, as he had done with Tuuli's. "You smell nice too, Myne." Lutz smiled warmly while looking directly at me with his jade green eyes.

Oh... Oh no! Lutz has a powerful color scheme! Golden blonde hair and jade green eyes alone make him look like a super cool, handsome guy!

"Plus, you look a lot cuter now that you're pinning your hair back and I can see your face better."

Hyaaaah! A finishing blow! Even though he's a little kid, I'm feeling super embarrassed! I know he's not doing it on purpose, but goodness! Please, stop! I may be kinda old, but I've never experienced anything like this! I don't know what to do!

I was the only one frozen in place and freaking out. Everyone else was already talking about what they wanted to find in the forest, or how long it would take for snow to start falling. The fact that Lutz was bragging about getting better at archery despite freaking me out like this ticked me off. Tuuli managed to just thank him, but I could only freeze in surprise. My heart was still pounding.

...Is it normal for five-ish year old kids to do things like that here?! Um, what's with this world?! I'm a fine young Japanese maiden with a shy heart, this is way too much for me!

Paper: Unobtainable

I kicked my legs around while clinging to Ralph's back and eventually the outer wall's gate came into view. The outer wall protected the city, and up close I saw that it was really tall. It was about as tall as a three-story Japanese building and was fairly thick. There were gates at the north, east, south, and west sides of the outer walls and several soldiers at each one checking those who came inside.

We had reached the south gate and we could see several of those soldiers. One of them should be my dad. I couldn't tell which was him, but Tuuli could somehow. She hugged the wrapped-up thing to her chest and ran toward him, waving hard. "Daaaad! You forgot something. You need this, right?"

Dad blinked in surprise as Tuuli handed him the thing with a bright smile. *So... So nice. You're way too nice, Tuuli. All I cared about was avoiding Mom's wrath over him forgetting what she worked so hard to find.*

"Yeah, I do need it. Thanks... Wait, did you leave Myne alone?!"

"Nuh uh, I brought her with me. See? Ralph carried her on his back."

Dad, eyes wavering due to feeling bad about having not noticed me, plopped a hand on Ralph's head. "Thanks for carrying her, Ralph."

"We were on our way to the forest anyway." Ralph lowered me to the ground, looking a little annoyed at how Dad was ruffling his hair. He then took back his stuff from Fey and Lutz.

"Thanks, Ralph. You too, Lutz and Fey."

After seeing Ralph and the others through the gate on their way to the forest, Tuuli and I were taken to a waiting room within the inner gate.

The outer wall was large enough to fit a room of about nine square meters of size inside. It wasn't that big, but there were apparently other waiting rooms and a room for those on night duty too. Our waiting room had a simple table, a

bench, and a single cabinet with shelves.

I looked all around, feeling like a tourist in a foreign country, and soon one of Dad's coworkers brought in cups of water for us. "You certainly raised your daughters well, I see."

It took about twenty minutes for a child like Tuuli to walk from home to the gate, so I appreciated the water. I gulped down the water in the wooden cup and let out big sigh of relief. "Haaah. That was tasty. Finally, I can rest my sore legs."

"You barely walked on your own, Myne," said Tuuli with pursed lips, causing everyone to burst into laughter at once. I hmph'd, but since everyone had seen Ralph carrying me, I couldn't say anything back to her.

As I drank down a second cup of water, a single soldier entered the room. He took out a toolbox-looking thing from the cabinet and immediately left. It looked like he was in a hurry, so I looked around. "Did something happen out there, Dad?"

"Probably just someone needing special attention at the gate. Nothing to worry about." Dad waved it off, but his hurried behavior did get me a little worried. Would things really be okay? *I mean, a soldier guarding this gate is hurrying around. Doesn't that spell trouble?*

In sharp contrast to me, Tuuli tilted her head in confusion without looking worried at all. "Someone needing special attention? Have I ever seen someone like that?" Despite passing through the gate frequently, Tuuli couldn't immediately imagine someone who would make a guard rush that much.

Dad rubbed his stubble and searched for the right words. "Aaah, yeah. Think someone suspicious-looking who's probably a criminal, or maybe the opposite and it's a noble we need to inform Lord Ehrenfest about before letting them in."

"Wow..." Apparently, they just judge people on their looks. *Well, I guess there's no helping that. This world doesn't seem like it would have a robust information network or anything of the sort.* Soldiers had no way of researching the background of anyone coming inside.

"We have them wait in a separate room while the higher-ups decide on

whether or not to let them inside.”

Aaah. So that’s why there are so many waiting rooms by the gate. I get it. I bet the waiting room for nobles and the waiting rooms for suspicious-looking people are totally different in size and furnishings.

My thoughts were interrupted after the young-looking soldier with dark brown hair and gentle, calm brown eyes came right back carrying the box and something rolled up into a tube shape. His expression lacked any sense of emergency. Dad was right, it apparently hadn’t been anything that serious.

The soldier, bundling up the box and roll in his left hand, stood in front of Dad and tapped his right fist against the left side of his chest twice. Dad stood up, correcting his posture, and repeated the same fist-tapping gesture. That was probably the salute of this world.

“Otto, your report?”

I let out a tiny awed noise after seeing Dad make a serious expression unlike anything I had seen at home. He usually looked so lazy and relaxed it was a real change of pace. When serious, he actually looked pretty cool.

“Count Lowenwalt is requesting entry.”

“And his seal?”

“Checked and confirmed.”

“Alright, let him through.” Otto gave one more salute before sitting in the chair on the opposite side of ours. He put the box on the table and spread out the roll beside it. It was as smooth as paper and had a distinctive scent that had my eyes locked on it.

...Parchment?! I didn’t know for sure if it was parchment, but it definitely looked like paper made from animal skin. I was used to paper made from plants, but older paper was often just dried animal skin called parchment. This world’s language was written on it, though I couldn’t read the letters.

As I stared at it with wide-open eyes, Otto took a bottle of ink and a reed pen out of the toolbox and began writing something on the parchment.

AAAAAH! Writing! There’s someone who knows how to write in front of me!

He's the first man of culture I've met in this world. I definitely want him to teach me this world's lettering system!

Dad rustled my hair and asked "What's wrong?" as I stared at Otto's moving hands.

I looked up at him and pointed at what I believed to be parchment. I had to learn what it was called in this world's language if I wanted to talk about it. "Dad, Dad. What's this?"

"That's parchment. Paper made from goat or sheep skin."

"And this black stuff?"

"Ink. He's writing with a pen."

I knew it. I've found my ink and paper. I'll be able to make books with this stuff, no problem.

Holding back the urge to jump with joy, I squeezed my hands together in front of my chest and looked up at Dad. "Um, Dad. Can I pleaaaase have them?"

"No. Those aren't toys for children." My full-power begging using all of my childhood cuteness was shut down instantly.

Of course, I wasn't the kind of girl who would give up after being told no once. Back when I was Urano, people said I was the most stubborn and persistent person they had ever met. It was time to show Dad just how fierce I could be when it came to books.

"I want to write just like that. I want paper and ink. Pleeease?"

"No, not a chance! You don't even know your letters, Myne." It was true that ink and paper was useless to someone illiterate. Which is exactly why Dad's statement was the perfect chance for me.

"Then teach me. I want to learn. Will you give me ink and paper if I learn?"

If his young-looking subordinate could write, then Dad could definitely write. He was, like, their captain. I didn't expect anyone in a house with no paper would know how to write, but that seemed to be a fortunate misunderstanding on my part. My dreams of reading books in this world might come true soon if Dad taught me to read.

As I beamed a bright smile, feeling as if I had taken a giant leap toward what I wanted more than anything else, I heard a chuckle. I turned toward its source and saw that Otto, who had been listening to us while writing, had burst out in helpless laughter.

“Hahaha! Teach you...? Heh, don’t you barely know how to write, Captain?”

The moment I heard that, I felt a crack run through my very soul. Even I could tell that my smile had frozen in place, as if a bucket of cold water had been dumped over me. “Wha? Dad, you don’t know how to write?”

“I can read and write, a bit. I need to know how to read parts of the paperwork I deal with, but that’s it. Best I can do is write down the names I hear.”

“Oh...?” I looked at Dad with cold eyes as he made excuses with a sullen expression. *So basically, in terms of my original world, he kinda knows the alphabet and can write the names of his friends, I guess? Since Otto said “barely,” he’s probably like a first grader who’d miswrite even those names.*

“Hey now, don’t look at your father like that.” Otto, the culprit behind my respect for Dad shooting up and then immediately dropping down, chastised me a bit with a somewhat worried expression. Then, as if covering for Dad, he began to explain what kind of work soldiers did.

“Soldiers work to preserve city peace, but when it comes to important business involving nobles, it’s really the knights who take care of the paperwork. A simple spoken report suffices for less important incidents, so his work rarely involves reading. Just being able to write names is more than enough.”

Dad puffed out his chest with pride, his mood brightened by Otto’s follow-up. My cold gaze had cut him surprisingly deep.

“Rural townsfolk are even worse off. Usually only town chiefs can read at all, so your dad’s plenty amazing.”

“Okay, my amazing dad. I want paper and ink. Pleeease give me them?” If he was that amazing, then he should show it by giving his cute daughter about one hundred sheets of paper.

But my begging was met by Dad taking a fearful step back. “Wh-Who would dump a whole month’s wages on a piece of paper for their kid?!”

Wait, what?! A month’s wages? J-Just how expensive is parchment?! I can see why he’s so hesitant to give me some now. That also explained why there was no paper in our house or why I couldn’t find any bookstores. Parchment was just too expensive for commoners. My family was already just barely scraping by; there was no way they’d spend their precious wages on paper to make a book.

I slumped my shoulders, depressed, and Otto ruffled my hair.

“In the first place, I don’t think that there are any stores that sell parchment to commoners. Paper is used by nobles, government officials, and rich merchants with connections to nobles. If you just want to learn your letters, why not use a stone slate? I can give you the one I used to use a long time ago.”



“Really?! I’d love it!” I immediately nodded and he graciously promised to give me his old slate. While I was at it, I wiggled my way into having him teach me. “Thank you, Mr. Otto! I’m so glad you’re going to teach me letters!”

As I beamed a broad smile, Dad looked between me and Otto with a fairly pathetic look on his face, but I pretended not to notice. I was very excited to learn letters and own a slate, but what I really wanted was a book and the paper to make one.

After all, you couldn’t store information on a slate. It was like a chalkboard that you wrote on then cleaned off. Perfect for learning letters, but nothing compared to a book.

Still, the fact that stores didn’t sell paper to commoners came completely out of left field. How could I make books without paper? Or in other words, what would I do if I couldn’t get paper? There was only one answer: I would just have to make some myself.

Ngggh, the road to getting a book is so long!

Learning to Respect Egyptian Culture

Now, despite resolving to make my own books no matter what, I couldn't manage to procure paper. My Japanese spirit suggested that I go to a department store and buy five hundred sheets of copier paper for two hundred yen, but in this world, a month of my dad's wages would disappear buying a single sheet of parchment.

To make a sheet of parchment, one would have to peel the skin off an animal, shave off the fur, and then cut the animal-shaped skin into easy to use rectangles. The sheet of parchment I saw at Dad's workplace was about the size of an A4 piece of paper. No matter how I cut it, I'd get about five to eight smaller sheets of paper at best.

In other words, parchment was so expensive that a poor commoner such as myself would never be able to buy a book's worth of it. To sum things up: Before I could make books, I needed to learn to make paper. But the only real experience I had with making paper was recycling milk cartons. Everything else I had just read about in books.

You would think learning something from a book would be enough to just do it, right? But think hard about that, and you'll realize that things really aren't that simple.

As far as I knew, there were no machines in this world for making paper. With no machine, I had to do all of the paper-making work by hand. And yet I was a sickly girl as weak as a three-year-old. There was little I could do on my own. The first step toward making paper was wood, and that alone was already a huge hurdle for me.

In conclusion: It was impossible for me. But it was also too soon to give up.

Since records were important both economically and politically, Earth had a very extensive recorded history. Records were kept for millennia, but it was only recently that humans developed machines for making paper. In short, the further back in history we went, the more likely it was that I would be able to

recreate the methods used for recording information.

Mmm... What did civilizations without machines do...? I opened my hands as wide as possible and glared at my palms. *Ancient civilizations, ancient civilizations... You can't talk about civilized ancient cultures without mentioning Egypt! And you can't talk about Egypt without mentioning papyrus! Long live Egypt!*

Through connecting the dots in my existing memories, I realized that I could make faux-papyrus with Egypt as my guide. It was invented in a society about as technologically advanced as the one I was in, so perhaps even my small hands would be enough to make it.

It was made using some kind of plant... I wasn't sure which, but I think it was just, like, made from the fibers of especially straight trees and plants... or something.

This world had plants too. I bet if I went to the forest, it'd be filled with plants perfect for making into paper.

...Okay, the forest. Let's go to the forest. I'm a woman who was both admired and lamented by my family and friends for how fast my footwork became when books were involved. I act the moment a thought comes to me.

In this case, I immediately asked Tuuli to take me with her to the forest.

"Tuuli, I want to go to the forest too. Can I come w—"

"Wha?! You, Myne? No way."

She shot me down before I even finished. Her reaction speed indicated she didn't even need to think about her answer. And the force of her "no way" probably reflected that she wouldn't budge no matter what I said. Ouch.

"Why not?"

"You can't walk that far, can you? There's no way you could walk to the forest if you can't even make it to the gate. And once we get to the forest, we need to pick up firewood and gather fruit. There's no time to rest. Plus, you can't climb trees. Could you walk home carrying a lot of heavy stuff while tired? We need to make it back before the gate closes, so you couldn't rest no matter how tired

you got. See? There's no way you can go to the forest."

Tuuli rattled off all the reasons I couldn't go to the forest one by one, counting on her fingers. There were a lot of reasons, but they could all be summed up as *"You're too weak."*

"Plus, winter's coming soon, so there's less stuff there..." According to Tuuli, it was likely that I would exhaust myself reaching the forest and then find nothing there I wanted. That would definitely be rough.

I either had to go to the forest accepting it might be fruitless, or give up on making paper. There was no easy way out.

"What do you want? I don't think there are many meryls left." Tuuli tilted her head as she thought hard about it.

As meryls were the main ingredient of my simple all-in-one shampoo, we were using all of them for oil without eating any. We would then use the oil to moisturize our hair every now and again. I did appreciate all the meryls, but I cared more about books than my looks. I needed plant fibers in order to make my faux-papyrus.

"Ummm, are there any (plants with easily removed fibers)?"

"Huh? What?" Tuuli gave me a confused look. Something I said there had definitely been in Japanese.

Mmm, I thought, and tried to come up with a simpler way of saying that. "...Is there a plant with really straight, thick stems? I just want the stems."

Tuuli put a hand on her head and thought about my question. Did I ring any bells? I waited patiently for her answer.

After a brief pause, Tuuli shrugged. "I know, I'll just help Ralph and Lutz out."

"Wha? You'll help *them*, not get them to help us?" I tilted my head in confusion, which surprised Tuuli for some reason.

After blinking multiple times, she said "Haven't we talked about this before? Ralph's family raises chickens, so they need lots of animal feed to last the winter, remember?"

Um... No, I don't remember. Tuuli sounded like she was saying things I should

know, so I replied “That’s true” while hiding my ignorance.

“So I was thinking I would try asking them for stems if I help them gather the plants and stuff. But the season where lots of plants grow is already over, so I don’t think there’ll be many.”

“That’s fine. Thanks, Tuuli!”

Just like always, Tuuli’s being a great older sister. I’m so lucky to have her.

The next day, I went with Tuuli down the stairs and tried asking Ralph and Lutz for help. Thankfully they accepted, but I couldn’t leave everything to other people. I went on my own quest for plants.

Luckily, there were plants growing by the well, aside from the paved part. Maybe I could use those stems.

“Mom, I’ll go with you to the well.”

“Oh my, do you want to help?”

“Nuh uh. Not that. I want to gather plants.” I showed her the small basket that Tuuli had made earlier.

“Okay, do your best.” I had straight-up declined to help her, but Mom still let me go with her, excited that I was healthy enough to be moving around.

I climbed down the stairs again, this time with Mom carrying a bunch of laundry. As that was my third time climbing down the stairs, I naturally ended up out of breath by the time I reached the bottom, which left me in no condition to be hunting for plants.

I rested next to Mom as she drew water from the well and rubbed our clothes with strongly-smelling animal soap that produced no bubbles whatsoever. Tuuli was right. If I didn’t get stronger somehow, I’d never make it to the forest no matter how much I wanted plants from there. *Isn’t there any way to get this body a little stronger?*

“My my, if it isn’t little Myne.”

“Good morning,” I said. I didn’t recognize her, but a middle-aged woman named Carla called out to us sounding friendly.

“Oh, hello, Carla. Morning. You’re up early.” Mom smiled back and continued the conversation, so this was definitely someone Myne knew. But who? I searched my memories, making sure not to make it obvious I didn’t recognize her.

Indeed, it was someone I knew. My memories told me it was Ralph and Lutz’s mother. She was a somewhat, er, sizable woman that seemed more or less dependable.

Ummm... Should I say something like, “Thanks for always taking care of me?” *No, no, a five-year-old child would never say that. What kind of conversations do friendly middle-aged women have with neighborhood children?! Someone, help me!*

Carla began easily drawing water from the well and washing her clothes without looking at me despite my spinning thoughts. As expected, she used that stinky animal soap.

“Are you feeling well today? It’s rare to see you outside.”

“I’m getting plants. Ralph and Lutz said they needed them for your birds.”

“My, you’re doing that for us? Sorry for the trouble.” Carla responded lightly enough that it was clear she didn’t feel particularly sorry.

The band of neighborhood moms, mine included, talked amongst themselves without stopping. Their hands never stopped no matter who was talking. It was really impressive.

Seriously though, the soap really did smell bad. I felt sick just resting near it. *I wonder if it’d get better if I used some smell-blocking herbs? Or maybe the smells would combine and make something worse?*

While thinking up a countermeasure to the awful smell, I stood up to escape it and began pulling up some nearby plants. I wanted to pull out the thick-stemmed plants with firm-looking fibers, but I wasn’t strong enough to pull them out on my own.

...I can’t do this with my bare hands. Someone, bring me a sickleee! Of course, nobody would bring me a sickle, and my weak arms weren’t going to get stronger in a day.

Okaaay... I give up. I'll just put all my hopes on Tuuli, Ralph, and Lutz. I quickly gave up on pulling plants for my own needs and instead selected those with soft-looking leaves and sprouts for the chickens. They were easy enough for me to pull despite my weakness.

"Myne, it's time to go home." Mom finished the laundry pretty fast. She called for me, holding the tightly-packed tub of laundry. I had only filled up about half of the small basket, but Mom had work today, so I couldn't ask her to stay. I went home carrying the tiny basket.

"Ready? Alright, let's go."

"Okay." I had been sick ever since becoming Myne, with Mom taking days off for me and such, so I didn't know that when I was healthy, she would send me to a neighborhood babysitter for the day.

Makes sense. Tuuli can't go to the forest when I'm at home.

"Myne, be a good girl while I'm at work. She'll be in your care, Gerda."

"Yes yes. Come now, Myne." Gerda the babysitter was watching over several children other than me. Most of them were toddlers who were just old enough to walk on their own a little.

In this city, once a child passed the age of three and grew stronger, they'd go with their older siblings to the forest or otherwise be old enough to help around the house and be left at home. In other words, my family trusted me so little I was the same age as a toddler who couldn't be left home alone.

Um, what's that's supposed to mean?! As I stood, shocked by my family's lack of faith in me, I saw a young boy pick up a toy off of the floor and start putting it in his mouth. Beside him another boy smacked a little girl, making her cry.

"Hey, that's dirty! You'll get sick if you put that in your mouth!"

"My my."

"Don't smack people for no reason. Why would you do that?"

"Oh dear."

Stop with the my mys and oh dears! Do your job, Mrs. Gerda! Despite how I

was another child being babysat, I was the largest kid around and thus ended up taking care of everyone else.

While putting small children to sleep, I thought about how best to make faux-papyrus with the soon-to-be-delivered stems.

...Honestly, I don't remember the proper method for making papyrus. I mean, it never came up on any tests, so how can you blame me?

Anyway. I remembered reading that papyrus is surprisingly stiff. It was made by placing plant fibers vertically and horizontally together, but you could only really write well on one side since the fibers are horizontal on the front and vertical on the back. There was a warning that it wasn't very bendable, either, but the book naturally hadn't mentioned how to actually make papyrus itself.

The main problem was that, despite having seen pictures of it, I couldn't think of a single way to make papyrus. I got the feeling that the fibers were lined up right next to each other, but I couldn't think of how to get them to stick together. *Does it need sticky plant starch like washi does? Or maybe there's some special way to put them together.*

I thought back to the history book I had read and tried to wring out any useful information I could despite how few important details it contained. For now, I figured the best thing to do was take the fibers from the hardest-looking stems and try weaving them together in a plaid-like pattern. That should make usable paper even without some kind of glue to stick them together.

As long as I can write letters on it, I'll be fine.

"Myne, Tuuli's here for you."

"TUUULIII!"

Tuuli came to get me that evening after returning from the forest. *I'm saved. Thank goodness she came to get me.* Overjoyed, I clung to her.

Gerda's style of babysitting hadn't been to take care of the kids, but rather to leave them on their own unless things got dangerous. If they peed themselves, she wiped them with a wet cloth and that was it. The room smelled of waste. It was hard for me to bear watching kids get treated like that, especially with my

Japanese values still intact.

I can't believe she's getting paid for doing this. The worst thing was, no matter how much I wanted to help, it was a problem too big for my hands. I couldn't babysit children myself, and Gerda's style of babysitting may be normal for this world. People might end up considering me the weird one if I complained too much.

I had spent all my time waiting desperately for someone to come get me, wanting to escape the horrid conditions as soon as possible.

"Did you get lonely, Myne? I guess it has been a long time since you've stayed here."

"You could go with us to the forest if you were just a lil' bit stronger."

"Hope you can come with us by the time next spring comes, Myne."

As Tuuli patted my head and both Lutz and Ralph consoled me, I realized that I absolutely did have to get stronger, no matter what. I needed to take it seriously. Being this weak was causing me nothing but problems.

"Oh right, we got those plant stems you wanted." Ralph grabbed some of the stems from his basket and showed me.

The moment I saw them, everything about Gerda vanished from my mind. Books were more important than her, and paper meant books.

"That's a lot. Thanks! Um, I gathered some plants for you at the well, too." I puffed out my chest with pride, but for some reason all three of them just patted my head. Not only that, but Lutz even said "You did good" with a warm smile while looking down at me.

Um... Just how useless do people think I am? I mean, it's true that I never do anything, and I'm useless almost all of the time, but still.

Tuuli went and got the tiny basket so we could exchange all our plants for the stems they gathered.

Okay. It's time to make some faux-papyrus!

Winter Preparations

I intended to immediately start making faux-papyrus with the gathered stems, but unfortunately, life got in the way.

"Just where do you think you're going, Myne? Didn't I tell you that we were starting winter preparations today?"

Right as I was about to leave to go to the well and get the fibers out of the plant stems, Mom grabbed the back of my shirt and stopped me. Apparently, snowfall was about to lock us inside and we needed to prepare for the long upcoming winter.

But why do I need to help when I'm so useless? No matter how much I scoured Myne's memories, all I got were memories of her catching colds and just lazing around, being useless.

Basically, to say it again: I was completely useless. The best thing I could do was not get sick and end up in bed all day.

"You're helping me today, Myne. C'mon."

"What about work, Dad?"

"I have a few days off. We workers gotta take turns staying home from work if any of us wanna finish preparing, yeah?"

Wow... Jobs are nice enough to give time off for winter preparations? I didn't expect to see that kind of working class benefit in this world. Or maybe winter preparations are just so rough that they're impossible without a man around the house?

Either way, it was rare for Dad to be at home and spend a lot of quality time with me. As you might expect from his occupation as a soldier, he was more of a meathead than anything and generally spent his time with Tuuli, who was healthy enough that he could take her places without worrying.

But now that everyone was home, I had no opportunity to escape, and since

Dad had specifically requested my help, I had no choice but to give up and obey.

"...What do we need to do?"

Dad answered while squatting in front of a window and preparing what looked like carpenter tools. "Today we're gonna check to see if anything needs fixing. The shutters will be locked tight during snowstorms, so we need to make sure none of the hinges are loose or rusted. While we're at it, we'll look for holes. Once we're done with that, we'll clean the chimney and furnace so we can use'm without issue over the winter."

Um, Dad...? What are you expecting from my weak little arms that can't hold anything or even use a screwdriver? I understood what we needed to do, but even then, I couldn't imagine that I would be helpful at all.

Though maybe if I tried super hard and showed that I could be helpful, my family's faith in me would go up a little. It should be simple to find rusted or loose hinges with my modern knowledge.

"Dad, this hinge and its nails are rusted."

"Those will last."

Um, I'm pretty sure they're like on the verge of breaking off? They're a mess. I briefly considered whether or not I should trust Dad. It'd be a big problem if a window door meant to block a snowstorm broke during the middle of winter.

I stood on a chair and tried shaking the window door a little. If nothing happened, I could trust Dad, but if it broke, then he should learn to trust me. After shaking the door a few times, the hinge loudly snapped into two.

I nodded to myself since that was what I expected, but Dad paled and stared at the shaking door with wide eyes.

"M-Myne, why'd you do that?!"

"See? It broke. I told you it wouldn't last all winter. Now, Dad. Fix it." I pointed at the window door, and Dad, ignoring his mistake in judgement, lifted me off the chair while sighing.

"Myne, go help Effa."

"Wha? But I'm helping you, Dad. We need to make sure all the hinges won't

break during winter, but you're ignoring the really bad ones." I shrugged and shook my head. Mom told me to help Dad, and so I would. This was all for the sake of making my winter as comfortable as possible.

"We don't have the money to fix all of them and at this rate you'll break all of'm. Go help Effa."

...Noooo! Money's a problem here too?! I, having destroyed the hinge that Dad had intended to treasure for a little longer, obediently followed his instructions and went to the bedroom where Mom and Tuuli were.

They were drying our sheets and blankets to make them more usable, moving our bed to the wall closest to the furnace to make nights a little warmer, and just setting up the room to be more livable in the winter.

"What's wrong, Myne?"

"Dad told me to come help you, Mom..."

"Really? We've just about finished here, so we're about to start preparing the lights. We luckily ended up with extra beeswax this year. We're also going to use beef tallow and fruits to make candles and oil for lamps."

That all sounded like a real pain. I had been smelling the nasty scent of animal oil wafting from nearby homes for several days and just imagining smelling the same stink from my own kitchen made me depressed.

Tuuli started work on extracting oil from fruits, but since I was too weak to wield the hammer well, I had no excuse. I could only watch beside Mom as she put beef tallow into our largest pot and set it over the fire.

...It stinks! So bad! Stay strong, me. Despite the smell being so bad I could barely breathe, Mom casually melted the tallow and picked out the drags that rose to the surface. Surprisingly, however, that was all she did before starting to finish up.

"Wait, Mom. That's all? You're not going to (salt it out)?"

"Hm? Come again?"

Oh no. I guess this is obvious, but "(salt it out)" didn't get translated.

Mom shot me a little glare that said *"Are you complaining about my work?"*

but I swallowed my fear and tried to explain what salting out was in as simple terminology as possible.

“Ummm, you put salt water in and then boil it a bit to get more junk out?”

“Salt water?”

“Uh huh. If you leave it for a bit afterwards, the oil will harden on top and leave just the salt water on bottom, right? You can pour out the water and then just use the pure oil. It’s a bit more work, but the oil will smell better and be higher quality.”

As if reacting to the phrase “higher quality,” Mom began salting the oil out.

The quality of oil we make here was a matter of life or death for me. After all, we’d be using the oil in a closed room. I wouldn’t be able to survive a stinky home for an entire winter. *Well... I couldn’t tell her exactly what ratio of salt water to oil is best, but it should still end up better.*

We went with a pretty arbitrary ratio, but thanks to the salting, the yellowed tallow became a pure white. The tallow was then split into parts, some to be used for candles and some to be used for soap come spring. The candle part was put back into the pot and melted again.

As an aside, the tiny chunks of meat that came out after filtering the tallow were used as a pretty tasty soup base. Yum yum.

After eating lunch, we got to work making candles.

“Okay, Tuuli. I want you to start making candles now. Gunther and I need to prepare the firewood.”

“Okaaay.”

Wait... What’s my job? All three of them started their own jobs, so after a moment’s thought, I followed Mom out of the front door. Maybe “go help your mother” included this.

But after noticing me, Mom told me to go back inside. “Myne, help Tuuli make candles. Be sure not to get in the way.”

“...Okay.” *Sheesh, why do they trust me so little?*

I returned to the kitchen and saw Tuuli cutting strings into identical lengths and hanging several of them at a time from little sticks. She then took a stick and held it such that the strings dipped into the pot of melted tallow before lifting it up and down. Over time, the oil sticking to the string hardened, fattened, and began looking like a candle.

“Wow, so that’s how you make candles.”

“Don’t just watch, Myne! Help!”

Tuuli was mad, so in order to help, I grabbed some smell-blocking herbs and stuck them to some of the hardening candles. If these worked, I would put more herbs into all of them.

“Myne! Don’t play around!”

“Just these, okay? Don’t you want candles that don’t stink too, Tuuli? Please.”

“Definitely just these, understand?” Tuuli drove that home, so I gave a big nod.

I didn’t know whether it would work or not, so I had no intention of messing with all of them. I put different herbs into each candle so I would be able to see which worked the best.

While Tuuli and I made candles, our parents were preparing firewood. Without it we would undoubtedly freeze to death, so making sure we had enough ready was absolutely vital. Dad took both the wood Tuuli had picked plus extra wood we bought and used an axe to chop it all into fifty-centimeter-long sticks. Mom then took the cut firewood and brought it to the winter storeroom.

“Where are you going, Mom?” I was so surprised to see Mom going into a room I didn’t know about that I followed after her. It was news to me, but there was another room inside our normal storage room. Apparently it was generally only used for winter preparations. About half of the room was already packed with tons of wood.

“Wha? I didn’t know about this room.”

“It’s our winter storeroom, remember? How could you even forget that, Myne?”

Speaking of which, I had been wondering where Tuuli put all the wood she came back with. Now I knew. Since the wood we normally use was put in the general storage room, I never noticed there was another one deeper inside.

“...It’s cold here.”

“Of course it is. This room is the furthest from the hearth.”

Our home didn’t have anything fancy like a fireplace, so the hearth slash makeshift oven in the kitchen was the only source of heat in the entire house. We would generally spend all of our time there.

And now, our beds were pressed against the singular wall separating them from the hearth. As long as fire was burning inside, which was when we children went to bed, it was surprisingly warm.

But it was only warm at the start. Mom would put out the fire before bed, so the room was ice cold in the morning. On the other hand, this winter storeroom was the furthest room in the house from the hearth, so it was super cold.

It was the perfect place to put preserved food, oil, and other things we needed for the winter. In other words, it was a natural fridge and we didn’t want it getting warm.

“There’s lots of firewood here.”

“It’s still barely enough, you know.”

Even though half the room’s full?! I looked at all the firewood stacked in the winter storeroom and the word “deforestation” passed through my mind. If a single family burned this much wood, how much wood was the entire city using?

“Myne, don’t start daydreaming, it’s time to prepare for our winter handiwork.”

“I’m not daydreaming!” I protested, but Mom was already heading to the kitchen. I hurriedly chased after her. I didn’t want to be left alone in a dark room with no windows.

“Mom, what do you mean by handiwork?”

“Well. Men fix the tools they use at work, I suppose? If we intend to make new tools or furniture, we need to gather the materials ahead of time.”

“So it’s like work we do over the winter while stuck inside?”

Mom nodded while counting how many spools of thread we had. “That’s right. It’s important that we women make clothes, remember? We won’t be able to do that without preparing thread and dyeing cloth ahead of time. I’ve already finished all that since I work as a dyer, but we still need to prepare the wool and plants like nillen that we’ll be weaving next year.”

“Huh.”

“Not to mention, Tuuli’s baptism is next summer. I need to prepare her special dress during the winter.” Mom looked around with a deadly serious expression, making sure she had everything she needed.

I got the feeling that I would just get in the way no matter what, so I slid back over to where Tuuli was. “What’s your winter handiwork going to be, Tuuli?”

“I’m gonna make baskets. We’ll sell them when spring comes.” Tuuli was preparing her basket-making materials which would serve as her handiwork. She was taking some of the wood she gathered in the forest to the well and peeling off its bark. She would then run her knife along the fibers to split the wood apart.

“What’ll you be doing, Myne?”

“I’m making (faux-papyrus)!”

“What’s that?”

“Eheheh. It’s, a, secret.”

I followed Tuuli’s example and started preparing the fibers I needed for my winter handiwork: making faux-papyrus. This was an important job for me. A respectable job that nobody would get mad at me for doing.

To get the fibers out, I basically just had to do what Tuuli was doing, probably. Peel off the outer layer of the stems, soak them in water, then dry them. Winter preparations began before Tuuli and the others could get too many stems, so I

decided to just take them all apart for fibers.

“Tuuli, I want some water too.”

“...Okay.”

“Tuuli, how do you think I should get just the fibers out of these stems?”

“Wha? Umm...”

“Tuuli, they won’t get blown away if I dry them in the window, right?”

“.....”

I bundled up the completed fibers. There weren’t many of them, but there were probably enough to make one or two sheets of faux-papyrus. With that, my own winter preparations were more or less finished.

Whew. I worked really hard here. Wait, what? Is it just me or does Tuuli look annoyed?

Stone Slate Get!

The most important thing to prepare for winter was food. Unlike Japan, there weren't supermarkets open every day of every year. Barely any crops could be grown or harvested and the market would barely open due to the weather. If you didn't want to starve to death, you had to prepare ahead of time. Which is why I was currently sitting inside the back of a covered wagon between the loads of stuff packed into it.

It all started when Dad woke us all up at the crack of dawn. "Alright, we're going to the farm today! Everyone ready?"

Umm, no, of course not. What the heck's going on? I rubbed my sleepy eyes and glared at Dad, but Mom and Tuuli both nodded enthusiastically with big happy smiles. I was the only one not understanding.

"Oh, right. Myne was sick when this was decided, so she might not have heard about it." Mom clapped her hands together and both Tuuli and Dad nodded in agreement. It felt like I was being left out and excluded from the rest of the family, which didn't feel great.

I pouted a little, cheeks puffing out, but everyone started preparing immediately. They didn't seem to have the time to worry about me.

"Anyway, we need to keep warm. I remember you getting a fever last year, Myne!" Mom called out to me while carrying stuff down the steps. I was in the middle of changing clothes since, given that they wouldn't let me stay home alone, I had no choice but to go along with them.

...Why are we going to a farm in a far-off village, anyway? I had intended to walk at least part of the way to the village in order to build up strength, but I was so excessively slow that Dad got frustrated and put me in the wagon. There really wasn't any space for me, so I huddled into as small of a ball as possible.

In the wagon there were several barrels of varying size, plenty of empty

bottles, string, cloth, salt, and wood. It was all important stuff for what we were doing at the farm, probably. ...*Wait. Am I the most useless thing in this wagon?*

Dad was pulling the wagon from the front while Mom and Tuuli pushed it from the back. It kinda felt like I was being serious dead weight, which again made me feel bad.

“Um, Mom. Why are we going to a farm?”

“There’s no smokery in the city, remember? We’re going to rent the one in the nearest farming village.”

We’re going to smoke meat? That reminds me, we bought lots of meat at the market.

But I feel like she already boiled or salted most of it. There’s that much left? Shouldn’t it be bad by now? Is this okay?

I started counting the days on my fingers, worried, but Mom just looked at me with exasperation.

“What are you even talking about? Today’s pig day. We’ll buy two pigs at the farm, split into groups to prepare them, and then share the meat.”

“Wha?” For an instant, my ears blocked what Mom had said. There was a brief but clear time lag between me hearing that and the noise reaching my brain, and when it did, I started to tremble. “P, P-P-P, Pig day?! What?!”

“The day when we and our neighbors gather together, butcher a pig, salt it, smoke it, and make bacon, sausage, and all other sorts of meat. Goodness Myne, don’t you remember last ye... ah, actually, you got a fever in the cart on the way there.”

Honestly, I want to get a fever this year too. At least then I won’t have to watch it happen.

“Mom, didn’t you buy a lot of meat at the market a bit ago...?”

“You should know that wouldn’t be enough. In fact, that was just extra meat to supplement the pigs.”

I had thought she bought more than enough meat before, but apparently it was all just extra meat, not even the main event. I couldn’t even imagine just

how much meat was necessary to last the winter.

In sharp contrast to my depression over being unable to avoid seeing pigs get butchered, Tuuli was wearing a bright, full smile as she pushed the cart. “There’s lots of fun stuff about today. We get to taste the meat in the middle of it and there’s fresh sausage for dinner, it’s great. This is the first time you’ll be helping, Myne, but it’s kind of like a festival everyone gets excited for. I’m glad we get to go together this year!”

“Everyone?” I blinked in confusion, and Mom replied with an expression that practically said *“Don’t ask questions with such obvious answers.”*

“Who would we do it with if not our neighbors? Butchering pigs is a serious job, it can’t be done without at least ten adults.”

Eugh, our neighbors... Myne had a lot of vague memories, so there were definitely going to be a bunch of people who knew me that I didn’t know. Not only would dealing with them be a pain, but we were going to be butchering a pig on top of that. Just remembering what I saw at the market was enough to make a chill run down my back.

“...I don’t want to go.”

“What’re you talking about? We won’t have any sausage or bacon all winter if we don’t go.”

We needed the meat for the winter, so naturally they wouldn’t turn around even if I said I didn’t want to go. I had to participate no matter how little I wanted to. I sighed, depressed, and soon our cart reached the southern gate of the outer wall.

“Wait, Captain? Aren’t you late? Everyone else passed through a long time ago.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

One of Dad’s coworkers called out to him as we passed through the gate. Apparently, our neighbors had left for the farm a long time ago.

“Stay safe.” A younger looking guy who looked like he probably liked children waved at me, so I waved back. Polite decency was important in all things.

“Wooow...” The moment our cart rumbled out of the small tunnel that was the southern gate, I let out a tiny cry of surprise. It was the first time I had left the city walls since becoming Myne. To be honest, I hadn’t expected things to be so different outside.

First of all, there were no buildings. Inside the city was a tight, never-ending cluster of buildings, but the second we got outside of the gates, there was a wide road with only about ten to fifteen shacks strewn about.

On top of that, the air was nice. The more open the air the more the smell of waste was diluted, I supposed, and for the first time in a long while I remembered that air could taste good. There were no tall walls to block all the smells inside. I looked around and saw a field of crops on one side of me and a forest of tall trees on the other. The scenery was impossibly tranquil, the very definition of idyllic.

“Myne, close your mouth. You’re gonna bite your tongue off.”

“Bwuh?!”

Right after Dad’s warning, the cart began rattling up and down even worse than it did in town. The city road had shifted from cobblestone to a normal dirt road with mounds and hills. It was shaking so hard I thought all our stuff would fall out, but at least they had ropes holding them down. I was in the most danger of all since I wasn’t locked down whatsoever. I clung tightly to the side of the cart for my own safety.

...This kind of road is the worst! On sunny days they’re super bumpy and on rainy day’s they’re a muddy mess! Learn how to make asphalt already! I spat angry complaints on the inside and soon felt Dad speed up.

We had arrived at the village. It was about fifteen minutes away from the town gate, and after passing through the entryway, I could hear lots of people talking.

“Almost there.”

Butchering the pig was mainly a job for men. They had to hold down beasts that looked like they weighed over a hundred kilograms, not to mention tie

them up and hang them from their feet. It was a job that took a lot of strength.

While they were doing that, the women would prepare the smokery, boil lots of water, and prepare salt and tools for preservation.

By the time we reached the village, the butchering was already beginning. Those who didn't participate naturally didn't get any meat.

"Crap! It's starting! Effa, Tuuli, hurry and take your places!"

"Oh no! Run, Tuuli!"

"Right!"

All three of them let go of the cart, grabbed wax-coated aprons made from some thick material, and put them on. Once Mom and Tuuli got theirs on, they rushed over to the smokery where a bunch of women already were. Dad put on his apron too and ran off after grabbing a spear, which was probably an important tool here.

Wh... Everyone's so fast! My family had all ran off before I could even process what was happening. I could have run after Mom, but I wouldn't want to be standing around in a crowd with no idea of what to do.

It was a yearly ritual for these people, so there were probably a ton of unspoken rules. If only I had a manual.

Knowing that I just got in the way no matter what I did, I decided to wait in the cart until someone called for me. *This is important work too*, I told myself while sitting on top of the abandoned cart doing nothing in particular.

Unfortunately, however, Dad had left the cart right in the middle of the pig-slaughtering field. There was a little distance between us, but I could clearly see the pig squealing in pain and fear while running away from its pursuers. There was a wooden stake driven into the ground, connected by rope to the pig's right hind leg. It fled in a circle around the stake while men chased after it, desperate to pin it down.

I saw a familiar pink head in the crowd. Ralph and Lutz were definitely around here somewhere.

"Go get'm! Hyaaah!" Screaming out battle cries, Dad participated in the

chase. He readied the spear with immense speed and then stabbed it right into the pig. That single strike was enough for the pig to start convulsing, legs twitching, before it stopped moving entirely.

I let out a tiny shriek, but all the men let out a cheer at what had been done. Mom rushed forward with a metal bucket-looking thing and a somewhat long stick. Another woman brought a bowl thing to the pig. A moment later, blood sprayed everywhere, dyeing several people's aprons dark red. Dad had probably pulled the spear out after the blood-gathering bucket and bowl were prepared.

I held down my mouth and felt myself shake with terror. I couldn't see the pig due to all the women's aprons crowding around, but I could see how mechanically the woman was gathering blood in the bowl and pouring it into the bucket.

Mom furrowed her brows a little while firmly stirring all the blood being poured into her bucket. *Ngh... Mom looks really scary right now.*

Afterward, a bunch of people worked together to hang the pig upside down from a tree that had been prepared beforehand. The blood they hadn't managed to squeeze out of the pig began dripping down to the ground.

The real butchering was about to begin. A man with a thick butcher's knife walked up and pressed it against the pig's stomach.

That was the last thing I remembered. Before I knew it, I was in a stone building, not one I had seen in the village. I could see the ceiling since someone had laid me onto my back, but it wasn't my home's ceiling.

I blinked several times, still on my back, and then remembered what I had seen before passing out. It made me feel sick. But for some reason, something felt really familiar about the pig being butchered.

What was it... Like, something being hung upside down, and then being cut apart... It was on the tip of my tongue, but it just wouldn't come out. If I had to guess, it wasn't one of Myne's memories. It was one of my Urano memories. I must have seen something similar in Japan.

...Ah! It looked like that fish I saw being hung upside down in a coastal Ibaraki market! From that perspective, I could understand why everyone was so excited about the pig. I remembered how excited people were to eat a fish that fresh. *Well... I can understand, but it's still a bit emotionally rough for me. I mean, the fish didn't scream in pain like that. It didn't gush out blood. Guuuh, so gross...*

I rolled over, holding my mouth, and fell right off what I was lying on.

"Oooow..." I used my hands to stand up and look around, seeing immediately that I had been resting on a smallish wooden bench. There was a burning fireplace nearby, so it wasn't cold. But nobody was around, and I couldn't hear anybody talking.

Oh right... Where am I, anyway? The moment I decided I needed to figure out where I was, a soldier peeked into the room, maybe due to having heard me fall.

"Oh. Finally awake, huh?"

"Mr. Otto?" I let out a sigh of relief, glad to see someone I knew.

A stone building with Otto inside could only mean that I was in one of the gate's waiting rooms. My anxiety melted away after I learned where I was.

"That means you remember me, right?" Otto looked visibly relieved that I remembered him. That made sense. I was a child on the outside, after all. He definitely thought that I would have started crying if I saw someone I didn't know.

"I could never forget you." *I mean, you're the first man of culture I've met in this world and my (future) teacher. How could I forget?*

I mimicked the chest-tapping salute, to which Otto laughed a little and rubbed my head. "The captain rushed back here with you in tow. He said you collapsed in the cart. He'll be back as soon as he's finished with what he needs to do."

I didn't know how long it would take to butcher a pig, but they had to prepare the meat afterward too, so I couldn't imagine it would be over soon.

Hm... Thinking about it, Tuuli said we would get fresh meat for dinner. Guess

I'll be waiting here for a while. Knowing that I would end up with plenty of spare time, I had put the materials I needed for faux-papyrus into the cart, but they were out of my reach.

"What's wrong, Myne? Feeling lonely without your mom and dad?"

"No, I was just thinking about how I could kill some time." I shook my head and said what I was really thinking.

Otto looked at me hard for a bit, then whispered, "He did say she wasn't as young as she looked," and nodded to himself. "I might have something that can help, Myne. How about this?"

"Wow! The slate!"

Otto held out the slate. He knew for sure we'd be passing by the gate today, so he had brought it with him to give to me.

A man of culture that considerate about other people?! Mr. Otto's such a great person!

"I need to go back and stand at the gate, but go ahead and practice this while I'm gone."

Otto wrote my name, Myne, at the top of the slate before setting down the slate pen and a cloth. He then left the room.

I hugged the slate with one arm and waved Otto goodbye with the biggest smile of my life before dropping my gaze back down to the slate.

The best way to explain it was to call it a mini-chalkboard about the size of an A4 piece of paper. A dark, thin stone set into a wooden frame. Both sides could be written on, and one of them had lines for practicing letters on.

The slate pen was a writing tool specifically for slates, and although I could tell it was a thin stone from a touch, it looked entirely like a thin piece of chalk. The somewhat dirty cloth was a way to clear off the slate. It would probably do a good job, given how the letters Otto wrote got a little blurry just from me hugging the slate.

"Aaah, my heart's beating so fast!" I put the slate onto the table and held the pen. Just gripping the slate pen like a pencil made my heart race.

I started off by copying Otto's letters, none of which I recognized at all. I was so nervous writing the first letters of my second life that they all ended up twisted and shaky. If I were in Japan, I likely would have shaken my head and wiped them away immediately to try again. But it had been so long since I had seen letters that I couldn't take my eyes off them. I was so happy.



I took a deep breath, exhaled, wiped the letters away with the cloth next to the slate, and tried again. Things went a lot better the second time. I wrote my name, erased it, wrote it, erased it...

When I got bored of that, I wrote little poems and song lyrics in Japanese, then erased them, then wrote them, then erased them...

Haaah... This is bliss.

I never would've thought that writing letters could make me so happy.

Despite being near the furnace, the waiting room was so drafty that after spending hours playing with the slate and waiting for my family, I caught a cold in record time and ended up in bed with a fever.

“You still have a fever, Myne, so stay in bed. No getting out!”

“...Okay.”

My parents busily walked around, in and out of the house, as they carried root vegetables into the winter storeroom. Tuuli was in the kitchen making jam out of fruit and honey that she had gathered herself. In this world, all it took was a sweet scent drifting through my home to make me happy.

While they were in the middle of stashing away beer and the prepared pig, Tuuli brought me my soup lunch. I put aside my stone slate and took the whole tray from her.

“Sorry, Tuuli.”

“Seriously. This is a real pain.”

“Aww, what? Didn’t you promise not to say that?”

“I never promised that!”

I mean... Okay, you didn’t promise that. But isn’t it still like, an unspoken promise?

While everyone else was exhausting themselves preparing for winter, I was lying in bed and playing around with the slate Otto gave me, practicing my name and having fun writing in Japanese.

But I really wanted a book that would preserve writing permanently. If writing some letters was all it took to get me this happy, I figured reading a book would make me absolutely ecstatic. I needed to hurry up and get healthy again so I could make paper.

Beaten by Ancient Egyptians

Tiny bits of snow began to fall here and there right as we were on the verge of finishing our preparations. Winter was coming, for real.

During winter, our neighborhood would end up snowed in, and we'd generally spend all our time inside the house outside of especially sunny days. I normally spent all my time inside anyway like the shut-in I was, so that wasn't really a problem for me.

But there were no books in this world. *Will I survive as a shut-in without any books around me?*

Blizzards often occurred when snow began falling, so we needed to keep our windows and doors shut tight for warmth. We then stuffed somewhat thick rags into any cracks to block as much wind as possible.

"...Ngh, so dark."

"It's a blizzard, what did you expect?"

It caught me off guard that the only sources of light in our locked-up house were the furnace and our candles. It was the first time I had ever been inside a completely dark room in the middle of the day. It hurt to live without electricity. Even back in my Urano days, I had my phone and flashlights when typhoons knocked out the power, and usually it got fixed by the next day. *Won't we all get depressed spending weeks in the dark like this?*

"Hey, Mom. Is everyone's house this dark?"

"Hmm. I believe those with a decent amount of spare money tend to have several lamps around their homes to light things up, but we only have one."

"Wha? We have a lamp and we aren't using it?" I figured that it was best to use any light source we had, but Mom just sighed and shook her head.

"We try to avoid using the lamp since we need to be frugal with oil. You wouldn't want to run out of candles if the winter drags on, would you?"

There was no argument against being frugal. Even my mom back in Japan did all sorts of things in the name of saving money. She would unplug the TV from the wall to save on the electricity bill, and yet fall asleep with it still on. She'd cut off the water when brushing her teeth to save on water, but leave it on when washing dishes. In other words, my mom taught me the importance of self-satisfaction.

I decided to take after my mother's frugal ways and see if I could finagle a way to get the room a little brighter.

"What're you doing, Myne?"

"I think this might make the room a little brighter..."

With a three-sided mirror's magnification properties in mind, I polished my dad's old metal gauntlets that he had apparently used in a past war and lined them next to the candle.

"Stop it, Myne."

"It's harder to see now."

They both immediately shot me down. Unfortunately, the gauntlets weren't flat slabs of metal, and the surface wasn't exactly the smoothest. The light reflected in all sorts of directions and shined in their eyes, making it harder to see their hands.

"Bwuh, it didn't work. I wonder if there's something else I can use like a (mirror)..."

"I would appreciate it if you would stop wasting our time." Mom shot me down with a firm tone, so I gave up on my light-reflecting strategy.

But still, having diminished eyesight didn't feel that great regardless of whether or not I had any books to read, so I took up camp right next to the warm furnace.

Not long after that, Mom began setting up her loom near me. It wasn't a large machine like those I had seen in Japan. It was something a lot more fundamental. I had been wondering how one could weave cloth in a house this small, but it seemed there were looms small enough to do the job.

“Tuuli, since your baptism’s coming up, there’s a lot I need to teach you,” said Mom before beginning to teach Tuuli all she needed to know about weaving. Tuuli took a spool of thread in hand, looking deadly serious.

“You put the thread here, then prepare the weft. You weave the thread like this...” Using the thread she had dyed in the fall for this purpose, she started weaving the cloth.

She wove the cloth, sewed it into clothing, and embroidered it. While she was at it, she prepared next year’s thread from the wool she had bought. We only ever bought the base materials. No new clothes were sold where we lived, and even cloth was too expensive for most commoners to buy.

“That’s right, just like that. You’ve got a knack for this, Tuuli. Myne, would you like to try too? They say that no beauty doesn’t know how to sew.”

“Wha? Beauty?”

“That’s right. Creating clothes for your family is important both practically and to show off to the neighbors. You can’t be a true beauty if you’re not good at sewing and cooking.”

Aaah... I’m definitely not gonna grow up into a beauty, then. And I mean, I can understand all that being important for a good wife, but what do cooking and sewing have to do with being beautiful?

I was used to clothes just being something you bought at a store. Go to the store and you’d be surrounded by clothes with all sorts of varying designs. I never was very interested in them, just wearing whatever I thought would get me through something without getting yelled at, but even so, my closet ended up packed with clothes.

At the very least, I never wore hand-me-downs that had to be sewed up. Sewing was just something I did a few times in school, and those times I just used an electrical sewing machine to finish in no time. The best I could do with needles was reattach a fallen button.

To say it outright: Expecting me to consider making thread, weaving cloth, and sewing clothes for the family over winter as some important thing was just asking too much. I could say with confidence that I would never, ever care that

much about it. I'd never feel motivated to do it.

Though I would sew until my hands fell off if I could use the cloth as parchment.

"You don't want to join, Myne?"

"Mmm, maybe next time."

Tuuli wanted me to join, but I really just did not want to sew anything. Mom was teaching Tuuli since she wanted to become an apprentice seamstress, but in my case, I lacked the height, hand size, and of course, motivation. Teaching me would be a waste of time.

"Okay, Mom. Please make my special dress. I'll make baskets."

"Certainly. Leave it to your mother. I'll make you the prettiest, most wonderful dress you've ever seen." Mom, confident in her sewing skills, spoke with eager enthusiasm.

Every season, all children turning seven gathered at the temple wearing their best clothing. It was the perfect opportunity for a mother to show off her talent. In some ways, it was like a competition for mothers. My own mom began preparing the warp with a smile on her face, using thread much thinner than what Tuuli had been practicing with.

"That thread looks really thin."

Mom gave me a conflicted smile as I thought about how long it would take to make cloth with that thread. "Well, her baptism is in the summer. Can you imagine how hot it would be without thin clothing?"

"You're making her dress in the winter even though her baptism is in the summer? Won't she get bigger by then?" There was a lot more food and time to play around in the summer, so I figured most kids would grow a lot during it. What would happen if she grew too much and the dress ended up too small for her?

"I can make little changes to it, so that won't be problem. My main worry is that you're so much smaller than her, Myne. You might not be able to wear the same dress. Fixing it that much will be quite the ordeal. I wonder what I'll do

next year?”

Oof... That does sound rough. Good luck, Mom.

Mom resumed weaving the cloth using the thin thread, which looked harder to work with than the wool thread they made earlier. Tuuli began making baskets to sell. Since my eyes had adjusted well enough to the dark, I decided to start making my own faux-papyrus, as my first giant step to accomplishing my dreams.

If I can just weave these plant fibers together, I’ll definitely end up with something like paper. I won’t lose to ancient Egyptians! Let’s do this!

I put the fibers on the table and thought back to the coasters I had been forced to make back in my Urano days. First, I would try to make a piece of paper about the size of a postcard. I got to work vertically and horizontally weaving the fibers that were much thinner than the thread mom was sewing with.

I lacked money, skill, and age. This was a duel I had to win with guts, determination, and more guts.

...Bwuuuh, they’re all so thin I can barely tell them apart. Fiddle fiddle fiddle fiddle...

...Ah, I messed up! Fiddle fiddle fiddle fiddle...

The fibers were so thin it wasn’t easy to fix any mistake I made. It all just fell apart. Frustrated, I continued my duel with the thin fibers, and eventually Tuuli stopped making her basket to peer over my shoulder.

“Hey, Myne. What’re you doing?”

“Hm? Making (faux-papyrus).”

Tuuli looked back and forth between me and my hands. It was written all over her face that she hadn’t understood what I just said.

Mmm, you can’t tell by looking? I haven’t even finished a one-inch wide square yet, so that’s fair. Not even I can tell if this is actually going to end up as good faux-papyrus.

Mom, continuing to weave the cloth, looked at me fiddling with the plant

fibers and sighed.

Fiddle fiddle fiddle...

Fiddle fiddle fiddle...

“Myne, if you have the time to play around, help Tuuli make baskets instead.”

“Mmm. Maybe when I’m not busy.” I wasn’t playing around, and I didn’t have the time to help Tuuli. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say I was the busiest I had ever been since starting my life as Myne.

...Ah! I made another mistake. All because Mom called out to me. Geez!

Fiddle fiddle fiddle...

Fiddle fiddle fiddle...

“Myne, seriously, what are you doing?”

“I told you, making (faux-papyrus).” I didn’t have the mental leeway to respond gently to Tuuli’s question, so my tone ended up a little sharp as I focused everything on fiddle fiddle fiddle...

I didn’t hate working with my hands, and I was doing this because I wanted to. I just had to stay determined and keep going.

Fiddle fiddle fiddle...

Fiddle fiddle fiddle...

“Um, Myne. It’s not getting any bigger.”

“I know that!” Tuuli’s comment served as the spark that finally made me yell in frustration. It took me a whole day just to get it the size of a fingertip. Please understand how I must have felt.

Fiddle fiddle fiddle...

Fiddle fiddle fiddle...

The next day I relied on determination as well. *Just keep going,* I told myself as I wove the fibers together. *I can’t let Tuuli’s comments bother me.*

“What’s that even supposed to be?”

“.....”

I can’t... let them bother me. I can’t let them bother me.

Fiddle fiddle fiddle...

Gah! It’s coming apart! Ngh, I just have to keep going! My heart will break if I try fixing it! Fiddle fiddle fiddle...

“Hey, Myne...”

“That’s it! I can’t do it! Okay, (ancient Egyptians), you win! I lose!” Mentally and emotionally exhausted, I clenched a fist around my faux-papyrus and yelled out in frustration.

The faux-papyrus had ended up about the size of a tiny notecard. I had no idea how many days it would take if I were to try weaving the fibers into the size of an actual piece of paper, while keeping them tight enough to actually write on.

Naturally, it would be impossible for me to make enough faux-papyrus to bind into a book at that rate. You could tell just by touching my card-sized faux-papyrus that I had lost patience with it midway through. The center was tightly woven, but the closer you got to the outside, the more frayed it was. No way would it have ended up as paper I could write on.

At best, it could be a somewhat messy coaster. Not even good enough to write memos on.

“Bwuuuuuh... I failed. My papyrus plan failed so hard.” The challenge involved in getting the materials, the difficulty of the creation process, and the overall time investment were all just too great for faux-papyrus to be mass produced. Even if I finished that sheet of faux-papyrus, it wouldn’t lead to me making a book.

“Be quiet, Myne! If you have the time to play with plants, weave some baskets!”

“Baskets won’t turn into books...”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but you failed, didn’t you? Just start making baskets already.”

Mom was so mad that I gave up and started weaving baskets. It was a lot simpler to weave the basket parts together than the super thin plant fibers.

“Tuuli, I’ll help you make baskets. Would you mind sharing your stuff?”

“Here, I’ll teach you.” Tuuli offered to help with a smile while gathering materials for me, but I just took them and shook my head.

“It’s okay, I already know how.”

“Wha?” Watching Tuuli blink in confusion out of the corner of my eyes, I started weaving a basket. I lined up the bamboo-esque, flat pieces of wood and delicately wove them together, making a tight basket with no gaps.

This was really perfect timing for me, since I had been wanting a sort of take-out bag for a while. I decided to put my all into making the basket, partially to blow off steam after failing so hard with papyrus. After making a solid bottom, I calculated how to make the outside of the basket have a pretty design before starting to weave the rest of it.

I kept weaving the pieces of wood, taking care not to hurt my hands, until the basket was done. It took me five whole days just to make a tiny chunk of faux-papyrus, but I finished my “tote bag” within a day. That was pretty good, considering how clumsy my tiny child hands were.

“That’s amazing, Myne. I didn’t know you were a natural at this. Maybe you should try to be an apprentice carpenter?”

“Whaaa? That’s a little...”

Mom’s eyes beamed with joy, excited to see that her generally useless daughter had unexpected talent, but I had no intention of becoming an apprentice carpenter. I would work at a bookstore, library, or nowhere at all. Though it was a little problem that books were so rare that there were no bookstores or libraries to hire me.

“Ngh, why are you so good at this, Myne?” Tuuli compared her baskets with mine and slumped her shoulders, depressed at how much worse hers were.

“Don’t worry about it, Tuuli. You just need to learn how to tighten the gaps and plan ahead to make patterns.”

I mean, the real difference here is just how much experience we have. Back in my Urano days, I had gotten wrapped up in my mom's arts and crafts kick, where she folded newspaper advertisements and made baskets out of them. I had never expected that experience to be useful to me, but well, you never know where life will take you.

"I can't believe you're better than me, Myneee..."

Oh no... Looks like I've really hurt Tuuli's older sister pride.

"Aaah, ummm... Right! Mrs. Gerda taught me while she was babysitting me. I've been doing this all the time while you're out at the forest. You did a lot of other things while I made baskets, so you're still better than me at almost everything. Really."

I didn't have much experience with children, so I wasn't sure how to put her back into a good mood. I did my best to make up an excuse for why I was so good, but honestly, I wasn't even really sure what I was trying to say myself.

"...Oh, okay. That's right." I wasn't sure what part of that convinced her, but Tuuli looked a little relieved. "Okay, then I'll make lots of baskets over the winter and get better than you, Myne."

"Uh huh. Good luck, Tuuli." I let out a sigh of relief, glad to see Tuuli feeling better. It would be a lot harder for me to survive here without Tuuli's help. If left on my own, I'd be helpless. *I'm so glad I cheered her up.*

"Oh, Tuuli. You should force it into place a little more, it'll look better that way." *Well... It's not like I'm that happy about being good at making baskets. I just want books.*

I watched Tuuli's basket weaving and gave her advice while glancing at my failed faux-papyrus. *If papyrus won't work, what should I try making next?* Throughout the winter, I thought about what to do next while continually weaving baskets next to Tuuli.

...Egypt's no good, it's way too hard for a kid like me. What should I do if Egypt won't work? Well, thinking about it like a textbook, you usually study Mesopotamian culture before Egyptian culture.

...Okay, that's it! Cuneiform! It's time for clay tablets! Long live Mesopotamian

culture!

I remember that even after the flames of war and arson, their clay tablets managed to survive. I'll make clay tablets, carve letters into them, cook them in a furnace, and that might just be that. Plus, making tablets out of clay will just look like a kid playing with mud. The adults won't suspect a thing.

It's settled! That's what I want to do. Once the snow melts and spring comes, I'm making clay tablets!

The Sweet Taste of Winter

“It’s sunny! Dad, it’s sunny! Come, wake up! Myne!” Tuuli’s excited voice rang through the dark bedroom and soon I was shaken awake.

There had been harsh snowfall for the past few days, but upon waking up I saw dazzling sunlight streaming through the crack between our window doors. *Wooow. Long time no see, Sun.*

Tuuli jumped off the bed in excitement and threw open the window covers without a care in the world for how cold it would be. A blue sky free of clouds stretched in all directions and the snow-swept city gleamed beneath the sun.

“Look, the weather’s perfect. You have today off, right Dad? We gotta hurry!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Dad, after scrunching his face from the bright sun hitting him head-on, jumped right out of bed.

Everything following that happened fast. Tuuli and Dad scarfed down breakfast, got some things ready, and then hurriedly dashed outside. I was just getting to the table as Tuuli went through the door, wearing as much warm clothing as possible.

“Bye bye, Myne. We’ll come back with lots of parues!”

I waved Tuuli goodbye while blinking in confusion. *Um... The heck’s a parue?* I searched Myne’s memories and learned that it was a fruit that produced a sweet white drink that tasted really good. Tuuli said she’d bring some back, but I wasn’t really sure how she planned to do that.

“Here’s breakfast, Myne. I need to go wash clothes. Those two will be bringing back parues for us, so I’ll be busy all afternoon.”

Mom sliced up bread that I couldn’t cut or break on my own and dunked it into soup. Bread that had been baked until it was hard and black to prevent mold and last night’s leftover soup with a side of milk was our normal breakfast.

Before I could even finish climbing onto my chair, Mom gathered up the dirty

clothes that had built up over the snowstorm and left the house. I sat in the now-silent kitchen and chewed away at my breakfast alone. Once done, I began making baskets, the only thing I had ever done that anyone complimented me for.

Dad and Tuuli must have known when Mom would be getting home, as they got back with broad grins right after she finished preparing for lunch. Seemed like their mission had been a success.

“We’re back, Mom, Myne. We got three parues!”

“Welcome home, you two. That’s fantastic. I have the dishes all set up and ready.” Mom pointed to a particularly deep bowl and went to get an especially thin piece of dry wood from the storage room, the kind used to start a fire.

Tuuli used it to start a fire in the furnace and then poked a parue over the bowl. The moment she did, the outer layer burst around her finger and thick white juice flowed out.

“Wow, it smells so gooood!”

A sweet scent drifted through our home as the fruit juice slowly filled the bowl. I swallowed hard, it having been the first time I had smelled something sweet in a while. This was definitely the kind of thing that would give me good memories.

Tuuli grabbed the bowl, making sure not to let any juice spill out, and Dad used the pressure weights to crush the juiced fruit.

“Parues are amazing,” Tuuli explained to me. “Their juice is super sweet and tasty, and you can get oil from them. Even the leftovers can be used to feed livestock. We don’t have any animals, so we take ours to Lutz’s place and trade it for eggs.”

“I bet a lot of people fight over them, then.”

“Uh huh. You can only find them in the snow on sunny days like this, so a lot of us in the city go to the forest right away in the morning. Everyone wants as many as possible. But gathering them is really hard.”

“Hard how?”

Tuuli poked a hole in the second parue with a thin stick and once again slowly poured the juices into the bowl. The only thing I could do to help was hold the bowl down so it didn’t fall over.

“To pick parue from trees, you have to heat up the branch holding it to soften it, but you can’t use *any* fire when up on top of the tree. The tree’s special powers will poof the fire away. So you have to take off your gloves and warm it with your bare hands.”

“You have to take your gloves off in a winter this cold?! That does sound rough.” That was a one-way road to frostbite. Even if Dad and Tuuli took turns, heating up branches with your bare hands was just terrible work. “You can’t wait until noon to pick them? Won’t it be better when it’s warmer?”

“Nope, nuh uh. You can only pick parues before noon.” Tuuli handed the drained parue to Dad and picked up the third one. She poked another hole into it and began squeezing out the juice. “Once noon comes and the sun rises, sunlight falls into the forest, and like, the parue leaves start shining, and the tree starts shaking, and the leaves all start making swishy swashy noises.”

Er... The leaves shine, the trees shake on their own, and they make swishy swashy noises? What? Despite Tuuli’s best explanation, I couldn’t imagine that at all.

“Once the leaves start making noises, the parue trees start stretching toward the sun. They grow taller than the rest of the trees in the forest and then they start shaking like a girl swinging her hair around. Like, rustle rustle, swish sway...”

“...They stretch and start swaying around?”

“Uh huh, right. The light hits its branches while it shakes around, and all the fruits we couldn’t gather shoot away, like pew! Once they’re all gone, the parue tree shrinks like it’s melting, and then it’s gone.”

“They shoot away, and then the trees disappear...? That’s a weird kind of tree.” That was really all I had to say on the matter. What a weird tree. My weak imagination wasn’t enough to visualize that happening at all.

“Okay, done. Want to try a little?” Tuuli poured most of the fruit juice into a jar, but left a little in the bowl. She drank two sips from it then handed me the bowl.

I took two little sips just like Tuuli did. A thick, sweet flavor filled my mouth and on instinct I grinned ear to ear. *This... This is what happiness tastes like! It’s like thick coconut milk!*

The moment I thought about drinking more, Tuuli said, “We don’t get a lot of this fruit juice, so we need to really, really, really treasure it. Don’t drink it all at once.”

Okay, okay, I’ll take it slow.

“Dad, are you going to squeeze this one too?” Tuuli held up the cloth bag and peered inside of it.

“Yep,” said Dad as he crushed the parue bit by bit with the pressure weights. Parue oil could be used for cooking and in lamps, which made it kind of like olive oil.

“Tuuli, let me see.” I peered into the bag from the side, wanting to see what parues looked like after getting their oil extracted. Inside I saw what looked like *okara*, which was a Japanese food made from soybean pulp. It smelled sweet.

“This stuff smells really sweet. Can you really not eat it?” I stuck a hand into the bag and experimentally plopped some of it into my mouth.

“Myne! That’s bird food!” Tuuli hurriedly took the bag away from me and told me to spit the stuff out, but I just chewed it thoughtfully.

The squeezed-dry stuff was rough and not nearly as sweet as it smelled. Overall, I understood why it wasn’t exactly considered good food for humans. But it definitely could be used like okara, in a good way. I took a bit of the stuff and dripped it into the fruit juice bowl to hydrate it a little.

“What’re you doing, Myne?”

“...I think it’ll be edible if I do this.”

“I’m telling you, that’s bird food! It’s not something for people to eat.”

I nodded and stuck some of it into my mouth. It was actually pretty good. If I

mixed the leftovers with fruit juice, and ideally added some eggs and milk, I could probably make a good okara pancake.

"...Uh huh, it's good."

"It's not good!" I pushed a bit of the parue leftovers mixed with fruit juice into Tuuli's mouth. At first she yelled "What're you doing?!" but after a bit, she started chewing with a conflicted look on her face.

"Okay, let's go."

Tuuli and I left to go to Lutz's house. It was the sixth floor of the house directly across from ours in the circular cluster of buildings that made up our neighborhood. I did my best climbing up and down two sets of stairs in order to trade the leftovers of two parues for eggs. It was pretty rough climbing the six floors to his place after climbing down the five from mine.

...I'll make a faux-pancake for them after the trade. Eheheh.

"Excuse meee."

"Lutz, here. We'll trade you these for eggs." I held out the bag with a full smile, but Lutz just frowned a little.

"We've already got enough animal feed. Got any meat instead? My older brothers keep stealing all of mine."

Everyone spent a lot more time inside during the winter, so it was more likely for them to steal his food. Lutz grumbled about being hungry all the time. Tuuli just gave a sympathetic smile and said "It's hard to fight back when they're so much bigger," but really, it was hard to describe how bad it felt to be hungry all the time.

I held the bag out, planning to help solve his problem. "Okay, Lutz. Why not just eat this?"

"Who would eat bird food?!" His reaction was as expected. Nobody around here ate it like okara.

"...It's edible if you make it right."

"Huh?"

“It’s only inedible cause you squeeze all the juices out. They taste really good if you make them properly, even the leftovers.”

Lutz looked at Tuuli in disbelief. He was definitely thinking that there was nobody in the world who would eat bird food.

“Seriously?! You’re just being wasteful! Sure, you could eat the parue and be done, but it’s way more efficient to use them to make juice, oil, and bird feed! Nobody wastes the fruit by just eating them on the spot! I can’t believe anyone would work so hard to get the fruit and just eat it without using it properly. There’s nobody dumb enough to do that in this whole town, Myne! Except you, I guess!”

Um... I didn’t eat the fruit itself, though. Maybe that’s just the only way he can understand? I put a hand on my chin and thought about Lutz’s harsh rejection. “You have enough bird feed now, right? Then the best thing is for we humans to eat it.”

“Like I’m saying, the leftovers are so dry nobody would eat them!”

“They only get so dry because people squeeze as much oil as possible out of them. If you put a little work in, they’re fine to eat.”

“Myne, y’know...” Lutz showed no sign of changing his mind no matter what I said.

I’d need to use a little force like I did with Tuuli to change his mind. He would definitely understand after eating them. I clenched my fist with resolve, ready to execute my plan, when all of a sudden Tuuli weakly hung her head and spoke.

“Um, Lutz. I know it’s hard to believe, but they really are edible. It, um... It tasted so good it kind of shocked me.”

“Wait, seriously? She made you eat bird food, Tuuli?!” Lutz looked at Tuuli with eyes full of sympathy.

“That’s rude, she said it tasted good. I think you just need to taste it for yourself. Do you have any fruit juice left over, Lutz?”

I walked into Lutz’s house and put some of our leftovers into a nearby bowl. I

then mixed it with about two teaspoons worth of Lutz's share of the fruit juice. After a brief taste test, I nodded to myself. It did indeed taste good.

"Open wide, Lutz."

Likely due to having seen me eat some, Lutz timidly opened his mouth. I placed the juice-mixed leftovers into his mouth. He closed his mouth, chewed a bit, then opened his eyes wide in surprise.

"See? Sweet and tasty, isn't it?" I puffed out my chest with pride, "eheh"-ing to myself, when all of a sudden Lutz's older brothers stopped just watching suspiciously from afar and instead swarmed down upon us.

"Sweet?"

"Tasty?"

"Seriously? Lemme try some, Lutz."

His older brothers all jammed their fingers into his small bowl. No matter how hard Lutz tried to hide the bowl or run away, they were just too much bigger than him. Not only could he not run away, he couldn't even dodge them.

"Hey, let go! Don't pick me up! What kinda older brother would steal his little brother's stuff?!"

"Your stuff is my stuff."

"Share your tasty food with everyone, Lutz."

"Alright! I got it!"

Lutz's resistance was futile. His three older brothers held him down and stole the whole bowl. They all jammed their fingers in, and in moments, it was empty. If his every meal ended up like this, I could understand why Lutz would complain.

"Aaaaah! My parue!"

"Tasty. Is this really bird food?"

Lutz's older brothers completely ignored his cries and looked at me, eyes opened wide in surprise just like Lutz's were. *This might be my chance.*

"I could make something even better here."

“For real?!”

They all took the bait. Despite how disgusted they had all looked at the idea of eating bird food, they were now on hands and feet asking for more, likely due to hunger.

“...Ah, but I might need some help. Since I’m so weak and all.”

“Alright, leave it to me.” Lutz enthusiastically flexed his arms. Seeing that, his older brothers all rushed forward and pushed him out of the way.

“You’re not getting it all for yourself, Lutz. We’ll help too, Myne.”

“Yup, yup. I’m a lot stronger than Lutz.”

“Yay! Okay, I want you three to get a metal pan ready for baking. Lutz can get the ingredients ready and Ralph can mix them. Oh, and it wouldn’t be fair to just use Lutz’s juice, so let’s all use a little bit of everyone’s. Come on, let’s see the juice. No hiding.”

I clapped my hands together while giving Lutz and his brothers cooking instructions. I was too small and weak to do much, so it was up to these hungry young men to do the work for me.

“Lutz, would you get two eggs and some milk? Ralph, mix them together with that spatula over there. Zasha and Sieg, heat the pan in the furnace.”

Lutz prepared the ingredients for me as I put them one by one in the bowl. Ralph began mixing them with the wooden spatula. Zasha and Sieg behind us got the metal pan and heated it up in the furnace.

“Okay, that should be good. Lutz, do you have butter?”

Lutz held out some butter, which I scooped with a spoon and put onto the metal pan after climbing onto a somewhat tall chair. The butter sizzled on the pan and melted, filling the air with a nice smell.

I then used a big spoon to pour the “batter” Ralph had mixed in the bowl. It hissed, cooking, and the butter scent was joined by the sweet smell of a parue. Since I was using the okara-esque leftovers in place of wheat, it ended up baking into more of a flat cookie than a pancake, but it was still basically what I had expected.

“And that’s how you do it. Would you all work together to make more?” After showing them how to make one, I got off the chair and let the tall older brothers take care of everything. They had figured out what to do already, so they immediately borrowed the cooking tools from me and started making their own.

“When they get bumpy it means they're ready. You should turn that one over now.”

“Right.” Zasha flipped it over and I saw that it was cooking nicely. I heard everyone swallow hard.

“Move this one over there. You can cook another one in the open spot.” Once it had cooked well enough, he moved it aside and poured more butter and batter in its place. After I checked to make sure they were cooked properly, we moved them from the pan to a plate, stacking one on top of the other.

“Tadaaa! (Simple Okara Pancakes)!“ I held the plate and puffed out my chest with pride, “eheh”-ing once again.



But my words must not have gotten through, given how Lutz was looking at me. “...Wha? Say that again?”

“Ummm... Simple Parue Cakeeees...” The steaming-hot parue cakes were lined across the table, wafting off a sweet scent and looking super delicious.

“Go ahead and eat up. But be careful, it’s hot.” I took a bite and chewed slowly. The parue cake was so tasty it honestly shocked me. It was surprisingly fluffy and wasn’t coarse or dry at all, unlike the bird food. Probably due to the parue fruit juice inside, it tasted plenty sweet even without jam or anything.

“Hey, Lutz. These were pretty simple to make, right? And don’t they fill you right up?”

“They do. Myne, I dunno what to say. You’re amazing.”

Since tons of people came to Lutz’s house looking to trade for eggs, they had plenty of parue leftovers, and thanks to their birds, they had as many eggs as they wanted. They could trade eggs for milk, too, so they could make parue cakes all winter.

“Now you’ll be able to spend the winter with a full stomach.”

“Yep!” Lutz bit into his parue cake happily. As I watched him eat, several recipes that used okara passed through my head.

“I know of some other ways to use parue leftovers, but I’m too weak to make them myself.”

“I’ll make them for you if you just teach me how. Now that you’ve taught me about food this good, you’re kind of like a god to me, so yeah. I've got your back, Myne.”

That event served as the beginning of me having Lutz and his brothers make recipes for me that required arm strength. I taught them the recipes and taste tested the results. Lutz and his brothers ate the food and got full. It was a nice give and take relationship.

Helping Out Otto

In this city the people go too gather parues on sunny winter days. Dad and Tuuli went together last time since it was his day off, but this time, he had work.

I thought for sure we'd just give up on them, until I saw Mom grabbing her coat. "I'll be going with Tuuli today."

There were plenty of ways to use parue and our family wanted as many as possible. Since I was pretty useless when it came to anything involving going outside, I wanted to at least show emotional support.

Good luck, Tuuli! You can do it! I believe in you, Mom!

The problem with Mom going with Tuuli to the forest, however, was what to do with me. I was weak, sickly, and generally dead weight. They wouldn't bring me to the forest knowing I'd end up bedridden with a fever. But they couldn't leave me alone, either, as they had no idea what I would do if left to my own devices. It hurt to hear that, but to be honest, they weren't wrong.

Dad, after falling into thought for a bit while preparing for work, suddenly clapped his hands together. "...I've got it! Myne, how about you wait at the gate with me?"

Dad would take me to the gate. Mom and Tuuli would go gather parues in the forest. On their way back, they would pick me up at the gate and take me home. We would get our parues and I wouldn't be left home alone. Everybody wins.

"That's an excellent idea. Okay, Tuuli. We're leaving Myne with Gunther."

"Right! See you later, Myne."

Mom, congratulating Dad on his idea, quickly prepared her things and left with Tuuli in no time. They had to leave fast since you could only gather parues before noon.

"Alright, ready to go? The gate's waitin'."

Weeell... It'll be a nice change of pace from home, I guess. And Otto can teach me some new letters if he's there, so...

Honestly, I had gotten tired of spending all day at home. Having failed at making faux-papyrus, the only thing I could do at home was play with my slate or make baskets. Never in my life had I expected that I would end up with so much spare time. Books had been the only things saving me from a life of boredom.

Incidentally, the song "Haru yo, Koi" (Come forth, Spring) has been playing non-stop in my head. The sooner spring comes, the sooner I can go outside and make clay tablets. To that end, I was exercising every morning in hopes of building up enough stamina to make going outside manageable.

My family looked at me weird, but I knew that physical fitness was best accomplished bit by bit, day by day, with a lot of determination. Though to tell the truth, as I had been exceedingly unhealthy in my Urano days, I hardly knew any proper exercise routines. I was just winging it.

"Dad, is Otto there today?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Yay! I'll bring my slate to the gate, then."

Now waiting at the gate's going to be fun. I hurriedly got my own things together, the most important thing being my stone slate.

After bundling on layers and squeezing into my coat, I grabbed the wooden tote bag I had woven over the winter and put my stone slate into it, plus the slate pencil. Preparations complete.

"Let's go, Dad!"

"...Myne, you like Otto that much?"

"Uh huh, I really like him." *I mean, he's my teacher (or so I've unilaterally decided), and he gave me this slate. How could I not like him?*

We left home and it took about half a second for me to realize the air itself was icy cold. Just a little bit of wind brushing my skin was enough to make me twinge with pain. My face was tingling so hard that even I, queen of all

lazybones, immediately began hatching a plan to turn parue oil into some kind of moisturizing cream.

“Bwuh! So cold!”

Not to mention that the snow was so deep I couldn’t walk in it. There may have been some trick to snow walking, but as I hadn’t grown up in a snowy area, I had no idea what it was.

It took exactly two steps for my stubby child legs to get stuck in the snow, rendering me immobile. My fate was sealed. My future, gone. I could only cry out into the void for help, hoping someone came to my rescue.

“Dad! How do you walk through snow?”

“...Enough already. Hold on tight and don’t fall off.”

I was holding my arms out to maintain my balance, legs stuck in the snow, when Dad turned around and walked back with an exasperated expression on his face. He put my tote bag around his neck and stuck his hands beneath my arms before lifting me up into the air and resting me on his shoulders.

“Wooow! So tall. This is so cool.” My line of sight shot up much higher than when Ralph carried me. The only reason the sudden height didn’t terrify me was that Dad’s shoulders, thanks to his job as a soldier, were wide and muscular. I could rest on them without fear.

Back in my Urano days I had barely ever interacted with my father, but I did have a few memories of him. He did carry me once, when we went to watch the sakura trees bloom.

“Be sure to hold on tight, alright?”

It had been so long since someone carried me on their shoulders that my heart was beating a little fast. After I clung to his head, Dad started walking through the snow. The alley to the road hadn’t been swept and thus he carefully traced the existing footsteps for a bit before reaching the main road and walking normally again.

“Myne, just so you know, Otto’s already married,” said Dad, breaking the silence with something entirely unexpected.

Um... What? Did I ever say I wanted to marry Otto? I don't think so. I've never said anything about marrying anyone.

"Ummm... So?"

"His wife is everything to him, alright?"

What exactly are you trying to stop your five-year-old daughter from doing? Even if I did like him in that way, he wouldn't give a five-year-old the time of day. You sure are being dumb, Dad.

Regardless of realizing what my dad was thinking, I kept quiet. He was being a pain and I definitely wouldn't reward his petulant behavior with a *"You're way more amazing, Dad!"* or a *"I love you more, Dad!"*

"So you're saying that Otto's an amazing person that's all about treating his wife well?"

"...No." That made Dad so sulky that he kept silent the rest of the way.

And thus, upon the shoulders of the most tedious father in the world, I arrived at the gate.

"Good morning." On instinct I bowed my head to the guards standing at the gate. They looked at me for a second, reminding me that bowing heads was not a customary greeting in this world. Or maybe they were just surprised to see me on my Dad's shoulders.

"This is Myne, my daughter. My wife will come get her when she's done gathering parues. Until then, keep her in the night watch's room."

"Understood."

"Got that, Myne? Otto should be there too. You're welcome."

Oof... Dad sounds kinda peeved. Wait, is Dad so jealous that he's gonna be mean to Otto? Is this complex web of human relationships falling apart?

"Um, well, I'm just looking forward to Otto teaching me new letters."

"Why's it have to be Otto?"

Welp... Sorry, Otto. I tried backing you up but I think I just made things worse. I don't know why Dad has to get so jealous. I'm just looking forward to learning.

It’s at times like these that I realize I don’t know too much about father-daughter relationships.

“I’m coming in.” Dad gave a light knock on the door and walked in.

The night watch's room had a brightly burning furnace and a lamp on the nearby deck, making it much brighter than our place. The desk was pretty close to the furnace and Otto was doing paperwork on it.

“Otto.”

“Captain... and Myne? What’s the occasion?”

“She’s staying here until the parue gathering is done. Keep an eye on her.” Dad kept his instructions brief, arguably blunt, and set me onto the ground.

The sudden addition of babysitting to his duties naturally surprised Otto, and he looked between Dad and his paperwork with a troubled expression.

“Huh? Er, but... I’m busy with these financial reports, budget calculations, and...”

“Myne. It’s warm here. Make sure not to catch a cold.” Dad left, ignoring Otto entirely.

I waved him goodbye and turned to look at Otto. “Sorry about this, Mr. Otto. It’s just that, well, getting this slate made me really happy, and seeing you again today made me even happier.”

“I’m glad to hear that. It’s nice to see you too, Myne, but uh...” Otto gave an awkward laugh and continued, “But that’s nothing to apologize for, right?” with a puzzled expression.

“The truth is, I complimented you a lot in front of Dad, and he got really jealous...”

“...Aaaah.”

“So, will you teach me new letters? I’ll be quiet and stay out of your way until Mom comes to get me.” I could tell from the parchment and ink on the table that he had been in the middle of paperwork. I didn’t intend to get in the way of his work, but I also didn’t intend to miss an opportunity to learn new letters.

“Well, alright. Somehow I get the feeling you actually will stay quiet and study, Myne,” murmured Otto as he took my slate and scribbled letters onto it.

This world’s writing system was similar to the English alphabet. There were no syllabaries like hiragana, nor logograms like kanji. The letters themselves determined the sound and meaning of words. Spelling was everything.

Otto had faith in my willingness to study quietly since I had spent hours playing with the slate after he first gave it to me.

“Myne. We don’t want you catching a cold and putting the captain in an even worse mood, so here, sit next to me.” Otto gave a troubled smile and scooted a bit to the side, opening up more space by the furnace.

I fully agreed with his assessment and sat next to him by the furnace without any unnecessary hesitation. “Thank you. It’ll be easier to study now.”

For a bit, the room was filled only with the sounds of a scraping slate pen, the roaring of burning fire, and an ink pen sliding across parchment. After I had memorized the written letters, more or less, I looked up and saw Otto staring at the parchment in front of him, expression deadly serious as he did calculations.

He did have an abacus-looking tool next to him, but I couldn’t tell how it worked from a glance. Though in the first place I had only ever used an abacus in elementary school when learning addition and subtraction, so even if it worked exactly like a Japanese abacus, I wouldn’t know how to use it.

I waited until he finished a section of the paperwork before calling out to him. “Mr. Otto, what are you doing?”

“Preparing financial reports and budgets. Over the winter we need to prepare a budget for next year and send it off before spring, but most soldiers aren’t great at math. I’m the most used to dealing with money, so I’m writing up our financial reports and budget.”

“So everyone just pushed the hard work on you, hm?”

I looked at the parchment, and although I couldn’t read the words, there were three stacked numbers beside a line of text. If I had to guess, the first number was the price of something, the second number was how many of that something they needed, and the third number was the resulting amount of

money. It looked like the first two numbers had been multiplied to get the third, so yeah.

I looked over the parchment, considering the possibility of it being a request for new equipment, when I spotted a math error. “Wait. Mr. Otto, isn’t this wrong?”

“Wha?”

“This is 75 and 30, right? I believe those actually make 2,250.” Although I could read the numbers, I didn’t know what they called multiplication in this world and thus had to be kind of vague in my explanation, but Otto seemed to understand me.

“Wait, what? How can you do math when you don’t know how to read?”

“Eheheh. My mom taught me numbers at the market. I can look at the numbers here and do math, but I can’t read anything around them.”

After hearing that I couldn’t read what was written on the parchment, Otto began thinking about something. I heard him muttering to himself, “No, I shouldn’t... But...” back and forth. “...Myne, I’m going to swallow my pride to ask this. Would you please help me?”

Um... Is this the kind of offer I should accept? I mean, putting aside all the problems regarding classified information, isn’t it pretty out there to ask a kid for help? I guess he’s in such a tight spot that he’d welcome the help of anyone who can do math, even a child?

He said that he was “swallowing his pride,” so I can imagine that it isn’t normal to ask kids for help. And I do want to help him, if he’s in that much trouble. Especially since I want something from him, too. This seems like the perfect place for some negotiating.

“Okay, I’ll help. If you keep teaching me letters and get replacement slate pens for me.”

“Wha?” He probably hadn’t expected a little girl to suddenly throw out conditions like that. His eyes opened wide.

Smiling a little at his predictable reaction, I explained my situation. “Like I

said, I know my numbers since Mom taught them to me. But I don’t know my letters. I want you to teach them all to me.”

“I’m fine with that, but... What’s with the slate pens? They aren’t that expensive, are they?” Otto was right, they were sold all over the markets for cheap.

“Mom and Dad used to buy them for me, but now they won’t, so...”

“Why’d they stop?”

“I play with the slate all day. No matter how many they buy, I always need more.”

“Ahahahahah...”

Hours of play a day was enough to wear out a slate pen in no time. Since I didn’t get any allowance, one could say that getting a steady supply of slate pens was a matter of life or death.

“A-Anyway! The point is, I’m not a cheap enough girl to work for free.”

“...I think those are some pretty cheap terms, but alright.” Otto gave a wry smile and agreed to officially become my teacher.

“What should I do?”

“Would you mind making sure the calculations here are correct? Basically, I don’t know where the mistakes are, so checking over everything is taking up a lot of time.”

Apparently he was in the middle of checking paperwork someone else had made. It was obvious given that this world had no computers, but despite how long it took to make paperwork, the calculations written on that paperwork all had to be checked manually.

“I guess you guys need another soldier that can do math.”

“...That would be nice, but I only got hired in the first place 'cause I can do this kinda stuff, so...”

It sounded like there were some deep circumstances behind Otto becoming a soldier. As someone starved for any sort of information, I was itching to ask for

details right away, but our workload was so great I swallowed my curiosity and bottled it up for later.

“Myne, do you need the calculator?”

“I don’t even know how they work, so I’ll just use my stone slate.” The slate could easily work in place of scrap paper for calculations since everything written on it could be erased.

I wrote down math on the slate and helped him with his double-checking work. The numbers of this world had completely entered my head and thinking about the number nine was all it took for the proper symbol to appear in my mind. Writing them was no issue.

“Holy crap, that was easy. I’m impressed, Myne, and I owe you big time. I never thought I’d finish all this double-checking work so soon. Y’know, Myne, with math skills like that, you would be a great merchant. I can introduce you to the Merchant’s Guild if you want.”

Otto had apparently been stuck handling all the financial paperwork himself for years, so he ended up extremely thankful for my help.

I might want to start a bookstore once I learn how to mass produce books. Getting a connection to the Merchant’s Guild here may pay off big time. Plus, it looks like Otto’s thinking of me as an important helper now. Perfect.

“Myne, if you really wanna learn your letters, I’ll take teaching you seriously. That way, you can help me with my written paperwork too next year.”

“Really?! Yaaay!”

“Huh? Is that something to be happy about?” Otto blinked in surprise, but why wouldn’t I be happy about him taking my learning seriously?

I mean, helping with paperwork means touching parchment, right? It means writing letters with ink, right? That sounds amazing if you ask me!

Tuuli’s Hair Ornament

One morning, several days after I stayed at the gate, Mom finally finished the dress she had been working so hard on for Tuuli.

Fundamentally, it was a one-piece dress sewn together from unbleached cloth. The fanciest part of the design was embroidery around the sleeves and neckline. Around its waist was a wide sash with a cool blue color that gave the dress an elegant flair.

It was cute, for sure, but I had memories of Japanese fashion where kids wore fancy dresses, kimonos, and just generally vibrant clothing at festivals. Tuuli’s dress felt a little lacking in comparison.

“So, Myne? Is it cute?”

Well yes, but it’d be cuter if you added more frills and decoration. I kept my thoughts to myself, though, because Mom looked full of pride and Tuuli was happy. By this world’s standards, the dress was surely more than good enough. Not to mention that this was a dress one wore when visiting a holy temple. Maybe a flashier dress would cause problems.

I shouldn’t talk about things I don’t understand, and there’s a lot about this world’s fashion I don’t understand. But there is something I think I can talk about. Her hair. Tuuli’s hair had gotten a lot more glossy thanks to regular shampooing and care, but she always kept it up in a braid. If she planned on changing her hair style for the festival, a nice hair ornament would add a lot.

But I needed to learn more about this stuff before I did anything. Myne was too young to have any memories of the baptism.

“It’s cute, Tuuli! But... what about your hair? Are you going to do anything special for the baptism?”

“Well, I wasn’t planning to?”

Tuuli... Come on. It’s a special occasion, you gotta mix things up a little! I slumped my head reflexively, but I shook myself out of it and continued

questioning her. A hair ornament could still work with her normal braid.

“Ummm, well, what about a hair ornament? Are you going to wear anything on your hair?”

“Hm, I don’t know. It’ll be summer, so maybe I’ll grab a flower?”

“No way, that’d be terrible! Think about how cute your dress is!”

It was frowned upon for children to wear their hair completely up, but braiding was fine, and we could just make a hair ornament if she didn’t have one. I could make a lace one myself. There was still time before summer.

“I’ll make you one, Tuuli! Let me make you one. It’ll definitely be super cute.” The moment after I said that, I realized I didn’t have the needles I needed for sewing lace. Mom had needles for sewing wool, but they were too thick for lace.

...O-Oh no! What do I do?! The only one in my family that could probably make needles from scratch was Dad. The long hair stick that Tuuli gave me had actually been carved down and smoothed out by Dad. He even finished it with an oil coating.

I glanced to the side, checking to see what kind of mood Dad was in. Several days had passed since Otto taught me letters at the gate, but he was still in a bad mood. I doubted he would be very receptive to begging.

“U-Um, Dad.”

“What?”

“You’re pretty good with your hands, aren’t you? You made Tuuli’s doll, right?”

“W-Well, yeah, pretty much. Ahem! Aaah, what, do you want a doll too?” He was frowning hard to show that he was mad, but nonetheless, his eyes gleamed with anticipation and he kept glancing at me.

“Nuh uh. I want sewing needles.”

“Sewing needles? Like the kind your Mom uses? Just borrow hers.” Dad’s face fell with disappointment the moment he heard my answer. He looked so, well, pathetic that I wished he would at least try to act a little tougher.

“I want needles a lot, lot more thin than those. I want to sew thread, not wool. Dad... I think it’d be really hard to make thin needles, but, would you pleeease make me some?” I looked up at him with wet eyes, hands clasped in front of my chest, as I made the cutest begging pose I could manage.

I didn’t know if this world understood the significance of puppy dog eyes, but fathers of all worlds and universes should be weak to their daughter’s cuteness... Hopefully.

My cuteness must have done the trick, as Dad stroked his stubble and fell into thought. “...Is wood fine?”

“Uh huh! Can you make them? They need to be really thin.”

“I’ll give it a shot.” Tickling his pride probably helped, as he immediately took out a few knives and began carving a chunk of wood.

He was used to carving with knives and worked fast. The bark of the thin branch was gone in no time, leaving just the hard inner wood. He then sliced off layer after layer of the wood while looking at Mom’s thicker needles as a reference.

“Is this thin enough?”

“Mmm, could you make it a little thinner?”

“This much?”

“That much!”

After carving the branches down to the proper thickness, he swapped out knives and began carving out the pointed tips. His work wasn’t good enough to be that of a professional, but I for sure couldn’t do it myself, so I was genuinely impressed.

“You’re amazing, Dad! They already look like good needles. If you would just smooth them out so the thread doesn’t catch on them, and give them an oil finish, they’ll be perfect.”

“Leave it to me.” His pride as a father must have been restored by my praise, as Dad got to work smoothing out the thin needles with an exceptionally pleased expression.

“Myne, it looks like Dad’s all cheered up now. I’m so glad!” Tuuli beamed the innocent smile of an angel.

I nodded in return, saying “Uh huh, I’m glad too,” while sweating on the inside. *It’s my fault he was upset in the first place, ahaha...*

Since Dad was working hard on my needles, I started looking for thread so I could get to work as soon as they were ready. We had plenty of thread left over since Mom had prepared plenty for Tuuli’s dress. The white thread and the unbleached thread that she had used to sew cloth would still be useful to her. But the colored thread she had used for the edges and the sash only had tiny snippets left over. They wouldn’t be that useful.

“Mom, can I have the rest of the colored thread?”

“What do you want it for?” Mom, surprised that I would want thread, gave me a puzzled look.

“I want to try some (lacework). Tuuli needs a hair ornament.”

My Japanese mother hadn’t just taught me how to make baskets, she had dipped her toes in all manner of arts and crafts, taking me along for the ride. I really wish she hadn’t bothered, but she was set on getting me interested in something other than books and got me wrapped up in whatever the latest craze was.

Basically, I had just as much experience with a million random things as she did. And one of those random things was lacework, which actually ended up relatively useful to me back then. I was confident that I could make a lace ornament if given the tools. My life as Urano was over, but my past experience kept proving useful in unexpected ways.

That said, since Mom had no way of knowing about my past life, she was hesitant to give me thread. She definitely thought doing so would just be a waste of good thread, given how often I’ve “wasted” things in the past.

“She’ll only need an ornament for the baptism, you know. Why waste thread on something so frivolous? A flower is more than good enough. Tuuli’s already cute enough as is.”

“If there’s a way to make her cuter, it’s wrong not to do it! Cuteness is

justice!” I clenched my fist to show my resolve, but Mom just sighed for some reason and turned her back to me, signaling that the conversation was over.

I hurriedly grabbed onto her skirt and began begging. “Please, Mooom. I just need your extra thread. I want to use the needles Dad worked hard to make for me! He’s almost finished with them. Pleaaaase.”

I looked at Dad for help, hinting that the needles would be wasted without thread. He must have understood the meaning to my glance and, perhaps fearing his efforts being wasted, or perhaps fearing losing my respect, backed me up.

“Effa, it’s not often Myne gets interested in sewing. Why not give her some of your spare thread?”

“...You’re right.” After thinking about it for a bit, Mom reluctantly gave me the thread too short for her to do anything with.

“Yay! Thanks, Mom. I love you, Dad.” I shot my fists into the air, showing my happiness. Dad grinned. He grinned so, so hard as he sped up his heated carving.

I wonder if all dads act like this when their daughter is sweet to them. Well... Now that he’s happy, I guess it’s okay if I stop worrying about him for a bit?

Dad gave me the needles, packed uncomfortably full with his fatherly love, so I went and started the lacework right away. First up was making a bunch of tiny flowers.

Fiddle fiddle fiddle fiddle...

Lacework required tightly weaving the strands just like my failed faux-papyrus did, so I needed some firm determination to succeed. But since this time I was making tiny flowers, and it only took me fifteen minutes to finish one.

I set the yellow flower on the table and got to work on the next one. Tuuli looked at the lace flower with admiration before tilting her head a bit in confusion.

“Isn’t it a bit small?”

“The ornament’s going to be a lot of tiny flowers bundled together.”

You see... Making one big flower would be a problem if I got bored halfway through, right? Once again, I kept my thoughts to myself.

I had talked big and now needed to finish the ornament for Tuuli no matter what. A design built around tiny flowers allowed me to duck out whenever I wanted.

To tell the truth, back in my Urano days, I had given up on a lot of big designs before finishing them. Predicting problems and avoiding them before they happened just made sense.

“I thought about making a lace ribbon, but it’d need to be long enough to tie, and it’d be a problem if I ran out of the same color thread before it was done. So, I’ll just make lots of little flowers.”

“You really thought this through, Myne.”

“Of course I did! I’m doing all this for you, Tuuli.”

I put my all into making a cute hair ornament for Tuuli, as thanks for always taking care of me. Since I would be bundling together finished flowers, it wouldn’t matter if I quit halfway through, ran out of thread, or needed to swap colors to keep going. No thread would be wasted.

Fiddle fiddle fiddle fiddle...

I felt someone looking at me after making several flowers and instinctively looked up. Mom was staring at my hands, entranced.

Given that being good at sewing was a requirement for being a beauty, everyone recognized Mom as a beautiful woman. That probably led to her being interested in all sorts of sewing.

She picked up the finished flowers and rolled them around in her hands. “...These don’t seem too hard to make.”

“You’re so used to sewing wool and stuff, I think you’d be a lot better at making these than me if you learned how. Want to try?”

I handed Mom my needles and she got to work, looking at the small flowers. She would occasionally pause to fiddle with the flowers, and in no time she had finished one of her own.

Wooow. Just what I'd expect from a sewing beauty. She learned how to make them just by looking at them. Meanwhile, it took me forever to learn even when being taught step by step, since I just didn't care.

"That's really good, Mom."

"I'm more impressed that you knew how to make these in the first place, Myne. I've made scarves and sweaters, but I never thought about making ornaments like this before."

In this world where it took all one had just to stay alive, most people didn't have the leeway to worry about decorations. Nobody made hair ornaments like this, and Mom might not have ever seen any lacework in her whole life. I knew about this kind of thing since I had been raised in a world where attaching decorations to one's clothes was normal, but even small little lace flowers were weird in this world.

"So, Myne. How will you put all of these little flowers onto her head?" Mom couldn't imagine what the completed product would look like from the strewn about flowers, so I gave her as simple of an explanation as I could manage.

"Ummm, well, we'll make a circle with these leftovers, and sew each flower onto them one by one. It'll look like a bouquet of flowers, right? Then we'll just stick a (pin) through it, and... wait, a (pin)?!"

The blood drained from my face. I even let out a tiny shriek, which made Mom flinch with surprise.

"What's wrong, Myne?!"

"Oh no... We don't have a (pin)."

This is big trouble! I don't think this world has pins. At the very least, I've never seen them at home. This is a world without hair scrunchies! A world where everyone bundles their hair with tiny strings! What's going to happen to my precious ornament?!

"D-D-Daaad!" Explaining with words would be hard, so I took out my slate and sketched what I needed. "I want a tiny hairpin kind of like mine, except one that has a flat end with a tiny hole in it! Can you make one?!"

“Heh, that’ll be easier than your needles.”

“Really?! You’re amazing, Dad! I’ve never respected anyone this much in my life!” I got so emotional that I hugged Tuuli hard as Dad muttered to himself, “Heheh. I beat you, Otto.” Apparently he had been secretly competing with Otto.

Dad enthusiastically made me a tiny hairpin, so I took it and sewed the mini-bouquet onto it, much like one would sew on a button.

“Okay, done! Tuuli, put on your dress and sit here, please.”

Wearing her summer dress, Tuuli sat on the nearest seat to the furnace. I slid my own chair behind her and stood on top of it after removing my shoes. I then undid Tuuli’s braid, combed her hair, and started braids on both sides.

Tuuli’s hair was fluffy and had a natural perm, so I stopped the braids halfway through to give her a more elegant look that would be sure to stun anyone who saw her. To finish things off, I stuck the ornament’s pin into the crude string that was keeping the end of her braids together. The tiny white, blue, and yellow flowers looked great on her green hair.

“Yep, super cute!”

“My goodness! You’re adorable, Tuuli!”

“You’ve got some good hands on you, Myne. Maybe you’ve got a future working with your hands?”

Tuuli, smiling from her family’s praise, turned every which way while touching her hair and the ornament.



But eventually, she pouted a little. “Myne, you put it on the back of my head. I can’t see it at all.”

“That’s true, but... what can you do?”

“Well, I still want to know what it looks like.”

Our home had no mirrors, so I had no way of showing her what it looked like. I thought for a second about what I could do, and although it wasn’t the best solution, Tuuli looked so frustrated that I undid her ornament and put it on my myself, next to my own hairpin.

“It looks like this. What do you think?”

“Wooow, cute! You look amazing! Um, Mom? Did I look like this too?” Tuuli cried out with eager excitement after seeing what the ornament looked like on me.

“Myne braided your hair and colored the flowers to suit you, so you looked even cuter, Tuuli.”

“Wooow... Huh. Ahahaha... Thank you, everyone. I’m really happy.” Tuuli broke into a ridiculously happy smile and blushed as she took the ornament off my hair.

And so, Tuuli’s special outfit was completed before spring. There was no doubting that she’d be the star of this summer’s baptism.

Also, Mom ended up addicted to lacework, and before I knew it the needles Dad made for me were in her sewing box.

Bring Me to The Forest

The forest snow had started to melt and seeds were growing, or so Tuuli told me after coming back from the forest.

Kids going to the forest for gathering meant that my horrible hibernation was over. I had learned how terribly full of spare time life was without books, but never again would I suffer through that.

Because now, I can make clay tablets! Tuuli said that there's still so much snow it's hard to walk and there's not much to gather anyway. But the relative lack of plant life is no problem to me.

What I want is sticky clay, and I'll find it if I dig into the ground. I want to go to the forest and make clay tablets. As long as I can reach the forest, it's my win.

Of course, I wouldn't be going to the forest alone. I needed Tuuli by my side, to keep an eye on me. Which meant I needed to do a little more begging.

"Please, Tuuli," I said while sliding up to her. "I want to go to the forest too. I want to be friends with everyone. Please take me with you to the forest!"

"No way. You can't walk that far." Her response was the exact same as last time. But if I backed down, it was all over. I had to resolve her lack of trust.

"I've gotten a little stronger! If I can't walk that far, I'll just wait at the gate. Please."

Tuuli was hesitant, but I had spent every day exercising, eating healthily, walking to the well with Tuuli to wash dishes, and just generally building up strength. *I should be strong enough to go by now.*

"...Only if Dad says okay." Tuuli gave up on shaking me off and dumped the responsibility onto Dad. That was inevitable anyway, since he would need to take care of me if I had to stop at the gate.

I shifted my sights to convincing Dad. "Dad, can I go to the forest too? I haven't gotten any fevers lately!"

“Good point...”

I had been very careful over the winter, so I only got fevers and passed out five times total. *Um... That’s a lot less, okay? My family was really impressed. They’re like, wow, that’s amazing, you’re doing so much better. And they mean it!*

Not being bedridden with fevers all the time meant that I could eat decent meals more often, which naturally meant that I ended up with more nutrition, and I started growing a bit more. I wasn’t as tall as the average kid my age, but I had definitely gotten stronger. Probably.

“If I really can’t make it, I’ll just rest at the gate. Please? Pleeease?”

Dad fell into thought. The fact he didn’t turn me down immediately like Tuuli gave me hope. I kept up my attack, wanting his permission no matter what.

“I just need to get used to it. There are three-year-olds that go to the forest, right? There’s no way I can’t go myself.”

“Aaah, I mean, that’s true, but... Those are the three-year-olds so packed with energy that they rampage around the house. Their parents are basically kicking them out, alright?”

“...So I can go to the forest if I throw a tantrum?”

“No need for that. Don’t be dumb.”

I was desperate to get Dad’s permission because once spring came Mom would start working again, which meant that I would need to go to Gerda’s place for babysitting again.

That place was horrible for me, mentally and emotionally. I hated it there. I’d avoid going there again at any cost. I didn’t want to see kids getting neglected.

“Dad, you’re worried about me not being strong enough, right? Well, what can I do, then? What will make you willing to let me go?”

“Good question.” Dad closed his eyes to think. I waited patiently for his answer. “...Stop at the gate for now.”

“At the gate? How long is for now?”

“Until you can walk to it on your own. You can go to the forest once you can keep up with everyone.”

In other words, he wasn’t letting me go to the forest that easily. I got the feeling that the clay tablets of my dreams had gotten a little further away. But getting strong enough to walk to the gate on my own was absolutely necessary for Dad to trust me despite my history of weakness.

Well, it’s not going to the forest, but at least this way I don’t have to go to Mrs. Gerda’s.

“...Okay. That works for me, Dad.”

I nodded and saw Dad’s expression soften with relief. He probably thought that if I had refused, I actually would have thrown a tantrum.

“Hey, Dad. Does this mean I’ll be walking home after reaching the gate?”

“No. You can stay and have Otto teach you letters.”

“Wait... Really?” *Dad got that jealous over Otto teaching me letters, and now he doesn’t mind at all? What in the world happened to him?*

I tilted my head in confusion as Dad furrowed his brows a little.

“Your body’s weak, Myne. But Otto said you’re smart. He said you’d have no problem getting a job that uses your head. The best thing I can do is let him teach you letters. The more you know, the easier that’ll be.”

Otto had understood my musclehead father’s love for his daughters and given him the perfect argument to convince him. I was so grateful that I could almost cry. I hadn’t expected at all that he would officially let Otto be my teacher.

“I was thinking you’d be a good fit for a job that uses your hands, but Otto told me jobs that take smarts pay better, and they’ll be easier on your body.”

“Jobs that take smarts? What kind of jobs are those?” I couldn’t imagine what kind of jobs there would be in this world for smart people. Were there really any jobs where I could just use my head?

“Well, he said there are people that write paperwork for administrators and nobles. You could do that at home when you’re feeling unwell, no problem.”

Writing paperwork for others? That was probably similar to a paralegal back in Japan. That was definitely the kind of job I could do at home, as long as I was qualified. Though I had no idea what getting qualified would imply.

“Otto’s a soldier, but he used to be a traveling merchant. He’s still got some connections to the Merchant’s Guild. Your mother and I can’t introduce you to many jobs you’d be good at, so don’t waste what you have with Otto.”

Um... Dad sure has gotten mature about this, huh?!

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll do my best.”

As Dad ruffled my hair, I turned to look at Tuuli. “Tuuli, will you help?”

“...You won’t make it.” Tuuli shook her head. She also took good care of me as her little sister, helping me with whatever I needed, but she wouldn’t budge on taking me to the forest.

Dad seemed like he was on Tuuli’s side there, so he just nodded gravely. “I know she won’t. Not now. But Myne’s the one who’ll suffer if she can’t make it to the forest.”

“That’s true, but... she’ll get in the way...”

“She will. Right now, she’s a burden on everyone.”

Both Tuuli and Dad considered me a burden. Dead weight. I knew it was true, but hearing them say it right in front of me really did hurt.

“She needs to get strong enough to walk as fast as everyone else first. Until then, she’ll stop at the gate. I’ll walk with her until she can reach the gate. Once she gets strong enough for that, I’ll want your help, Tuuli.”

“...In that case, I’ll do my best.” Tuuli, with her strong sense of responsibility, gave a big nod.

But I just slumped my shoulders. My family had utterly no faith in my strength whatsoever, just like always.

...I can’t believe they think I won’t even make it to the gate. Don’t they know I barely get out of breath walking to the well now? Sheesh.

The next day, I went to the gate with Dad in the late morning, when the sun was already high up. I could only go to the gate with him when he had noon duty.

There were three shifts at the gates: morning duty, from the opening of the gates to noon; noon duty, from noon to the closing of the gates; and night duty, from the closing of the gates to the opening of the gates. Until I could walk to the gate on my own, I would need to walk with Dad on the way there and then, depending on my health, either wait for Tuuli to come back from the forest or wait for Dad to finish work so I could go home with him.

“Don’t push yourself too hard, sweetie. Keep a close eye on Myne, Gunther.”

“Yeah, ’course. Let’s go, Myne.”

“Bye bye.” I waved Mom goodbye as she looked on with worry, and then held hands with Dad as we walked to the gate. I had built up enough strength that I didn’t need to rest as soon as we reached the bottom of the stairs, but by the time we reached the main street, I was already a little out of breath.

You know... now that I think about it, I’ve never walked to the gate on my own before. Someone’s always carried me on their back or shoulders, not to mention the cart.

“Feeling alright, Myne?”

“I’m, still... okay...” If I gave in too soon, he might never let me go to the forest for the rest of my life. I said I was still okay to avoid that, but I really wasn’t okay at all. My body felt so heavy I wanted to just slump onto the ground.

“You don’t look okay at all, y’know. Up you go.” Dad let out a sigh and lifted me up. In moments, I was leaning against him and breathing heavily in exhaustion. *I... I can’t do it! I’m gonna die! My family was right. I could never make it to the forest like this.*

“Hey, Dad. Otto’s going to be teaching me letters now, but is it really okay for me to take that much of his time? What about his own work?” Otto worked as a guard. No matter how you looked at it, teaching me to read had nothing to do

with his job.

"We have five apprentices that finished their spring baptisms. Part of Otto's job is to teach them to read." It was important for a guard to be at least somewhat literate. If they couldn't read and write the names of people and their jobs, they couldn't do their job properly.

"So he's going to teach me with them?"

"Yeah, pretty much. But you're not gonna participate as an apprentice guard. You're Otto's assistant."

"Assistant?" *Is that really gonna work with a kid like me? There's no getting around the fact that I look like a three-year-old girl. I don't think anyone will buy that I'm Otto's assistant.*

"Myne. You helped Otto with his work, didn't you?"

"Well, with the budget reports and stuff... But all I did was a little math." I only helped Otto once. He had mentioned swallowing his pride, so I thought it best not to spread the word and thus didn't tell Dad about it. But it seemed that Otto did report it, under fear of getting reprimanded otherwise.

"Yeah. Otto's been saying for a long time that work's too much for him to handle alone, but nobody has been good enough at math to help. He himself said he wants to teach you letters and make you his assistant."

I had asked to learn letters in return for helping him with work, but it looked like he wasn't joking when he said he wanted me to be his assistant.

"From his perspective, you're gonna be his assistant, but we can't actually give work to a kid that hasn't been baptized yet. So officially speaking, you're just going to the gate to learn letters. Your payment is in slate pens. When you're sick, you don't have to go. Otto was real serious about convincing me. Said I wouldn't find a cheaper helper for him anywhere."

To sum things up, they wanted me to help Otto with his paperwork while he taught me to read. Preparations for next year's budget season, I could guess. To think that Otto would talk to his superior and work out a plan to get me "hired" as his helper with a salary of slate pens... I would expect nothing less from a merchant. I got the feeling he was experienced in earning profit without hurting

his own wallet too much.

Dad and I reached the gate, with him having carried me about half the way there. I needed to rest in the night duty room as soon as we got there. I doubted I'd be able to do anything else. In fact, I was so exhausted that Dad set me down onto the bench himself. It wasn't until past noon that I managed to get up.

"Hey, Myne. I'm about to start class. Feeling up to it?"

"Uh huh."

Otto came looking for me, so I took my tote bag and left with him to the gate's training room. One of the corners inside said room had a table with chairs, and there sat five boys who had just been baptized. Those were probably the apprentices that Dad mentioned.

"Myne is the daughter of my captain, and she's been helping me with my paperwork. She'll be joining you five in learning to read. No teasing her or anything like that." Otto introduced me in a very teacher-like fashion and began class. He began writing the fundamental letters of the alphabet on a big slate board. Learning to read would be impossible without memorizing all of them.

"First, learn all of these letters." He started today by writing five of the thirty-five letters while pronouncing them. I had learned some of them before, so it wasn't too hard to memorize them.

"...You sure are a fast learner, Myne."

"I like this kind of thing more than physical stuff, so..."

Unlike nearly all of the children in this world, I was used to studying. Having no resistance toward active studying was the key to learning things quickly, in my opinion. As the saying goes, if you love your work, your work will love you. I honestly felt bad for the five apprentices who were holding a pen for the first time in their lives, and had to get used to the simple act of writing before anything.

"Mr. Otto, I think we've studied letters enough for today," I declared.

Upon hearing that, Otto turned around with his eyes wide open in surprise. “Wha? Already?”

My gut told me that only about thirty minutes had passed since starting, but those were long, painful minutes for the boys around me. They were already starting to move around in their seats, fidgeting. Proof that they had gotten bored.

“It’s not reasonable to expect people who have never held a pen before to concentrate for long periods of time. After having them study letters for a bit, switch to math. Have them sketch maps of the city. Teach them the moral code of city guards and what rules they’ll have to follow. Mix in some exercise. If you cover a lot of different topics in one day, they’ll learn and remember things better.”

Otto looked at me with a shocked expression.

Really though, the lessons one could learn from elementary school scheduling applied here, especially given their age. Think about spending an *entire* day learning hiragana in class, or any other kind of alphabet. *No elementary schooler I knew could bear that. Doubly so when it comes to the kids of this world, who aren’t very used to sitting down for long.*

“Let’s move on to math. You can start by counting the numbers.” Thanks to how they’d gone shopping before, each of them could count up to ten. But a few of them seemed a little shaky on some of the numbers, so Otto said the numbers out loud while writing one through five on the slate. Once the kids got antsy again, I suggested we stop with math and move on to exercising to blow off steam.

“I think that’s enough studying for today, Mr. Otto.” Directing the classroom in the form of giving advice to Otto, I let the kids go early. “Be sure to memorize all the letters and numbers we discussed today. If you don’t, you’ll end up behind and it’ll take a lot of extra studying to catch back up. Memorizing letters and numbers is a very important part of your job.”

The children cheered at the early dismissal and left the room. Otto, looking confused, steadily developed a sour expression as he watched them go. “Myne,

seriously, they'll never learn if we go easy on them."

"Mmm? But if they start associating studying with miserable boredom, it'll just take longer for them to learn. A pace like today's is ultimately for the best. You really shouldn't compare them to me."

"Ah... Right." Otto, noticing that he had been subconsciously comparing the boys to me, awkwardly scratched his head.

"Plus, it's still their responsibility to memorize the letters, so I don't think this is going easy on them."

"True. Self-responsibility is rough for little kids just starting work." Otto gave me a conflicted smile, so I smiled back while letting out a quiet sigh. I had said all that based on my experience from my Urano days, but really, who knew how right it all was.

Otto and I returned to the night watch's room so that he could use the rest of the time to give me a personal lesson. I had him write some words on the slate, which I then practiced writing myself. Meanwhile, he started his paperwork.

"Okay, it looks like you have a good grasp on your letters. I think now's a good time to start teaching you words. I'll start with the ones we use all the time."

And so, since I had mastered the alphabet, Otto started to teach me words. But all the words he taught me had to do with provisions and other things related to the work of a city guard. He really was fully intending for me to help him with his paperwork. I got the feeling that the moment I had a usable level of literacy, he wouldn't even wait for next year's budget season before putting me to work.

...I mean, the first words and phrases he taught me were "Person Inquiry," "Noble," "Letter of Introduction," and "Written Petition." Um, does he think I'll ever use those in my day to day life? If he would at least start with the list of provisions from the budget, I could learn some kinda useful words like the names of food, plants, and equipment...

Dad came looking for me while I was in the middle of writing on my slate. The gate was just about to close, which meant Tuuli and the others had returned

from the forest. I put my slate into my bag and went home with them.

“Let’s go home, Myne.”

The other kids, carrying baskets and various tools and other things for gathering, stared at me and my single tote bag.

“Wha? Myne?”

“That’s Tuuli’s little sister? I’ve never seen her before.”

The unrestrained stares of the somewhat dirty children made me reflexively hide behind Tuuli.

“Well, there’s no helping that. Myne doesn’t go outside too much.”

Apparently, past Myne had barely ever participated in neighborhood social events, so the local children considered her something of a rare monster with a low encounter rate. Tuuli comforted me by saying “They’re not bullying you, they’re just looking,” but it didn’t really help.

“You walking back home with us, Myne?”

“Lutz!” Sincerely relieved to see a familiar face, I looked around to see if Ralph was there too. But I couldn’t see him anywhere, despite how much his tall stature and red hair should have stuck out. “Huh? Where’s Ralph today? Is he sick?”

“Ralph turned seven this spring. He’s at work today.”

“Wow...” *Ralph wasn’t even seven when I met him, huh?* I did know him from past Myne’s memories, but he was so tall and considerate that I just assumed he was eight or nine. *Wait... Is it just me or did Lutz get a lot taller during the winter too? I have to look up a bit more to see his eyes now, I think.*

With those thoughts in mind, I started walking home. The other kids sped up naturally, likely wanting to get home as soon as possible to unload their stuff. They were just about to leave me behind, but Tuuli and Lutz backed me up.

“Don’t rush, everyone!”

“You okay, Myne?”

I was trying to walk as fast as I could, but the group kept getting ahead of me.

Children were merciless. They wouldn't wait for me; I was just too slow. "They're so fast..."

"Sorry, Lutz. Would you take care of Myne for me? I need to go watch over everyone." Tuuli had become the oldest out of the pre-baptism children, so she found it necessary to prioritize them over me, especially if Lutz could watch over me.

"Alright. Take it slow, Myne. I won't be able to carry you right now if you pass out." Lutz was the only one to stay behind with me and walk slowly. I didn't want to be even more of a burden on him, so I gladly followed his advice and slowed down.

"What were you doing at the gate, Myne?"

"Learning my letters."

"Letters? You can write?!" Lutz looked at me with utter shock. I got the feeling his eyes were shining with respect and admiration for me, but I didn't know enough words to really say that I could write. His admiration was just kind of making me feel awkward.

"I can still barely write my own name. I'm still practicing."

"Holy cow, Myne! You can write your own name? That's awesome!"

...Um? He looks even more impressed now, somehow. I really didn't think anyone would get this impressed by me being able to write my name. But thinking about it, I remember Otto mentioning that in a rural village only the town chief will know how to read and write, and that Dad was pretty amazing just for being able to write names.

...I'd looked down on him, thinking that it was obvious to be able to do that much, but in truth I should have been impressed. I now understand just how important being able to help with paperwork really is. Which explained why Otto was more invested in teaching me, rather than his fellow soldiers. Someone satisfied with just writing names would never be able to help with paperwork.

"Haaah... Haaah..."

“You okay, Myne?” Learning letters was simple for me, but building strength was something else entirely. Whether I liked it or not, I had to recognize here that everyone had their own strengths and weakness.

By the time I reached home with a worried Lutz by my side, I was so tired I couldn’t even talk. As expected, I caught a fever and ended up in bed for two days.

“Goodness gracious, I told you not to push yourself!” Mom was peeved, but I really had gotten stronger. A fever that normally would have knocked me out of commission for five days only lasted two. By the third day I was up and about.

I walked to the gate with Dad, ended up tired out halfway through, and got carried the rest of the way. From noon onwards I studied reading and writing, plus helped Otto with his calculations. I walked home with the others, but soon ended up left behind and out of breath with Lutz beside me, worried. When I got home, I ended up in bed.

That routine repeated for about a month, but I was unmistakably building up strength. At first I rested for three days after each trip, but soon those three days became two, and eventually I alternated between going and resting. I was still slow then, but I could manage to walk all the way to the gate on my own.

Eventually, it became two trips per one day of rest, then three trips per one day of rest. My family threw a huge celebration the day I finally went five days in a row without getting sick.

“You did it, Myne. You went the whole week without resting for the first time.”

“My little girl’s all strong now! Daddy’s proud!”

“You’ll be able to go to the forest soon, dear.”

My family’s excitement encouraged me to push myself harder, but that led to me getting a fever that knocked me out for two days. Things wouldn’t be that easy.

It was three months after starting to go to the gates that I finally got permission to go to the forest. Signs of summer were beginning to show, marking the end of spring.

Long Live Mesopotamian Culture

Today is the first day I'm going to the forest, on my own two legs.

Rather than my usual tote bag and stone slate, I had a basket (somewhat smaller than everyone else's) on my back and a spade for digging into clay, though it really just looked like a wooden spatula. I got the feeling that the wood spatula thing would be less reliable than a children's toy made of plastic, but maybe that was just me.

As I swung the flimsy spade around, expecting it to break any second, Dad grabbed onto my shoulders. He was no doubt about to repeat the same lines I had heard a thousand times since he decided to let me go to the forest.

"Myne. Today you're gonna go to the forest, and come back. Nothing else. Everyone's gonna be tired and weighed down. You need to rest in the forest and aim to come home with everyone. Understand?"

"I understand."

Either because my answer wasn't enough for him, or because he could tell how annoyed I was getting by his repeated warnings, Dad looked at Tuuli with a grim expression. "Tuuli, I know it's gonna be rough, but I'm counting on you. Talk with Lutz and make sure Myne will get home before the gate closes."

"Right. I'll make sure we leave early today." Tuuli's always been overflowing with a sense of responsibility, and Dad's reliance on her was igniting her determination. She would probably be a bit strict today.

We went outside and met up with several other kids, all carrying similar baskets. There were about eight of them, some about as small as me, some big and tall like Tuuli and Fey. The pink-headed Fey took the lead while Tuuli watched the back. I started off walking at the front, but by the time we reached the gate, I was in the back.

"Alright, Myne. Let's go. Walk as slow as you need." I could walk to the gate on my own easily, but it was my first time walking all the way to the forest.

Thus, Lutz was following along as my pacer.

Over the three months that he walked beside me from the gate to home, Lutz had apparently memorized the best speed for me to walk without pushing myself too far. The fact I could walk so far lately was largely thanks to his help. And today, Dad was actually paying him a little to keep his eyes on me.

“Thanks, Lutz.”

“Hey, it’s the least I can do to pay you back.”

Lutz’s house had recently taken care of all the parue remnants they still had. Parues could only be harvested in the winter, and apparently they went immediately bad once it got warm. As a thanks for all their help, and as a sign I wanted to keep up our cooking relationship, I taught them how to make a not-quite okara hamburger, known as a parue-burger. I took a pome, which was a fruit that looked like a yellow bell pepper at a glance but tasted like a tomato, and turned it into a sauce which I then covered with a layer of cheese. The combination brought out the parue’s gentle sweet flavor so well, even I ended up surprised.

Incidentally, first Lutz, and then all his older brothers actually cried afterward. They were sincerely thankful for how I had not only given them delicious food, but more food than they normally got to eat. Even their mom Karla was extremely thankful, since my recipes were easy on their budget. I could imagine that their Engel coefficient was off the charts with four hungry boys clamoring for food. *I’m just glad I could help them.*

“Why didn’t you tell us about those parue burgers during the winter?”

“You need fresh meat to mince it like that, right? And it was really hard to mince it in the first place. Who knows what would have happened without all your help...”

“Aaah, yeah, that was pretty rough. But we’ll do anything for your food, Myne.”

I didn’t have the strength to keep chopping the meat until it was all minced up, and I couldn’t ask Mom to do it knowing how difficult it was. I hadn’t been able to eat anything like a hamburger in so long, I felt really lucky that Lutz and

his brothers were willing to make some with me.

We walked all the way to the forest while chatting. It was so much fun that I managed to walk such a long distance without stopping, but the exhaustion after we got there was overwhelming. I sat on a somewhat large rock and just focused on recuperating energy while everyone else went gathering.

Worried about how heavily I was breathing, Lutz patted my back. “Remember, Fey and Tuuli’s baptisms are coming up. You gotta get used to walking to the forest real soon.”

“...Why?” I knew Tuuli’s baptism was soon given how we’d spent the winter making clothes and her hair ornament, but I didn’t understand what specifically would change after it happened.

“Once a kid gets baptized, they start apprentice work, right? That’ll mean for about half of each week, you’ll be the only one in your family who has time to go to the forest, Myne.”

I opened my eyes wide in surprise. Tuuli starting apprentice work meant that I would have to help around the house more in her stead.

“Wh-What should I do...? I didn’t think about that.” Past Myne managed to live this long without doing anything since Tuuli was such a good older sister that took care of her. Without Tuuli, I probably wouldn’t be able to survive.

Lutz cackled and rubbed his nose as he saw the blood drain from my face. “Hey, don’t sweat it. I’ll always protect you, Myne, whether Tuuli’s there or not. Cause you’re so small and weak.”

Lutz was too kind. He’s had that kind of manly attitude ever since I first met him as Myne. “Thanks, Lutz. I’ll be counting on you.”

“Yeah. I’m gonna go gather firewood. Sit there and rest while I’m gone, alright? You don’t wanna be too tired to go home.” Lutz left it at that and went to get firewood. Once his footsteps faded into the distance and there was nobody around me, I grabbed my wannabe-spade and started digging a hole.

My goal for today was “Go to the forest and get home. Try not to catch a fever.” I knew that. But although I felt bad for Lutz and my family, could I bear coming to the forest and then just leaving without doing anything? No, I

couldn’t.

...Dig, dig! Dig as far as you can! I wanted sticky clay, but who knew how much I could get. Assuming the ground layer here was similar to Earth’s, I’d need to dig fairly deep to find sticky clay.

“Hyah!” I thrust the spade into the ground, putting all my strength into it. But the flimsy branch my family called a spade didn’t even go a single centimeter into the ground.

...So hard! Bwuh? Is it even possible to dig into this? It felt like trying to dig into the packed dirt of a sports field. I had expected the ground of the forest to be moist and soft, but reality couldn’t be more different. Was it the ground’s fault, or the spade’s fault? The answer was simple.

Yep... It’s the spade. The spade I was holding was a far cry from the ones I was used to. If only it were at least made of metal, not wood. But alas. Regardless of the spade being wood, regardless of how hard or soft the ground was, giving up wasn’t an option for me. I just had to keep digging bit by bit, even if my progress ended up being pathetic.

Scratch scratch scratch...

The flimsy branch of a spade scraped the ground away bit by bit. It took a lot of strength and determination to dig out sticky clay. It would take a lot more than a single day to finish this. Somehow, I got the feeling making tablets out of the clay would be hard too. I could only pray that it would be easier than making faux-papyrus.

Scratch scratch scratch...

After digging about five centimeters into the ground, I heard someone approaching.

“What are you doing, Myne?” Lutz, both hands filled with gathered twigs, opened his eyes wide in shock after seeing me sitting on the ground digging with a spade. “Didn’t you promise not to do anything that would tire you out?!”

I remembered the promise we made after I left home, but I couldn’t resist digging for the clay that was right in front of my eyes. I had intended to stop before Lutz came back, but it was hard to quit after getting started.

...Wh-What should I say? I could fool Dad with a hug and a smile, but Tuuli had specifically assigned Lutz to watch over me. There was no fooling him. If I tried, he'd just narrow his eyes and interrogate me further. I knew that from experience.

"U-Um... Well, Lutz."

"...Well what?" Lutz furrowed his brows, put his hands on his hips, and looked down on me. The interrogation had started. "I told you to rest. Why aren't you? What are you doing?"

"...U-Ummm, digging a hole!" Lutz's intimidating pose and aura of anger overwhelmed me such that I accidentally let the truth spill out. *I-I mean, Lutz is scary when he gets mad. If things go bad, I won't make it home before the gate closes.*

"I can see that. Why were you digging?" I thought answering honestly would do the trick, but Lutz's anger just multiplied. I felt his gaze get a lot, lot colder. Groaning fearfully to myself, I looked up at Lutz.

"Ummm, well, I want (sticky clay)."

"Huh? You want what?" Lutz tilted his head a little bit in confusion. It seemed like the confusion had dimmed his anger somewhat.

"I want, um... ground that's heavy, bad at draining water, and all clumped together. Sticky."

"...If that's what you want, you'll find more of it over there, where there's not much grass or trees."

It was true that it'd be more efficient to search for ground where plants weren't growing, since *too* much water actually made it harder for them to grow.

"Good thinking, Lutz! Thanks!"

"Hey! Stop, Myne!" I tried moving over there immediately, but Lutz grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me back. He was incomparably bigger and stronger than me, so I had no way of escaping him.

"Your job today is to rest, remember? Did you not hear me? What's so

important that you gotta dig for it right now?" Lutz followed up his neck grab by pulling my ears. I wailed while flailing my arms around.

"Ow! Ow! It's something I really, really want...! But it's not something we can eat or anything, so I can't ask Tuuli to get it for me!" I glared at Lutz with tears in my eyes while rubbing my ears, which made him falter a little. He must not have expected me to argue back, or maybe he was just surprised to see me get so stubborn about something when I usually didn't.

My raw instincts told me not to let this opportunity slip me by. "Are you saying you'll dig for me if I rest?!"

"...I'll dig for you once I finish getting enough firewood. So c'mon, Myne, rest." His unexpected answer made me freeze up. I could only stare at him, stunned. Although I had led the conversation in that direction, I had to wonder if Lutz understood what he was saying. Rather than helping me make my clay tablets, he should focus on gathering as much as possible for his family.

"Lutz, um, I appreciate the thought, but shouldn't you, um, focus on yourself?"

"You're too weak to dig up clay. So, I'll do it. But in return, tell me what you'll use the clay for. What you want to do with it."

"...Why?"

"I can save time and avoid wasted effort if I know what you want to do. 'Cause I mean, look, you were digging in the wrong place for what you wanted."

Ngh... I can't argue with that. It was true that even with a clear goal in mind, I struggled a lot due to not knowing what things were called in this world, not noticing that things looked different here from what I had seen in my Urano days, and not having access to the tools I needed. Thanks to Lutz firmly pointing out my error, I knew that he hadn't said he would help without thinking, but I didn't know *why* he was willing to help. It made me feel weird.

"Why are you willing to help me, Lutz?"

"Huh? I mean, you made those parue cakes for me when I was real hungry, right? That day I decided to help you with whatever you needed. No matter what."

...Bwuh? Just that? He'll help me dig out clay just for that? To be honest, it was hard for me to understand Lutz's willingness to perform hard labor for me, but maybe he was just the kind of person who cared a lot about repaying gratitude. If he wanted to help, that was fine with me. I felt kinda bad about it, but when it came to matters of strength, I would leave everything I could to him.

"...Okay, Lutz, I'll leave it to you. I can just wait here."

"Alright. I'll be back in no time." Lutz really did finish picking up firewood in no time. He then led me to ground with poor water drainage. It was a lower point in the forest, with slanted ground surrounding it.

"Should be around here." Lutz took the twig-like spade I brought with me and started digging with it. "Myne. Y'know, thinking about it, why'd you even bring this spade with you? You never intended to keep our promise, huh?"

"Ah?! U-Um, that's, well... I was just so excited to go to the forest. I just accidentally brought the stuff I needed with me."

Lutz flinched a bit, and thrust the spade hard into the ground as if to release his burning emotions. "Sheesh! You look all nice and sweet on the outside, but I can't let my guard down around you!"

"Actually, I think you should let your guard down a bit more... Why do you have to be smarter than Dad?"

"Mr. Gunther is just too soft on you!"

I could only watch silently as Lutz used his anger to dig. Somehow, the twig was steadily making progress through the ground. Unlike my scratching, the ground was getting flung away chunk by chunk. It was so weird, I couldn't understand it. *Is he just that much stronger than me? Is he holding the spade differently? Is there some trick here?*

"Wait, is it just me or is the ground a different color now?" After Lutz dug about fifty centimeters into the ground, it changed color. "Is this the stuff you want?"

I grabbed some of it and tried squeezing it in my hand. It was cold, heavy, and changed shape inside of my hand. This was definitely the sticky clay I had been

looking for. “This is it! It would have taken me days to dig this far! You’re amazing, Lutz. So strong.”

“There’s not a guy alive who’s not stronger than you, Myne.” Despite sounding peeved, Lutz kept on digging up the sticky clay.

Giddy with excitement, I brought chunks of the clay and set them on top of a large rock, bit by bit. *I wonder how many clay tablets this will make.* That alone made me grow terribly fond of this clay, as silly as that sounded.

“So, what do you need this stuff for?”

“Eheh. I’m gonna make (clay tablets) with it.”

“(Clay tablets)?”

“Uh huh.”

I took the clay, acquired through Lutz’s hard labor, and squished it into the shape of a thin tablet. I then grabbed a nearby, tiny stick and started carving in a Japanese bedtime story that my old mom had told me. I would have preferred to write in the language of this world, not Japanese, but Otto was only teaching me words that had to do with work. I could write the basic template for a letter of introduction, and I could write out various things related to noble offices, but I couldn’t write words related to my basic daily life.

“Are those letters you’re writing?”

“Uh huh, basically. If I write something down here, I can remember it later just by reading. Written records are amazing, don’t you think? And books are just filled with these written records, so they’re even more amazing.”

“Wow...”

“Lutz, thanks for digging up this clay. You really saved me. If you still need to gather stuff, go ahead. I’ll be sitting right here and writing.”

“Alright. You better stay still.”

I was writing a story aesthetically similar to “The Elves and the Shoemaker: Isekai Edition.” It was such an epic tale that even if I packed each clay tablet with letters, I would need ten to tell the whole story.

“Yaaay! I finished!” Upon writing the last word and settling things with a climatic “Fin,” I was struck with a sense of overwhelming accomplishment. *Wow! Clay tablets! I finished the clay tablets! Oh great and mighty Mesopotamian culture, may you live forever!*

I would be finished for real once I heated the tablets on our hearth, such that they wouldn’t break. I squeezed my stick and turned around to see the other finished tablets I had stacked on top of one another.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAH!” I slapped my hands on my cheeks and screamed in a way that made me the spitting image of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream.* What I saw before me was so unbelievable my mind went white.

Lutz, holding his gathering basket, rushed back to where I was. “What’s wrong, Myne?!”

“Fey stepped on them! He messed them up! ...UWAAAH!” The first half of the story I had put all into writing — more than half really — had turned into mush beneath Fey and his friends’ feet. The tablets had crumbled apart and the footsteps covering them made the text unreadable.

“I-I had finally finished them... So mean! Uwaaah! How hard do you think I worked to come here?! How hard do you think it was for me to make this weak, sick body stronger...?! I even wrapped Lutz and Tuuli into this to finish them, and yet! GAAAH! STUPID DUMB IDIOOOTS!”

I glared at Fey and the others as hard as I could, choking back sobs as tears streamed down my face. Rage coursed through my body as if to set my blood boiling, but somehow, my mind was frighteningly calm. I knew on the inside I was being immature, but I couldn’t calm myself down.

Fey and his friends flinched from my glare and slowly backed away, trembling in fear.



...I was almost there! I was one step away from getting a book, and now it's all a mess! How are they going to make up for this? As I began thinking of ways to cool my rage over my clay tablets being messed up, Tuuli came running over with a terrified look on her face, probably having heard my scream.

"Myne, what's wrong?!" She peered over to see my face and immediately her expression twisted into one of fear, just like Fey's. "...What happened? You look really, really mad." She averted her eyes from me and looked around to assess the situation while consoling me. "Myne, you can't let yourself get that mad. I'm sure they didn't mean to hurt your feelings, right?"

Whether or not they meant to hurt me, the ruined clay tablets wouldn't be coming back. My rage over all my efforts being wasted couldn't be calmed by Tuuli's words alone.

"Whatever! I'm never gonna forgive them!" With tears and snot trickling down my face, I glared with all my might at Fey and his friends as they quivered in terror, before suddenly Lutz patted me on the back.

"I remember you saying you spent three months building up strength just so you could go to the forest and make (clay tablets). I get why you're mad. I get why you don't want to forgive them, I really do. But no matter how mad you get, what's done is done. The only thing you can do is make them again. And uh, yeah, I'll help you."

"If we start right now, we can make it to the gate before it closes. I'll help, Myne. Okay? Fey and the others feel bad about what they did, so they'll help too. Right?"

"Yeah, definitely! We didn't think they mattered that much to you. Sorry, seriously." Clinging to the lifesaver thrown to them by Lutz and Tuuli, Fey and the others nodded their heads hard and hurriedly reached to the tablets they had been stepping on. Fey's apology and the assurance that we could make new ones before the gate closed made the anger drain out of me. Staying angry wouldn't be as productive as getting to work making new tablets.

"...Okay. I'll make new ones." I had more or less managed to finish writing the story on the old tablets, so my approach in making them wasn't flawed. I had to be satisfied with how much easier they were to make than papyrus.

But I didn’t forget to drive the point home to Fey and his cronies. “Don’t think any of you will get a second chance.”

Apparently, I reigned as the queen of the rumored “Top People You Should Never Make Angry” rankings for some time.

Clay Tablets Won't Work

As expected by basically everyone, going to the forest, making clay tablets, and exploding with rage all took so much out of me that I ended up bedridden with a fever. Apparently I had murmured "clay tablets" under my breath over and over the whole time.

I clenched my fists, resolved to go right to the forest to make more clay tablets, but Dad wouldn't let me. "No way, not a chance! We gotta see how your health holds up. Wait until tomorrow. Alright?"

"...Okaaaay." Naturally, he wouldn't give me permission to do something as reckless as go straight to the forest the day after recovering from a fever. But still, he said I could go to the forest tomorrow if I didn't get another fever today, so I started preparing for tomorrow with excitement in my heart.

First, I took a board from the storage room (whose true purpose I didn't know) and put it on the bottom of my basket for stability. I then took some torn-up cloths that Mom was intending to sew into rags and stealthily put them into my bag. With all that done, I could wrap the clay tablets up and bring them home with me.

Okaaay, time to make tons and tons of clay tableeets! I woke up in excitement the next morning, but it was raining hard. In fact, it was a torrential downpour, which was rare for this area. Things were so bad it was like a typhoon. We could hear the wind and rain even after tightly shutting our windows.

"NOOOO! Rain?!" In a world without weather forecasts, we were at the mercy of Mother Nature's whims. Or really, I was sick so much that I only ever left the house when my family said I could, which meant up until now I never had to worry about the weather.

Visions of the clay tablets falling apart beneath the rain flashed through my mind. Although I had hidden them beneath some sturdy-looking shrubbery, they would definitely not survive this storm unharmed.

“NGYAAAAAH! My (clay tablets)! They’re gonna turn into mush!”

“Hold it, Myne! Just where do you think you’re going?!”

“To the forest!” I immediately tried running outside without a second thought, but Mom grabbed the back of my neck and stopped me.

“What in the world are you thinking?! You already get sick so easily, this storm would kill you! Do you not realize it’s so bad we can’t even go to the well?!”

The sounds of the storm raged through our home despite the tightly shut windows, emphasizing just how bad the storm really was. I would never survive outside if even healthy adults hesitated to step outside to reach the well.

I sunk to the floor. “My (clay tableeets)... Awww...”

“Don’t worry, Myne. Everyone said they’ll help you, so you’ll be able to make new ones faster than before. You don’t need to get super mad again.” Tuuli rubbed my head, consoling me. She really was a good older sister.

The rare storm continued for two days, and it took another two days after that before we kids were allowed to go to the forest again.

It was a bright and sunny morning, and everyone looked excited to visit the forest again after so long. And today was a day where apprentices didn’t have work, so there were a lot more kids than usual, especially big ones. Lutz’s older brother Ralph was going to the forest too. He had a large basket on his back and was carrying a bow.

“Heya, Myne. Feeling better?”

“Hi, Ralph. I’ve been better, but the day Dad said I could go to the forest again, the storm hit.”

“Now that’s rough.” Ralph rustled my hair and then went to see Tuuli. “Sup, Tuuli.”

“Ralph! It feels like it’s been forever since we saw each other.” Perhaps due to having started work as an apprentice, Ralph looked a lot more mature and confident in himself. And Tuuli, who I had been cleaning up in preparation for her baptism, beamed an angelic smile.

...Uh huh, these two would definitely be a nice couple, I think. Ralph and Tuuli both care a lot about others, so I think they would be a good fit for each other. I watched the two of them, grinning, when suddenly Lutz pulled me over to him.

"Myne, get a grip. You gotta start at the front of the group since you walk so slow, remember?"

"Right, sorry."

The platoon of kids, myself included, walked on and passed through the gate. What was normally a grassy wonderland had been scarred deeply by the storm, with mud scattered everywhere. *Um... Does this world have financial assistance for natural disasters?*

I kept moving, looking around me in a dazed surprise, when something suddenly got in the way of my eyes. Surprised, I looked to the side and saw that Lutz was waving his hands in front of my face.

"Wha? Is something up?"

"Nah, I was just wondering if you were actually awake. Hey... Myne. Are you gonna make those, uh, (clay tablets) again? What are they, anyway?"

Even if I wasn't writing in Japanese, Lutz was illiterate. He had no idea what I was writing. Not to mention that his daily life involved no paper or writing whatsoever. There wasn't a single letter written anywhere in his home. He no doubt knew nothing of the splendor of media in general, with clay tablets just one of the mediums of recording information he had never encountered in his life.

I began to teach Lutz, feeling an odd sense of responsibility to proselytize books and writing. "Well, it's simple. They're things to write on. Like, if you have something you don't want to forget, you can write it down on them. That way you can't forget it, right? If you store the tablet properly, you can look at it whenever you want. That's what (clay tablets) are for. They're just one (medium of recording information) out of many. Clay is so squishy that you can just use a finger to wipe away mistakes, and once you're done, you can harden them with fire. Don't you think that's amazing?"

Maybe due to how I had said that all without pausing, Lutz just tilted his head

a bit, mouth hanging open. “...Ya lost me. Anyway, what’d you write down?”

“I wrote a story. One my mom told me. Like, I won’t forget it if I write it down, you know? What I really want are books, but there aren’t any here. So I’ll just have to make them myself.”

“Hmmm. So that’s what you really wanna do, Myne?”

I thought about Lutz’s question and suddenly realized something. I had been thinking for a long time that I wanted to make books, since they were too expensive for my poor family to own, but what I *really* wanted deep inside wasn’t to make books.

“Mmm, not quite. What I really want is to live a life surrounded by books. I want tons and tons of new books to be made every month, I want to buy all of them, and I want to spend my life reading them.”

“Uuuh, so basically, you want books...?”

“Yes! I want them right now, so bad. But they’re too expensive to buy. They’re out of reach for me. So what can I do but make them myself? Paper’s also too expensive, so I’ll make (clay tablets), write stories on them, and harden them.”

With that, Lutz finally clapped his hands together in understanding. “You’re making replacements for books right now, huh?”

“Yeah! Things didn’t go well last time, but that’s the past! I’ll make sure it works out this time!”

“Alright. I’ll help out.” Lutz was willing to go this far for me just because I shared a few recipes, which made me want to help him too.

“Okay then, what do you want to do, Lutz? It sounded like you have something you really want to do yourself.”

“I... Yeah. I want to go to other cities. You know how the bards and traveling merchants go to all sorts of places and know all sorts of things? I wanna do that too.”

“Uh huh, that sounds really cool.” Speaking of which, back in my Urano days, I often dreamed of traveling the world to visit all sorts of foreign libraries and read their books. Thoughts of that now-unattainable dream flashed through my

mind, and soon I lowered my eyes.

“...You really think that? I mean, I’d be leaving this city, y’know?”

“Aaah, traveling seems wonderful. You can go all over the place, it seems like so much fun. Like, I actually dreamed of traveling all over the (Earth) and visiting tons of (libraries)...”

“Haaah... I dunno why I was worried about saying that. Man, Myne. You’re definitely gonna do what you want to do.”

“What’s stopping you from doing the same, Lutz?” My head was so full of my Urano dreams and wishes that I wasn’t actually looking at him. I didn’t see what kind of face he was making.

Once we finally reached a dry part of the road, we walked on and soon came upon the forest. The slightly open part right inside was our meeting place.

“Alright, let’s get to gathering, everyone. If you’re a littler kid, don’t go too far. Always stay where you can see the meeting place. Alright?” The larger kids made sure the little kids understood the rules before taking their bows and jogging deeper into the forest. The little kids glanced furtively in my direction. I was already exhausted just from walking to the forest, but I immediately began investigating the area to see what had become of my clay tablets.

“Um, does anyone know where the (tablets) are?” I couldn’t find the tree the other kids had marked for me. At first I thought I had just forgotten where it was, since it had been several days since then, but everyone else was looking around too, just as lost as I was.

“We definitely put the marker on a tree around here, didn’t we?”

Fey’s cronies all nodded together. He was pointing at a place where several trees had fallen from the storm.

“Well, we’ve got an idea on where they are, so we just gotta search.” Once Lutz began digging through the shrubbery, everyone else hesitantly joined in and searched with him.

And it’s not just Fey’s friends, but everyone... They’re all such nice kids.

“Hey, ain’t these it?”

It took a lot of work to find the marker, but Fey waved me over while squatting by some bushes. I dashed over there as fast as I could and found clumps of clay stuck together without any visible letters on them. As expected, the rain had messed them so much all my work had been erased. The tablets had returned to their original form. *Aaah... Back to square one.*

“I-I didn’t break them this time, a’ight?!”

“...I know that.”

Fey hurriedly covered for himself, but he didn’t have to. I knew it wasn’t his fault. I also knew everyone was buzzing around me, uncertain of what to do, not knowing whether they should console me or not. I knew I was stressing everyone out, but I couldn’t stop my tears from flowing out.

As I sobbed quietly to myself, I heard footsteps approach. They stopped, and then moments later, someone hit me lightly on the head.

“Myne, if you’ve got the time to cry, you’ve got the time to make more tablets.” Lutz’s voice broke through to me. He was right. I just had to try again, while Fey and the others were still willing to help me.

I wiped away my snot and looked up. *Right... I won’t let the world beat me! I first failed because of Fey. I then failed because of a storm. I’ve just experienced human and natural disasters. What else could the world throw at me? No matter what happens, I’ll finish these tablets!*

The clay I needed was right in front of me, so I just had to squish them into shape to start writing again. I knew where to get more if I ran out. Compared to when I was cluelessly searching for clay on my own, things were great.

...This is okay. I’m not back at square one at all. From these failures I’ve learned that I either need to finish the tablets all at once on a sunny day, or I need to work in a building with a roof. Today’s weather is nice, and I have three helpers with more than enough strength and energy to spare. Fey and his cronies are only helping because of the promise they made out of fear, but still. With this many helpers, I should be able to finish the clay tablets in no time.

“I only need Lutz, Fey, and Fey’s friends’ help. You can go focus on gathering,

Tuuli.”

“Okay... Good luck, everyone.”

“Yeah!”

Tuuli's encouragement brightened my mood and I got right to work making new clay tablets. I had Fey and his first crony dig out more clay, then I had Lutz and Fey’s second crony squeeze the clay into the shape of tablets. My job was just using a thin stick to carve letters into them. *Uh huh, things are going perfectly.*

“I needed ten (clay tablets) to write the whole story, so once you’ve made that many, you can go start gathering. Thanks!”

“Y-Yeah.” Fey and the others lined up tablets one by one in front of me, finishing all ten as soon as possible before running off to gather. And yet, Lutz kept digging out more clay.

“You’re not going to go gather?”

“Ralph’s here today, so I can stick around and help you instead.”

“Hmm. Well, I have enough clay, so why don’t you practice writing on the ground?” The ground was soft due to all the rain, so I took my stick and carved “Lutz” into it, using the letters of this world.

“What’s that...?”

“Your name, Lutz. You won’t be able to travel the world if you can’t write your name, right?” People of our city could go in and out of the gate without much fanfare, but apparently strangers entering new towns were asked their name and had to write it down. Otto, a former traveling merchant, had told me that. The same was true for our city. Any strangers were checked quite severely before being let inside. If Lutz wanted to visit other cities someday, he had to at least learn how to write his own name.

“Hey, Myne. This is, uh, my name?”

“Uh huh. If you want to travel the world, you should start learning your letters.” Lutz started to practice writing his name on the ground with his green

eyes sparkling. Meanwhile, I continued to write a story I had learned in this world in Japanese. *I will DEFINITELY finish making this book,* I chanted to myself over and over.

"Done!" I had finished writing one of the stories Mom had told me. I wanted to keep going and make *Bedtime with Mom: A Short Story Collection* out of clay tablets. It would be a "book" packed with stories I had learned for the first time by coming to this world.

I wrapped the finished clay tablets in the rags and stacked them carefully inside my basket, making sure not to break them or rub the words off. Once they were all inside, I let out a heavy sigh. My eyes turned upward and tears dripped out.

I had finished my first "book."

Really, clay tablets weren't a sophisticated enough medium to really call books, but they were the closest thing I had in this world. I had begun life in this world at the end of fall, and spring was now ending. It took a very, very long time for me to get my first book. But now that I had made one, I got the feeling that my life here had finally stabilized.

"I can read books again. I can read books in this world. So... I think I'll be fine." Since I had been reborn in a world where books were too expensive for poor people to read, and I had been reborn into a weak body that got sick over nothing, I never really cared about pushing myself too hard. I didn't care if I ended up dying. This sickly child's body didn't feel like mine, and I couldn't imagine living in a world without books. I had no attachment to anything.

But now that I had a book, I had something I wanted to take care of. I got the feeling that I had finally found something worth living for in this world. I had found my path in this life.

"You finished, Myne?"

"Uh huh. I finished, thanks to everyone's help." Even if Lutz and Tuuli's feelings were for Myne, not me, they had in fact helped me make this book. I took off the rag and showed Tuuli and Lutz the finished clay tablets.

“Um, Myne. What’s written on these?”

“This is the story of the star children. The one Mom told me on that first night.”

“First?” Tuuli furrowed her brows in confusion.

“Uh huh. It’s the first story that I remember.”

Mom had whispered the story to me in a quiet voice the night I first became Myne, when I had such a high fever I couldn’t sleep. Her voice was filled with love, but it felt to me that her love was for someone else, not me. I didn’t accept having become Myne, so Mom’s feelings and words went in one ear and out the other. They just made my confusion worse. Nothing in the world hurt more than Mom’s love, for it worsened my sense of isolation.

And yet, when I decided to make my own books, the story she told me was the first thing that came to mind. I got the feeling that by turning Mom’s stories into a book, I would be able to accept the love contained within them.

“I, um, I really want to write down all the stories Mom told me, so I don’t forget them.”

“But won’t the letters just disappear again?” Tuuli looked worried, but I just smiled.

“They will if I leave them like this, which is why I’ll heat them up to harden them. Then we can read Mom’s stories whenever we want.”

About half a year had passed since I began life in this world. And finally, for the first time, I smiled a truly sincere smile.

It would have been beautifully emotional for things to end right there, but sadly, I was not so lucky. I wanted to heat the tablets up as soon as I got home, so I waited for Mom to be distracted and immediately put the tablets on the hearth. Whereupon they exploded.

I’m not kidding. You may think I’m just telling a joke, but it really happened. I heated them on the hearth, and boom! My first book turned to dust and rubble. I just stood there in a daze, and before I could figure out what went wrong, Mom yelled at me and made me swear not to make clay tablets a second time.

...Wait, what? Did I just get thrown back to square one for real? Um... Well, emotionally speaking, I feel a lot better, so maybe it's like... Three steps forward, two steps back? Umm... Wh-What should I do now?

Tuuli’s Baptism

...If only I could have fired those clay tablets in the hearth and preserved them. Haaah. I really didn’t expect them to just explode like that. If only I had a knife like Tuuli, I could make some mokkan.

I was banned from making clay tablets after they exploded in the hearth, and while I was stuck thinking about how to proceed with bookmaking, Tuuli turned seven.

It was customary in this world to throw large celebrations for one’s seventh birthday. Or to be more precise, birth season, rather than birthday. A large baptism was held at the temple each season and all children in the city turning seven would go there to be baptized. They’d be able to work as apprentices after that, so I suppose one could say they were joining the workforce. I felt kind of uncomfortable about a religious event being mandatory, but when I thought about it like the shrine visits I’d go on in Japan as a child, it felt more natural. Weird.

Since children under the age of seven weren’t allowed to enter the temple, I couldn’t watch the baptism myself. But neither could Dad. In a stroke of bad luck, Dad had a meeting on the day of Tuuli’s baptism that he just couldn’t avoid. The meeting had been ordered by an archnoble, one of a higher-ranked family in noble society, and thus his head would literally fly if he didn’t go. *Literally?! Really?! That’s scary!*

And yet, despite that, Dad had been complaining since morning, showing no signs of going to work. “Don’t wanna. Who cares about the meeting. This is Tuuli’s baptism, y’know? Why would I care about a meeting on a day like this?”

It was true that Tuuli’s baptism was a very special day. I imagined that the noble had children of his own, so I didn’t get why he wouldn’t be understanding of the situation. “Wait. Do noble children not go get baptized?” I asked.

“...I’ve heard that they don’t go to the temple. They summon the priests to their home. Nobles don’t understand how we commoners feel.”

I had been enduring his complaining since I imagined he just needed to calm down a little, but he had been going since last night and just wouldn't stop. *Do all worlds share how annoying a daughter-obsessed father gets when he misses an important day with his children?* I sighed while diligently combing Tuuli's hair from the middle outward.

"Dad, I'll go with you, so don't skip work. We can go with Tuuli on the way there. And anyway, only children get to go inside the temple. Parents have to wait outside in the plaza."

He would probably feel better if he tagged along and saw Tuuli mixing with the other children in her dress. And yet, even with that suggestion in mind, Dad kept up complaining.

"It's a father's duty to wait outside the temple."

"Isn't going to work and making money a father's duty too?"

"Ngh!"

"I'm done with this. If you don't want to go to work with me *that* much, you can go on your own." I let out a hmph, causing Dad to look my way with tearful eyes full of sorrow.

"...I'll go to work with you, Myne. But I'll go right back to the temple plaza once the meeting's over. We're definitely gonna celebrate tonight."

Tuuli couldn't move her head while I was braiding her hair, so she looked at Dad with just her eyes and smiled. "Geez, Dad. I know that. We'll definitely celebrate together. And I'm really excited for it, so hurry home."

"Yeah." Tuuli's smile shot Dad's mood into the heavens. I could only clap my hands in awe of her angelic power.

And then she made a request to me with that smile still in place. "Myne, keep an eye on Dad and make sure he goes to work, okay?"

"Leave it to me! I'll work hard so you can relax and go to the baptism."

"Wha, Myne?!" Dad's pitiful behavior finally made Tuuli burst into laughter. She had a nice smile. With this much overwhelming love thrown her way, she wouldn't feel lonely even without Dad waiting outside for her.

“Okay, done. You’re looking super cute, Tuuli.”

“Thanks, Myne.”

I had braided both the left and right sides of her hair in a half-up style, finishing things off with her hair ornament. It consisted of the tiny lace flowers I had made over the winter and looked like a bouquet. The variety of colored flowers suited Tuuli’s dress and her bright, soft personality.

“My my, Tuuli. She really did pretty you up.”

“Wha... Mom?”

As she was going to the temple with Tuuli as well, Mom was wearing her best outfit. It was a simple, light-blue dress that stopped right above her shoes and gave her a dignified look. To think that a simple change of clothing and crimson blush from crushed red plants would make her look so much more beautiful. *Wow... My mom’s got perfect genes. She’s like, an absolute beauty.*

“Mom, sit down. I’ll braid your hair too.”

“No need. I would stand out too much if you did my hair like that. Tuuli and the other children are the stars of the show here, not me.”

“...Okay.” My intention wasn’t to make her stand out, and I didn’t think braided hair would change Mom’s look that much, but oh well. I didn’t know what the other dresses would look like and there was the chance that I went too far. I jumped off the chair I had been standing on to braid Tuuli’s hair. “Okay, let’s go.”

I took my tote bag to bring to the gate and left home with Tuuli. Dad, wearing his work clothes, and Mom went with us. Mom could normally walk at a steady pace no matter what she was carrying, but today she walked down the stairs slowly while holding her skirt up with her hands to prevent herself from accidentally stepping on it. Tuuli learned from her example and lifted up her skirt a bit while taking each step. Thanks to that, I somehow managed to be faster than them and exited the building first for the first time in my life.

“Wooow...”

There were tons of people in the plaza surrounding the well. I heard that the

entire city celebrated the baptism together. Lutz and Ralph, who had finished his baptism in the spring, were both outside despite having nothing to do with the event. Our neighbors were coming out to congratulate the stars of this season's baptism. I had always been too sick to go outside much, so today was the first one I had ever seen.

"Congrats, Fey."

"Looking a lot more manly, dude."

The pink-headed Fey had his baptism today as well, it seemed. He was wearing white clothes with green embroidery just like Tuuli, and his shirt was held in place by a diagonal green sash.

Okaaay, I get it. Right. Now I see why being good at sewing is important. All these clothes were home made, so one's skills were being put right on display. Sewing skills were never that important in Japan, and even in this world I wore raggedy clothes most of the time, so I never understood it when Mom told me that being good at sewing was required to be a beauty.

I never knew since I didn't have a point of comparison until now, but my mom really was great at sewing, I could see why she was so proud of herself. *I hate working with needles, so I guess I'm pretty much guaranteed to never find a boyfriend or get married here.*

"Wow, Tuuli! You're so cute!" Lutz's mother, Karla, slapped her cheeks with overwhelming surprise after seeing Tuuli and complimented her in such a loud voice everyone in the plaza heard. Immediately, everyone's attention fell on Tuuli and words of praise flew in from every which way.

"Congrats, Tuuli."

"Your hair's all braided and it's super cute, like a princess's."

Tuuli blushed with embarrassment at Karla's praise and smiled. Her white dress and green hair, with the light forming a halo on it due to the style of my braid, fluttered around her. *Mmm... Our Tuuli really is an angel. I can tell why Dad's such an obsessive parent.*

"Myne worked hard to braid it for me."

“Oh goodness, Myne did that? To think she’s good at something other than weird cooking.”

Mrs. Karla... That’s just mean. Despite feeling depressed on the inside, I was a little relieved too. I might have been totally useless around the house, but I did have some skills that even this world valued.

“This looks really complex. How do you tie it together?”

“Let me see too!”

Women and girls of all ages peered toward Tuuli’s hair. *Aaaah! They’re just simple braids, don’t stare at them! I didn’t have a proper comb, so the parting lines are kinda messed uuuup...*

“That’s so nice, Tuuli. My baptism’s this winter, I wish I could have my hair braided like that too.”

Once one girl let out a jealous sigh, cries of agreement rung out. People just kept saying “me too, me too” with no end in sight.

“Myne, everyone wants you to do their hair. I think that’s a great idea.” Tuuli happily suggested that I braid everyone’s hair, but I shook my head immediately.

“I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“I could get sick at any moment. This is the first time I’m even seeing a baptism, remember?”

I hated to disappoint Tuuli, knowing that she wanted to show off her little sister, but I didn’t want to braid the hair of a bunch of girls I didn’t know each baptism. In the first place, none of them would end up with braids like Tuuli’s. None of them took proper care of their hair, just like Tuuli didn’t before I came around. I especially didn’t want to start cleaning and maintaining the dirty hair of strangers I didn’t know.

“Oh, okay. You’re healthier now, but we really can’t tell when you’ll get sick. That’s too bad, I wanted everyone to know how amazing you are.”

I really wanted to grant Tuuli’s request since I was generally a useless waste of

space, but this was physically and emotionally impossible for me.

"...I could braid your hair while they watch, at least. But I won't promise to braid their hair myself."

"Yeah, okay! Dad always says not to make promises you can't keep, right? Everyone! Myne said she could teach you all how to make braids like this!" Tuuli, satisfied with my compromise, went ahead and planned a future gathering by the well where I would show them how to do the braid.

I really hadn't expected my simple braids to get so much attention. Now I knew why Mom declined to have hers braided too.

"So, what about that hair ornament? Who made that?"

"Myne."

"No, Tuuli. Our whole family did! Mom and I made the flowers. Dad made the hair stick part."

Lacework was so rare that even Mom didn't know about it despite being such a talented seamstress. The older ladies here were fascinated by it.

"Hey, Myne. Would you teach them how to make these too?"

"I could, but they'd need to make thin needles first. Plus, Mom would be a better teacher than me. I'm not as good at sewing as she is anyway."

I wasn't the most social person out there, and I ran the risk of saying something weird due to my lack of familiarity with this world. Who knew what I should and shouldn't say to the moms around here. It would be best to just keep my distance and avoid accidentally exposing myself somehow.

Clang, clang, clang... The temple's bells rang three times. Whenever the temple in the middle of the city rang its bells, the ringing echoed throughout the entire city. All of us who'd been making noises around the well fell silent for an instant. And then, someone let out a cheer. "It's time! Let's go to the main street!"

With the kids being baptized in the lead, we walked onto the main street and saw other groups all doing the same from other alleys. A group of kids wearing white clothing was going from the edge of town to the temple in the center.

The group walking consisted of those being baptized and their family, with everyone else watching from the sides of the street.

...This feels pretty familiar. The way people on the sidelines waving and cheering as those on the road advanced forward made it feel just like a marathon. Distant cheers grew louder as the group of kids approached where we were. I looked to Tuuli, who was right beside me, and saw that she had kind of stiffened up with nervousness. I stretched as far as I could and poked Tuuli on the cheek.

"Wha? Why?"

"Smile. You're cutest when you smile, Tuuli. Believe me."

Tuuli's eyes opened wide, and then she smiled like she usually did. "Geez, Myne."

"That ain't right, Myne. Tuuli's the cutest even when she doesn't smile."

Aaah, what am I gonna do with you, Dad?

Soon enough, we saw the front of the crowd. In the midst of the loudest cheers, clapping, and whistling yet, I saw plenty of kids wearing similarly white clothing. Some had bright smiles, some looked uncomfortable, some looked smug, some looked nervous, but they all walked forward together. Tuuli and Fey stepped forward out of our group of onlookers. They walked forward briskly, watching the group of kids, and then joined in the back. After confirming that they had safely joined the group, we and Fey's family joined the group of families further in the back.

More and more kids joined bit by bit as we crossed intersections. I had no idea how huge our group would be when we reached the center of the city. Some parents were already teary eyed from emotion just from walking with the group. For example, Dad.

I jogged a bit to keep up with the procession, walking among the loud cheers with everyone else. Since the cheers were coming from everywhere, I looked around and saw people watching on from the windows of their houses, and I even saw some people tossing small white flowers our way in celebration. The flowers drifted down as if they were coming from the blue sky itself. The

children in the front let out happy cries. I was so short that I could really only see the hands of kids reaching up to try and catch some of the flowers.

The group stopped after reaching the fountain where the main roads connected. The kids from the other roads joined together, swelling our numbers enormously all at once. This was as far as Dad and I could go.

“Wrong way, Dad.”

I took Dad’s hand, stopping him from walking with the group to the temple, and pulled him away from the group. We walked to the side of the road and joined the onlookers so as to not get in anyone’s way.

“Tuuli...”

“Geez! This way, Dad.”

Once the group passed, the onlookers began heading home. We followed the others and headed to the southern gate with Dad turning around multiple times, regret in his eyes.

We’re not going to be late, are we?

“Captain! You’re late!” Otto immediately called out to us with a sharp look once we reached the gate, then sent Dad to the meeting room.

I would be using my slate to learn words just like always. In a pleasant surprise, today he was going to start teaching me the names of commonly traded products so that I could read the material ledgers that merchants would show to identify what they were bringing with them. The names of these products were the first words that were actually relevant to my daily life.

Today’s words all had to do with currently seasonable vegetables. It was easy to learn the words for vegetables often used in cooking like pome (a tomato that looks like a yellow paprika), vel (red lettuce), and fisha (green eggplant), but it was hard to mentally picture the vegetables I hadn’t eaten before, so they took longer to learn. *I really wish I could go to the market to match the words with the real thing. Butchers are still too much for me, though.*

As I was practicing my letters alone, a relatively young soldier rushed in

holding paperwork.

“Do you know where Otto is?”

“He’s in a meeting right now.”

“Oooh, that’s right! Crap...” Apparently, today’s guard couldn’t read paperwork very well.

“Do you want me to read it for you?”

“Wha? You?”

“I am Mr. Otto’s assistant, you know.”

He looked at me very suspiciously. But I couldn’t blame him, since I definitely looked too young to be literate. I was used to looks like his. In any case, I had only offered to help out of kindness, so I didn’t mind if he didn’t want to show it to me. Which seemed to be the case, so I dropped my eyes back to my slate and returned to studying.

“...You can read?” asked the guard, looking surprised after seeing me start writing on my slate.

Whether or not I could read depended entirely on what kind of paperwork it was. I hadn’t memorized everything yet. “Ummm, I can read inquiries and letters of introduction without issue. I can read the numbers on material ledgers, but not the products listed.”

“Okay, this is a letter of introduction. I’d really appreciate your help.”

Noble letters were annoying to read due to how indirect they tended to be, but if you stripped off the purple prose, nothing that complex was written. Person X was introducing Person Y, and they needed Person Z’s seal. That was all you needed to discern from them.

I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs with the scent of parchment and ink as I ran my eyes over the letter. *Aaaah... The gate commander is in the meeting too. Since this is a letter from a laynoble, a lower-ranked noble, I think it should be fine to have the one being introduced wait until the meeting is over.*

“Ummm, it looks like this is an introduction from Baron Blon, and the person is headed to see Baron Glaz. The commander’s seal is necessary.”

I returned the parchment while reminding myself how Otto usually did his job. Even I could do this job once I had the instruction manual memorized.

“Please have the merchant who brought this wait in the room for laynobles. Tell him that the commander is in a meeting with an archnoble and he needs some time before he can give his seal. I think Baron Glaz’s visitor won’t be pushy about this.”

“Thanks. That’s a big help.”

He tapped his chest twice in salute, so I jumped off my chair and returned it. At some point, saluting had become second nature for me while working for Otto. *Mmmm, at this rate, I think I might accidentally end up employed as a secretary here.* I had intended to make paper and open a bookstore before my apprentice work next year began, but I had stumbled and there was no end in sight.

I went back to work studying words on my slate, and soon Dad rushed in. “Time to go home, Myne.”

“Um, a second ago, someone...”

“You can tell me on the way back. Tuuli’s waiting.” Dad put my slate and pen into my tote bag and hoisted me up before walking out with his stuff. I started slapping my dad’s shoulder, caught off guard by the pace of his walking.

“Dad?! Um, come on! I have a report...”

“We’re outta here before Otto sees us.”

“Wait! I really have a report for Mr. Otto!”

While we were in the midst of arguing, Otto caught up to us.

“Ah, Mr. Otto. A merchant with a letter of introduction from Baron Blon to Baron Glaz came. Since the commander was in a meeting, I had him be taken to the waiting room for laynobles. Please take care of this as soon as possible.”

“That’s the kinda good work I expect from my assistant. Great job.”

“She’s my daughter,” said Dad, making Otto sigh and rub his temples.

“My skilled assistant, I give you an important job: Go home with this captain

immediately. He was so antsy during the meeting that an archnoble glared at us and thereby shaved years off my life."

"...Dad, you need to treasure your life more."

"Otto's telling us to go, so let's not keep him waiting."

I let Dad carry me home, and that night we had a family celebration for Tuuli's birth season. My internal view of celebrations involved cake, but we didn't have anything like that in our home. The only thing I could make with our ingredients was an attempt at french toast.

I had Mom cut the fairly hard multigrain bread into slices, which I then covered with milk and eggs that I got by exchanging recipes with Lutz's family. It was finished once Mom cooked it with butter. Since we didn't have sugar or honey, we had jam made from a raspberry-like fruit as a side.

I also made one other thing for Tuuli: soup with specially chopped vegetables. Tuuli loved it, since she thought the heart and star shaped vegetables were cute.

"Here, Tuuli. Your presents."

"Wooow! Thanks, Mom! Dad!"

They gave Tuuli clothes and tools for work. After turning seven and being baptized, kids began work as apprentices. Some workplaces had places for their apprentices to live, but Tuuli would be walking to her apprentice seamstress job. *I guess she's aiming to be a beauty by getting good at sewing. I understand. She wants Ralph to say she's a good woman. Uh huh.*

"You don't have work every day, right?"

"Well, I won't be able to do any serious work for now, so I'll go there for about half of each week."

"After all, the workers won't be able to do their own job if they spend all the time time training apprentices."

Makes sense. My own studies were put on hold when the apprentice guards are being trained, and Otto did have more work because of them.

"And Myne, this is for you." My parents took a long bundle of cloth and

placed it on the table. Blinking, I tilted my head in confusion, not understanding why I was being given a gift on Tuuli's baptism.

"But I didn't get baptized today."

"Now that Tuuli has work, it's your job to pick up firewood, Myne. You'll need this."

I opened the bundle of cloth and saw a gleaming knife. The blade was thick and it was heavy enough to weigh my hands down. If this were Japan, my parents would be chastised for giving such a dangerously sharp thing to a child, but in this world, you couldn't even protect yourself without a knife. Those who can't help or do anything are treated like babies.

...I have my own knife now. Up until now, I've been treated like a baby. Helping Tuuli do the real helping at best, and just getting in the way at worst, which is most of the time. But since Tuuli was starting work as an apprentice, they had no choice but to give me my own knife.

...A knife! Now I can make mokkan! Wooden mokkan!

I Love You, Yellow River Culture

The day Tuuli went to work as an apprentice for the first time, I was stunned. I could barely do any of the chores entrusted to me. I had the knowledge of my past life in a modern world, which I thought would have made things easier, but it absolutely didn't.

...Tuuli was truly a mighty older sister.

First of all, I couldn't carry water. I couldn't even get it out of the well properly; I was too weak. The best I could do was get a little water into the bucket and struggle back up the stairs. It took me five trips just to get one normal bucket's worth. Of course, one bucket of water wasn't enough. We needed our whole home water jug to be filled. Mom would help, but she was so much faster she would fill the whole jug by the time I had brought a bucket's worth. I... I was useless.

Mom told me to light a fire in the hearth so she could prepare lunch. I had spent some time camping in the past, so I knew how to organize firewood. I put thick wood next to thin, easier to burn wood while leaving passages for air. I even put dried grass on top since it was easier to ignite. That was all easy. But I couldn't start the actual fire. When camping, I had used a lighter. I had no experience using flint stones. I tried remembering what Tuuli had done and mimicking her.

"Hyaaah?!" I slammed the two rocks together, and naturally, sparks flew. But the sparks surprised me to the point I reflexively dropped the stones. After that I became unable to slam the stones together at all, fearing that the sparks would burn me. Someone else ultimately had to do it for me. I... I was useless.

I could help with cooking, at least. Or so I thought, but no. The knives were too heavy and I needed both hands just to lift them. And I froze up looking at the chicken being held down. The best I could do was take food Mom had chopped up and slice it into smaller pieces, plus tell her recipes. I couldn't do much myself. I was so short I couldn't stir a pot even when standing on

something. Mom complimented my recipes, but my own weakness was seriously depressing. I... I really was useless.

“What’s wrong, Myne?” said Tuuli after coming home from her first day on the job and seeing me thoroughly depressed.

Mom, forcing a smile, answered for me. “...She’s sad that she couldn’t do any of the chores I gave her today.”

“Wha? Didn’t we all expect that?”

Indeed... Everyone had expected it. Including myself, but still. I was shocked by how useless I really was.

“I tried doing lots of things, but they were all too much for me.”

“Well, now that you know your problems, why don’t you get to work fixing them?”

“Myne, you may be feeling sad right now, but just know you’re better at cleaning than any of us.”

When it came to sweeping with a broom and wiping things down, neither took much strength and I had plenty of experience with both. Though I would get a fever if I got too enthusiastic about it.

Plus, I didn’t consider cleaning as part of my chores. I just couldn’t stand to live in a filthy environment. I was already sickly enough, I didn’t need a dirty home making my health worse. My actions were motivated by self-interest and nothing more.

I knew how to clean, wash dishes, and cook thanks to my Urano days, but none of that knowledge was useful here. To be honest, I had no idea doing chores would be this difficult. Tuuli could do it and she was only a year older than me. Why was I so weak? Why was I so useless?

...I wish I had been reborn into a healthier body. Healthy enough to at least not be dead weight.

“Heh, Myne. Are you really that worried about being useless?” asked Dad.

“...Obviously.”

“Yeah, figures... But I’m not expecting that much from you anyway, Myne.”

Um? Is it just me, or did he say something really mean with a smile on his face? I knew I wasn’t the most helpful person around, but I didn’t expect a father this obsessed with doting over his daughters to just up and say “I’m not expecting that much from you anyway” right in front of me.

As I stood there stunned, Dad patted my head and spoke with tears forming in the corners of his eyes. “For years I’ve been worried that the next time you got sick would be the last day of your life. But you’re healthier now, and that’s good enough for me,” said Dad, which made Tuuli shrug.

“I think Dad’s right, but who would hire Myne at this rate? I mean, Myne can’t do anything on her own.”

Dad shook his head. “Nah. We could hire her at the gate.”

“Huh? What job could Myne do there?”

Mom and Tuuli looked confused, but really, I had no idea why. Dad and I had talked to them about what I was doing at the gate before.

“What’re you two confused about? Paperwork. She’s been helping Otto each time we go to the gate. Though most of the time he’s teaching her to read and write.”

“Whaaa?! She hasn’t just been resting at the gate?”

“Myne wasn’t exaggerating about all those things?!”

Tuuli, why are you that surprised? And ouch, Mom, that hurts. I can’t believe you thought I wasn’t telling the truth.

“Myne’s especially good at math, I hear. If she doesn’t find a job she wants by her baptism, she can work at the gate. And you want to work with your daddy anyway, right Myne?”

“What? No way. I want to be a (librarian), or own a (bookstore).”

Unfortunately, my list of dream jobs did not include doing paperwork at the gate with my dad. Though naturally, since I had never seen a bookstore or librarian in this world, none of them understood what I had just said.

“...Aaah, Myne. What are you talking about?”

“Someone who sells books, so... a merchant? Mmm, I don’t think I have the personality for being a merchant, but I want a job that deals with books.”

“Eh, well, I dunno what you mean, but I hope you can do what you want. For now, just do what you can. Half a year ago you couldn’t walk to the forest. You didn’t even want to go outside. But now you can walk to the forest and back on your own.”

“...Uh huh.”

With all that said, they told me to do my best with gathering firewood, so both Tuuli and I left home with baskets on our backs. Although it was true that I could walk to the forest, I had to take a break once we were there before I could move again, and if I wasn’t careful, I’d be bedridden the next day. I really hated how weak my body was.

After reaching the forest and catching my breath, I started picking up firewood. I was just looking around and picking up whatever looked good, but Tuuli used a billhook-esque blade to chop sticks off a tree.

“You’re amazing, Tuuli.” I was once again reminded of Tuuli’s dexterity. “I need to start at the bottom and do what I can for now, I guess.” It didn’t take long for me to run out of breath picking up branches. I sat on a rock to rest and took out my knife to get right to work on a mokkan.

“Ngh, I didn’t expect it to be so heavy.” I sighed with the dully gleaming knife in hand. It wasn’t as if I had never used a blade in my life. I used kitchen knives and box cutters all the time in Japan. But I didn’t have any experience carving wood.

At some point in elementary school, a lesson involved me using a small knife to manually sharpen a pencil. It was only now that I felt sincere, painful regret over how I had barely participated, thinking that in the age of pencil sharpeners I didn’t need to waste my time learning to sharpen them myself.

...I mean, I can barely even hold the knife right, much less carve mokkan with it! No way could I use the knife well when I was too incompetent to even

sharpen a pencil. Would it even be possible for me to make mokkan?

To experiment, I tried carving off a little bit off the thinnest branch I had collected. It was a struggle with my tiny weak hands, but I managed to get some of the outer layer off, which revealed its insides. *Oh... This is kinda hard, but I think I can do it!* I could practice my knife skills while making mokkan. Two birds with one stone. I excitedly took the branch and carved it flat with the knife. There were plenty of thin branches about as long as this one. If I just carved them all flat and tied them together with string, I would have some fine mokkan. It might even be usable in place of a memo pad.

...Yellow River Culture and my ancestors, you have my sincere thanks for this splendid wisdom. I love you all. Father, Mother, thank you for this wonderful knife. I can make mokkan thanks to it.

Since this just involved picking up branches and carving them, there was much less work involved than the clay-digging for tablets and the fiber fiddling with faux-papyrus. *This... This is good.*

I carved down the wood in my hands bit by bit, making it as flat as possible for the purpose of writing. It would have been nice to be strong enough to slice it in half in one go, but there was no use wishing for something I didn't have. I just had to take my time and put in the work to make as many mokkan as I wanted. It was hard enough for me to cut branches that I would only be able to write a single line of text on each mokkan, which meant I would want a lot of them.

"Myne, is that what you're making to replace the clay tablets?" asked Lutz as he peered over my shoulder, seemingly finished gathering his firewood. His unexpected question threw me off.

"...Wha? How'd you know these were replacements for the clay tablets?"

"Cause Myne, you look like you're having tons of fun."

"Wha? Fun?"

"You look like you're about to rub your cheeks on that wood. I remember you looking at clay tablets the same way."

Wait... What? I was carving wood all by myself while looking one step away from rubbing my cheeks against it? Wouldn't that mean it looked like I was in

love...? Bwuuuh! Subconscious stuff is the worse! I'm so embarrassed! While I panicked on the inside, overwhelmed by embarrassment, Lutz took a hard look at the mokkan I was making.

"So, what're you making?"

"...I'm making (mokkan)."

"Mo-what? Is that somethin' else you can write on?"

"Uh huh. So I want a lot of them. It's too hard for me to make big ones on my own." I readied my knife again and began carving the branches. Lutz sat next to me and grabbed a somewhat thick branch.

"I'll help. If you wanna thank me, could you let me meet that Otto guy you talked about before?"

"Why?"

"I wanted to hear about traveling merchants, so..." said Lutz in a quiet voice, as if worried about people around us hearing. He had acted like that before, when he told me that his dream was to leave the city as a traveling merchant or a bard so that he could explore the world. I could guess, then, that traveling merchants and bards were frowned upon in this world. Weird. But regardless of what I thought, the best thing for Lutz would be for him to meet Otto and hear what he had to say.



“He seems like a busy person, but I’ll try. Sorry if he turns me down.”

“Hey, that’s all I can ask for.” Lutz let out a sigh of relief, as if a heavy burden had been lifted off his shoulders. I could tell that he had never been able to talk to anyone about this before now.

The two of us steadily kept carving, without talking too much. Lutz unsurprisingly had a billhook-esque knife just like Tuuli which allowed him to make several large mokkan out of the thick branch. I used my knife to smooth their surfaces further. I now had wooden boards to use as mokkan, but both of their sides were pure white.

...I wonder if they’ll let me borrow ink from the gate? Ink was generally used with paper, so it wasn’t sold in stores for commoners either. And speaking of which, both ink and parchment were stored securely together. It could be that ink was just as expensive as paper.

Well, I’ll try and see if I can negotiate with Otto to be paid in ink from now on instead of slate pens. I can mention Lutz’s request while I’m at it.

I Want Ink

There was nobody to watch over me when Tuuli went to work, so I went to the gate to study. I was having lots of fun now that I was learning words more relevant to my life.

There were three new apprentices this season, all whom had been baptized along with Tuuli. Otto was pretty busy since he had to go back to square one with them, teaching the letters and numbers themselves. Especially since he had to finish up his normal work after teaching them.

While practicing words and doing calculations, I kept an eye out for a good opportunity to talk. Once Otto found a good place to stop in his paperwork and started putting up his ink, I struck.

“Mr. Otto, do you mind if I ask a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“How do you become a traveling merchant?”

“Wha?! Myne, do you want to become a traveling merchant?! Wha?! Hold on! Did I inspire you by accident? The captain’s gonna kill me!” yelled Otto, leaning forward across the desk with his eyes opened wide. He was so surprised even I kinda panicked a little.

I hurriedly waved my hands and corrected him. “Not me, my friend.”

“Oh, whew. Tell them they should give it up.”

“I knew it.”

Otto’s reply confirmed to me that people did not approve of becoming a traveling merchant.

“What do you mean, you knew it?” Otto narrowed his eyes.

I replied, thinking about how best to explain my perspective. “Ummm, my friend is also really quiet and stealthy whenever talking about this, so I figured he expected people to shoot him down if he mentioned it.”

“Yeah, his parents would get super pissed.”

“Plus, traveling merchants live on the road, right? They have to travel the world while thinking about what to buy and sell when and where. Normal parents couldn’t give their kids the tools and experience you would need to survive that lifestyle, not to mention them not having any important connections with merchants, so an average kid wanting to become one would probably have a really hard time...”

I could understand why children of commoners stuck in one city would find themselves attracted to the idea of a nomad lifestyle. But the lifestyle is so different that their own life experience wouldn’t prove very useful, which would make the work harder than they might think. It’d be day after day of doing what you thought was right and being punished for it without understanding why. You might think it best to do nothing at one point, but then you might get punished for doing nothing.

There was no manual for the unspoken rules one picked up through their daily life. I knew very well how large the walls of common sense could be given my experience of being suddenly transported to another world where I didn’t know right from wrong. But I couldn’t just lock myself up inside my room without books, so I was forced to go outside, where I was probably doing a lot of really weird, noticeably wrong things. I knew that.

“If you’ve figured that much out yourself, why don’t you take care of this?”

“Mmm, I think he’ll listen to you more than me, since I live in the same city as him. Plus, I heard this from Dad, but don’t you have connections to the Merchant’s Guild? Becoming a traveling merchant might be out of the question, but maybe he could become an apprentice merchant and leave the city to buy goods elsewhere.” His family probably wouldn’t protest as much if he was leaving the city as part of his stable job, rather than him leaving on a directionless adventure into the unknown.

“I see your point. Judging from your tone, I’m guessing you like this boy, Myne?” Otto grinned, amused at the prospect of having sniffed out some romance, but I just shrugged.

“It’s not that I like him, it’s just that he helps me out a lot. Nothing good will

come from letting favors pile up."

"A boy who helps you a lot, huh? Must be that gold-haired kid, I guess." Dad was paying Lutz to keep track of my walking pace and report back to him when we passed through the gate, so Otto had probably seen him before.

"That's right. But you're so busy training new recruits, Mr. Otto, that I guess you might be too busy..."

"I've more spare time this season than any other, so sure, no problem. How about we meet up on my next day off?"

"Thank you, Mr. Otto!" But if this season was the least busy for him despite all the work he had, I could only imagine how busy he was when I helped him with the budget reports and whatnot. I didn't really want to think about it, considering how I was now his assistant.

"Ah! Right, there's something else I wanted to ask. Would you be okay with sharing some ink with me?"

"You mean this stuff?" Otto, with furrowed brows, tapped the top of the shut ink jar. I nodded hard, seeing the ink swash behind the clear glass.

"Could you pay me in ink from now on, not slate pens?"

"Three years of working for free. No getting paid up front." His reply was so brisk I just blinked it surprise, not understanding what he had said. I briefly hoped I had just misheard him, but Otto began counting on his fingers with a serious look in his eyes.

"Your pay will go up if you become an official apprentice, but at the rate you're helping me now, it'll take about three years to afford a jar of ink, even including the bonus pay for budget season."

"Three years?! Ink's expensive!"

Otto, seeing my surprise, gave a wry grin. "Looks like I need to start teaching you the words we use in budgets. Think about it. Ink's only used for paperwork involving nobles, right? It's way too expensive for kids to play around with."

In short, ink was simply out of my reach. *Okay. I get it.*

Although I had finally finished the mokkan, I could only weep in despair, as I had nothing to write on them with. “Ngggh! The second I solve my paper problem, I realize I have an ink problem! What’s with this!”

Naturally, there were no ball point pens, mechanical pencils, or even ink sold anywhere near me. I could use a pointed stick to write with if I just had ink, but that ink was too expensive for me to buy. I roughly knew the market value of a slate pencil, but since I didn’t know how much the bonus pay for budget season was, I couldn’t calculate how much ink was worth.

...How much money would working for three years straight even be? With buying, finding, asking, stealing, and making being my methods of obtaining ink, I could only consider making as a legitimate possibility. *Nothing good would come from me trying to steal ink from the work room...*

It seemed that I would have to start from scratch making both books and ink. But how do you make ink, anyway? I knew about mixing pigment with drying oil, but where could I find pigment and drying oil in this world?

“Am I going to have to catch a (squid) or an (octopus)? Where’s the (ocean)?!” I let out a yell with a half-finished mokkan in hand, causing Lutz to jerk in surprise and spin around.

“What’s with that?!”

“Lutz, what do you think this place’s ink is made from?! How can I make some myself?!” Naturally, I knew that it wouldn’t be realistic to try and capture a squid or octopus. But I had no idea what around me could be used to make ink.

“Y’know, what even is ink?”

“Mmm, a black liquid that you use to write letters on stuff, and...” It was hard to explain ink to someone who wasn’t used to seeing it. I just said what came to mind, and eventually Lutz replied while rubbing his chin.

“Black stuff? If you just wanna get stuff dirty like that, why not use soot or ashes or something?”

“That’s a great idea! Let’s try it!” Burnt firewood left behind plenty of soot and ashes, so I could get what I needed at home. We would even be burning wood today. There was no doubt I could get my hands on ashes immediately.

Upon getting home, I immediately asked Mom for permission.

“Mom, can I use these ashes?”

“No, dear. We use ashes to make soap, melt snow, dye things, and so on. They’re very useful, and we can even earn money selling them to farmers. Don’t take any without permission.”

Speaking of which, I did remember helping my parents spread ash. I had just thrown it everywhere like a granny feeding birds. Who knew that was actually intended to help the snow melt. *That’s news to me.*

...Mmmm, we used a lot of it when making soap, too, so ashes really are valuable. It seemed unlikely I would receive permission to use ashes when they could sell the leftovers, but there was one option still left open to me.

“Well, Mom. What about the soot?” I listed my secondary choice, and after furrowing her brows for a second, Mom smiled for some reason and said okay.

“I don’t know what you intend to use it for, but consider all the soot yours. This means you’ll clean the hearth for me, right? And just saying, you’ll get more if you clean the chimney too.”

“Bwuh?! Aww... Okay. I guess that makes sense...” Pushed on by my smiling mom, I ended up cleaning the hearth and chimney. This hadn’t been my intention, but I had to do what I had to do. I took some cleaning tools in hand and pumped myself up to clean some soot... when suddenly my mom stopped me in a panic.

“Hold it, Myne! Are you planning to clean in those clothes?!”

“...Wha? Should I not?” My clothes were already filthy and in tatters, so I didn’t see the problem with cleaning in them. Mom grabbed her sewing box and a basket of rags while I watched on with confusion.

“Wait one moment, I’ll be done in no time.” Mom sewed some rags together and made me a new outfit, looking pleased when she finished. I changed into it, putting my hair up in an adult fashion to minimize contact between it and the dirty rags, though I wore another rag on my head as a bandanna. *Wooow. This would suck really bad if I weren’t fooling myself into thinking I’m cosplaying Cinderella.*

First, I scraped out soot from the hearth. I then stuck my head inside of it and scraped off the soot stuck to the sides. It was perhaps the first time the tiny size of my body had been useful.

Unable to resist my mother's smile, I cleaned the chimney while I was at it and got soot from it as well. Black stuff fell out in clumps as I cleaned, steadily giving me more of the soot I wanted.

It honestly got kind of fun once I started, but that led to too much excitement. I got a fever and collapsed.

I had worked so hard that I ended up filthy and unconscious, but I had somehow gotten the soot I needed. And now I was healthy again. I just had to somehow turn the soot into something I could write with.

"Myne, what are you gonna do with this stuff?"

"Mix it with water, I guess?"

The first thought that came to mind was dissolving the soot in water. I got the feeling that would make something like ink. Somehow. I put some river water in a wooden bowl and used a stick to mix it with soot. The soot just floated in the water without dissolving.

"Maybe that's enough?"

"Try writing something with it."

I took a stick with a shaved-down tip and stuck it into the water, then tried writing the number "1" on the mokkan. But most of the soot just stuck to the stick instead of the mokkan, and the resulting number was too blurry to read.

"Nooope. This one's a bust."

"What'll you try next?"

"Mmm, ink making is built around the idea of mixing stuff with oil, but..."

I couldn't ask Mom for oil here. The reason being, our household was always short on oil since we used it for eating and for making my simple all-in-one

shampoo. On top of that, we used animal oil for candles and soap, so it would be a hard battle to get any of that. They would probably shoot me down as easily as Mom shot me down over the ashes.

“Needing oil’s rough. I’m guessing they don’t give you any?”

“Nope, none. I wish there was something...” I searched my memories for a hint and plenty of writing utensils used in Japan came to mind. “Mmm, I think the (paint) in (Japanese art) used (glue), but that’s out of the question for me, since fire’s too dangerous. It really sucks being so small and weak.” Getting glue might be more feasible in the future, but not now. That was unfortunate, because I would have been able to make something like paint with natural materials. I had no choice but to wait for my own growth.

“Helloooo, Myne, you alive in there? Come back to me.” I could see Lutz waving his hands in front of my eyes, but I was too busy thinking to stop.

“Mmmm, I guess it doesn’t have to be a liquid. (Crayons), (chalk), (pencils)... oh, that’s it! Clay! I’ll mix it with clay!”

“Wha?”

“I feel like (pencil lead) was made from mixing (graphite) with clay. Wait, or maybe that was for (conté sticks)? Well, whatever. I’m using soot instead of (graphite), but it just might work!” I could mix clay and soot, squish it all into thin cylinders, then dry them. Once they hardened, I might have some solid writing utensils. “Lutz, this is where you dug out the clay for the tablets, right?”

“Yeah, but you may as well just use the leftovers from back then. They should be around that rock over there.”

Lutz was right, there was a small mountain of clay over there. I took some of it and mixed in the soot. I was imagining a colored pencil where the whole thing was color, or a pencil made entirely of lead. It wouldn’t turn into a usable color if I didn’t knead it myself, so both the rock I was using as a base and my two hands turned pitch black as I molded the stuff into the shape of a soot pencil. I then split it into chunks about as long as a pencil each. *If these dry and harden, it’ll be my win.*

I washed my hands and feet in the river, but they didn’t get much cleaner. But

filth this persistent would definitely be good for writing. Definitely.

“How long do you think I should dry them?”

“Meh?”

“Maybe I should try cooking them.”

“Don’t bother. They’ll explode again.”

“Awww...”

I followed Lutz’s advice and quietly let the soot pencils dry on their own.

Intense Battle with Food

Due to Tuuli having started working, it became my job to prepare meals. But it was impossible for me to make a meal entirely by myself, considering that I couldn't properly hold a knife nor make fires. In the end, I just made the food with Mom, helping where I could.

I wanted to take this opportunity and use it to prepare the food in a Japanese style. Unfortunately, despite getting pumped up to use my Urano-era knowledge, nothing came from it. Because I mean, the game was rigged from the start. There was no rice here. No miso. No soy sauce. Naturally, no store sold mirin or sake. There was nothing I could do without ingredients. What could I make out of nothing?

...And hey, I do know how to make miso and soy sauce, okay? I know what they're made of and all that. Soybeans, koji, and salt. I even learned how to put them together. Back in elementary school I went on a field trip to a miso factory, and the demonstrations they held were so interesting I ended up researching more on my own in the library.

I thought back to that field trip. After doing my absolute best to organize the recipes for miso and soy sauce, I wrote a report with my supplementary research included. My teacher was so proud she put it up on display in the classroom.

...But where are soybeans and malt in this world? Even if it were possible to replace soybeans with another kind of common bean in this world, where could I buy koji? Naturally, I was too afraid to make koji through natural means. After all, koji is mold. One simple mistake and my whole family would have food poisoning. And even if I found some existing koji, I wouldn't want to ferment it in this bacteria-filled house, not to mention that it would stink so bad my parents would throw it away before it's done.

I gave up on making my own seasoning and tried hard to think of Japanese food that didn't need seasoning. *Mmm... What about sashimi? Maybe it'd taste*

good dipped in salt and fruit juice? But I think this city is really far from the ocean. There are no fresh fish in the market. They don't even sell wakame or any other kind of seaweed. Forget sashimi, I can't even make a seaweed salad.

No ocean meant no kelp, naturally. No dried shrimp, no fish flakes. Without those ingredients, I had no way of making the dashi soup stock that Japanese food needed. That was just a critical problem with no solution. I knew things were different here; I wouldn't ask for powdered soup stock or anything like that. But at least give me kelp or fish flakes.

I did try making something similar to pickles with faux-cucumbers and wine, but without soy sauce or sugar, it just didn't taste right. It ended up painfully sour and unlike any pickled food I knew. Being incapable of making anything was naturally getting frustrating, so I pieced together the most simple recipe for a child like me to make and tried eating the faux-cucumbers with salt rubbed in. The salt drew out some of the water from the faux-cucumber and gave it a nice salty flavor, resulting in something similar to Japanese pickles. I had thought that eating anything similar to Japanese food would satisfy me, but in reality, it just made me yearn for white rice even more. Incidentally, eating the salted faux-cucumbers with multigrain bread felt so wrong that I couldn't handle it.

Rice, rice, Japanese food! Someone! Bless me with Japanese food, please! The faux-cucumbers made me want to eat proper Japanese food so much that I got it in my head to fish at the river and do what I could there. Since I couldn't use fire, my only choice would be to dry the fish beneath the sun. Dried fish might work. Maybe it would work out if I salted the fish before drying them. I really hoped it would work out.

"Hey, Lutz. I want to try fishing. Are there fish in this river?" I asked Lutz by the river the next day we went to the forest.

"I think that'll be too hard for you."

Lutz's prediction came true when my attempt at fishing failed spectacularly. Fishing itself was just really hard. I slumped over, depressed, and Lutz brought me a fish.

"Here, I caught one. Whaddya wanna do with it?"

“You don’t mind if I have it?”

“Nah. I don’t need a fish.”

“Can you start a fire? I want to cook this with salt.”

Unable to wait for the sun, I took the fish Lutz caught for me and cooked it over a fire with salt, like one would cook a trout.

...Ugh, it stinks! It tastes so bad! One bite later and I was scrunching my face up. Weird. It tasted and smelled like stinky mud, unlike any fish I had eaten before. Why did this fish smell so bad? I tilted my head, searching through my memories to see if I had cooked it wrong as Lutz furrowed his brows.

“Won’t it stink if you cook it wrong like that?”

“...It does stink.” The fish just smelled bad. I wish he had told me that earlier.

I got another fish from him and this time I prepared it with my knife. It didn’t work exactly like a Japanese kitchen knife, so the fish got kind of messed up, but that shouldn’t impact the flavor. I took a carved stick and stabbed the fish with it, then tried drying it. Maybe dried fish would taste better.

I went to gather firewood while the fish dried, and before I knew it the fish had gotten so hard it was inedible. Too much of its water had evaporated.

“Myne, the heck is this?”

“...Dried food that got too dry. I don’t think we can eat it anymore.”

“Yeah, doesn’t look edible to me.”

“But I might be able to get some soup stock out of it. I’ll try taking it home with me.” Even if I couldn’t eat the fish itself, it could potentially serve as a good ingredient for soup stock. I took the hard fish home with me and tried putting it in water.

“Myne, what is that?! Disgusting! Please don’t put things like that in our pots!”

“Um, Mom. I want to make soup out of it.”

“No! The only thing you can put in our pots is food.”

But this is food, technically.

The dried fish looked so gross that Mom gave it a hard no, rejecting my idea to make soup from it. Maybe it looked so gross to her because she didn't normally eat fish, and a dissected dried one just looked terrible. *Kind of hypocritical, since she can look at a split-open pig's head and think it looks delicious.*

...I'm sorry, Mr. Fish. I couldn't make Japanese food in the end. For now, I'll just try and think of how I can use our existing ingredients to make something closer to Japanese food in appearance and taste. That seems like it'll be more fruitful than this. Uh huh.

In a stroke of luck, we were given a bird to eat today. One of our neighbors had bagged five birds in the forest, apparently. And since it'd be hard for his family to eat all of them before they went bad, he split them with us, partially as thanks for us splitting some meat with them when Dad similarly hunted too much in the past.

Mom was cutting up the bird. I didn't know what species it was. The knife she used for cutting meat was so heavy that neither I nor Tuuli could use it yet.

"Myne. Come now, pick the feathers."

"R-Right..." I grabbed the feathers of the bird and pulled. The sensation of the feathers popping out gave me goosebumps. I kept pulling the feathers while weepily reminding myself that it was necessary if we wanted to eat. It would be a long time before dealing with dead animals didn't bother me. *But if I do say so myself, I think I've grown a lot, considering that I didn't scream or pass out at the sight of Mom gutting the bird.*

"Now, Myne. It's time to cook."

"Okay." While we were at it, I thought about making broth from the bird's bones. Bird bone broth would definitely alter the range of the food's flavors. It would be no replacement for kelp or fish flakes, but it could go well with dried mushrooms.

However, it was a real struggle to get that bird bone broth. Mom didn't understand what I was trying to do and thus wouldn't help me at first. In these parts it was normal to just cook the meat and eat it plain off the bone. I

managed to convince her to at least chop the bones, though, by reminding her that today was my turn to cook. Everything else was up to me.

I threw bird bones, tenderloin, and herbs into our biggest pot. I chose herbs which smelled and tasted similar to what I was used to despite looking different. The ones I used smelled or tasted of onion, ginger, garlic, and bay leaf. Really, I put in anything that seemed like it would help cover the smell of the meat.

“Myne! Wait! That one's too much for you. It's dangerous!” Mom stopped me before I could cut the leaves off a white radish-looking thing. She took the knife and, as if to stop it from running away, grabbed onto its leaves and held it against the cutting board. The moment she glared at the white radish and sharply and cut in half, I heard a loud scream. From the radish.

“Bwuh? What?” I blinked in surprise, wondering if I were just imagining things, when Mom let go of the leaves and slammed the flat part of the knife against it. She had crushed it just like you would crush garlic. Mom was faster at chopping up vegetables than me, so I was thankful for her help, but I noticed that the white radish was turning red beneath her knife for some reason. It looked scary, like blood pooling out.

“That should be enough. Be sure to wash it before you use it.”

Is it just me, or does Mom look a lot more dangerous than the radish? It’s probably just me. Let’s leave it at that. In this world, a lot of vegetables that looked familiar to me were actually bizarre and incomprehensible. Each time I encountered one of these weird vegetables I was reminded that I really was in a world different from my own.

A lot had happened, but once the seasoning herbs were inside the pot, all I had to worry about was getting out the scum that would build up. I had heard it was best to just dump all the water once you got it boiling, then refill it with water, but the scum didn’t actually impact the soup’s flavor and doing all that would be tedious, so I didn’t bother. Once it was boiling, I kept an eye on just the tenderloin and took it out once it was ready. I dipped it into water, shredded it, and that was that. It was ready to be put on the side of some salad.

I prepared the other parts of the meat while the soup was cooking. I chopped

the heart, gizzard, and other easily spoiled parts into small chunks and sprinkled them with salt and alcohol. These parts were fine to just cook with salt before eating. That was, as expected, the method of preparation my family was fastest to accept. The word “char-grilling” ran through my head briefly, but I had other work to do, so I forgot about it.

Today we were eating the organs and thigh meat. Mom would be putting her all into making something like roast chicken with the thigh meat, so I was forbidden from interfering. I salted and rubbed alcohol into the breast meat, then put it in the winter storage room. We would be using that for tomorrow’s meal. If we had an airtight bag and a fridge, I would have made bird ham, but oh well. Life is full of regrets.

“...That certainly smells good.”

“It’s not ready yet.”

Once the smell of the soup started drifting through the air, Mom, who had been keeping her distance, started inching her way to the pot. You had to cook bird bone broth for a decently long time, so I started chopping vegetables bit by bit while keeping an eye on the scum. Doing anything took a long time in this body, so I wanted to save time anywhere I could.

The first step of my plan for making Japanese-like food revolved around the concept of a hot pot, where I would cook all the ingredients in a single pot. I had figured that once I had good broth, I would be able to make a decent hot pot. I wouldn’t be able to make the kind I was used to, but now I had bird bone broth. Since I lacked any ponzu sauce, I was taking pomes — the yellow paprika-esque fruits that tasted like tomatoes — and boiling them with herbs for flavor in the hot pot. In this pome soup I would be using the tips of the bird wings, which were too bony for regular eating, and some seasonal vegetable that I didn’t know the name of. The fact that most anything tastes good when boiled together is why I respect hot pots so much.

“Oh, I think it’s about ready. Mom, could you help me?” I put a strainer on top of the second-biggest pot and called for Mom.

“What do you need me to do?”

“I want you to pour the soup out of this pot. It’ll get rid of the stuff inside of it

that we don’t want.”

“...So we won’t be eating all that, then,” said Mom, sounding relieved for some reason as she strained the chicken bone soup.

I cleaned the biggest pot and had her put the strained soup into it. We used the second biggest pot the most, so it would be a pain to put the soup stock into it. My plan was to use the second biggest pot for the pome soup, after all.

I put dried mushrooms into the prepared soup and got to work starting the pome soup. As the wing tips boiled, I loosened the edible meat from the bones and added it all to the pot. The bones were sharp, so I had to grab the meat bit by bit, making sure not to leave any within. Mom’s roast chicken was starting to smell nice, so considering time constraints, I started putting vegetables into my pot too.

“Myne! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“...Putting in vegetables?”

“Don’t you know you have to parboil them first?!”

...That seemed to be normal here, but if you boil vegetables in another pot and drain the water before using the vegetables, they’ll taste half as good. A lot of the nutrients will melt away, too. I had no complaints with my Mom’s cooking, but I didn’t want her to restrain my own cooking with her rules.

“This is fine for what I’m making.”

“But you’re just going to ruin your nice meal.”

“It’ll be okay.”

The pome soup was done once I took the scum out. A quick taste test confirmed that it tasted pretty good. You didn’t have to parboil vegetables before using them.

“I’m home. Aaah, I guess it was our place, huh?”

“Hi, Tuuli. What do you mean?”

“I smelled something nice on the road and got hungry while walking.

Everyone started looking for where the smell was coming from. I didn't think it'd be coming from my place." It was like getting hungry for noodles after walking by a ramen stand. Bird bone broth had a pretty strong smell, after all.

"I'm home. Oh, huh, now I know where that smell was coming from." Dad, who had a morning shift, came home at about the same time. The bird bone broth smell had apparently traveled pretty far. Dad sat at the table with excitement on his face; our family had gathered just in time for dinner.

"Al gave us a bird for today. He said it was thanks for the meat you gave him earlier, Gunther. I made it with Myne."

"You're saying Myne made this stuff I don't recognize?"

"That's right."

Mom's roast was placed in the center of the table, and beside it was salad with tenderloin placed on top. The salted organs were placed next to Dad as finger food, and pome hot pot was in everyone's bowls. The hot pot soup now looked like regular soup.

"What's this? It smells really nice. Can I eat some?"

"It's pome soup. I worked hard to get broth from the bird bone soup stock, so it should be really good. Try some."

Tuuli, her face up close to the pome soup, gave a sparkling smile and grabbed her spoon. "Wooow, it's so good! How? This is amazing."

"Goodness, it is. I was surprised to see her boiling bird bones and putting in vegetables after just washing them, but this really does taste delicious," said Mom earnestly after taking a bite herself. Given how experienced she was with this world's cooking, she must have been worried despite the good smell.

"Incredible, Myne. You've got a talent for cooking." Dad, overjoyed, shoved the food into his face at an immense speed.

I tried eating some of the pome soup myself. The bird bone broth had a really nice flavor and the vegetables added a lot. It tasted good, it really did. But. It wasn't Japanese food.

The next day, I finished gathering firewood in the forest and went home as soon as possible. Small kids had to stick together in a tight group at all times, but kids like Tuuli who had finished their baptism could leave the group and do whatever they wanted, with some prior notice. Thus, I went home early with Tuuli.

I wanted to use the rest of the bird meat today, so Tuuli and I were sharing cooking duties. The second step of my plan to make Japanese-type food was to try and sake-steam the meat. I figured that any alcohol would work, not just Japanese sake.

“So I’m guessing you already know what you want to make, Myne?”

“I’m planning on (sake-steaming) the meat and making (gnocchi) with a salad. What do you think?”

“Mmm, I don’t really know what you’re talking about, but okay. I’ll leave it you.”

First came the gnocchi. I boiled potatoes, crushed them, and mixed in a bit of salt and multigrain flour. Commoners couldn’t afford to just casually use wheat flour, so we were left with multigrain flour. It was mostly made from rye, barley, and oats. Once the dough was about the consistency of an earlobe, I stretched it into round sticks and chopped them into centimeter-long chunks.

“Could you stretch out the chunks I cut so they look like this?”

“Uh huh.” Tuuli nodded enthusiastically after seeing me somewhat struggle to stretch out the dough while rubbing ridges in with the back of a fork and my thumb. The ridges would allow sauce to catch and stay on top of the gnocchi more easily.

Tuuli stretched out the chunks of dough I cut one by one. She was stronger than me, so she prepared them faster and more neatly than I could have.

“You’re better than me at this, Tuuli.”

“You think so...? Myne, don’t watch me, keep cutting. I’ll run out.”

I had Tuuli boil some water and begin cooking the gnocchi. Once it started really bubbling and the gnocchi floated to the top, they were ready. I added

more pomes to yesterday's leftover soup and boiled it down into pome sauce. I would be mixing the gnocchi in before we ate, so that was all I could do right now.

“I think that’s enough for now. We can finish the salads really fast, so...”

“Mom’s coming home soon, so I think making the salad now would be smart.”

Tuuli got to work making the salad and Mom came home before long. Once I saw her, I asked her to get the breast meat I prepared yesterday so I could start the sake-steaming. Despite having been stored within a cold room on cold stone, it wasn’t winter anymore and I felt compelled to sniff test the meat. *Nmm... Okay, it’s not rotting. All good.*

“Myne, is this the skillet you want?”

“Uh huh. Thanks, Tuuli. I salted and rubbed alcohol into it yesterday, so it should be ready soon.” Not having any pepper hurt, but there was nothing I could do about that.

Sake-steaming the meat would be simple. I browned the skin side of the seasoned breast meat before flipping it, adding more alcohol, and covering the skillet. Since I had the opportunity, I wanted to add in the mushrooms I had gathered in the forest. I cleaned the mushrooms and got ready to cut them, when all of a sudden Tuuli shouted with her eyes open wide.

“Don’t, Myne! Those mushrooms will dance if you don’t burn them first!” Tuuli immediately skewered the mushrooms with a stone stick and, after salting them, heated them on the hearth’s fire.

Um... Mushrooms? Dance? Does she mean like how seaweed can wiggle around from the heat? I really don’t get it. I tilted my head, confused, and Tuuli offered me the now slightly burnt mushrooms.

“Now they’re okay.”

“Th-Thanks...” I was really thrown off, but if that’s all it took to make them edible, okay. The mushrooms were probably just another member of the bizarre food group. I needed to be careful before judging things by their appearance.

Taking care not to get burned by the heated up mushrooms, I got to cutting. “Mom, which alcohol would be best for cooking? Just a little won’t make it taste that much better, so I want about half a cup.”

“Good question... This is what you want.” Mom filled about half a cup with alcohol, which I took and poured into the pot by standing on something and stretching as much as I could. I put the cover back on the pot, and once the sizzling got loud enough, I took it off the fire and let it sit. Now we just had to wait for the lingering heat to do its work.

“You’re already taking the pot off?”

“It’s already hot enough to cook properly on its own. If you cook breast meat too much, it’ll get dry and hard to eat.”

I warmed up the gnocchi and pome sauce made from the leftover soup, mixing them together as I did so, while Tuuli finished making the salad. Just like last time, the salad was topped with tenderloin. It seemed that everyone really loved it yesterday.

“Today’s dinner is looking really fancy again, huh? Two days in a row!”

“We really gotta thank Mr. Al.”

Considering our financial situation, it was fairly rare for us to have this much food on the table. That bird really helped out.

“I’m home. Things’re smelling good again.” Dad came home with a broad smile. He had been looking forward to today’s dinner ever since yesterday. He puffed out his chest and told us about how he’d bragged about our cooking at work. I got the feeling that in reality, he had annoyed everyone by being extremely proud and not shutting up about it. If that were the case, I’d feel kinda awkward going to the gate.

“Time to eat.”

“Wow, amazing! This tastes so good, Myne!” Tuuli’s eyes shot open with joy after she bit into the sliced, sake-steamed bird meat.

Mom also smiled after taking a bite. “It’s a simple meal, but the breast meat is soft and nice. The mushrooms add a lot too; this truly does taste delicious. Was

it because of the nice alcohol, I wonder?”

“Maybe. The sweetness of the honeyed alcohol is really seeping into the meat.” The moment I said that, Dad paled, shot up out of his chair, and ran to the shelf with his liquor bottle. He hung his head looking close to tears upon seeing that the already small jar was now half-empty.

“...M-My secret stash...”

Sorry, sorry. But Dad, when I asked for some, Mom gave me a meaningful smile and told me that you had stealthily bought that without telling her, and that it’d be a waste if everyone didn’t get to enjoy it. For once, I actually managed to read between the lines.

The honeyed alcohol made the food taste great, but it was sweet in a way that Japanese sake wasn’t, so the meal didn’t really taste like Japanese food. It was something entirely different. *Aaah, I miss Japanese food.*

Being told all about the food here that supposedly “danced” and was “dangerous” surprised me a lot, but in the end, I could cook with similar recipes as I did back in Japan. On future days, I made potato gratin, quiche out of hardened multigrain bread dough, and so on. My family loved it all, but I personally wasn’t satisfied with any of it. I lacked the seasoning and spices to even make proper western food, so everything ended up tasting more or less the same.

...At least give me pepper! And I’d be extra happy if you gave me some curry powder! My struggle to improve my diet was far from over.

Mokkan and A Mysterious Fever

The soot pencil I worked so hard to make dried and hardened after I left it to dry for a while. I wrapped it in a cloth to make a handle that I could hold without getting dirty. Once that was done, I sharpened its tip with a knife and tried writing.

...It worked! The pencil crumbled easily, but it did write. I had invented a form of recording information even more ancient than books themselves, but still. Success was success.

“Yay! It can write, Lutz!”

“Oh nice, congrats.”

Excited to have finally created a writing tool, I began to excitedly make more mokkan. I could make mokkan while picking up the firewood our family needed anyway, so it wasn’t too hard to make more of them. The best part was that I could do all of it by myself without relying on anyone else. I would run out of space eventually if I kept making them, but the same would have happened with clay tablets. I just had to endure until I grew up and could live on my own.

Basically, I was pretty satisfied with my mokkan. But one day, I came home from the forest to find them all gone. They weren’t where I left them.

“What?! Where are they?! Huh?!”

“What’s wrong, Myne?” Mom poked her head into the storage room while I searched for the mokkan.

I asked her where they were, thinking maybe she had moved them. “Mom, do you know where the (mokkan) are?”

“Mo... what? Mmm? What are they?” Mom tilted her head in confusion, so I explained what mokkan were as simply as I could.

“Umm, some are thin and some are thick, but they’re all pieces of flat wood with words written on them.”

“Oh, the pieces of firewood you gathered? I used them.”

“Wha? Huh? You used them?” My head went blank.

“You worked so hard to reach the forest and gather firewood for us, Myne. I wouldn’t want to disappoint you and not use any of it.”

“But the firewood is stacked over there. Why would you go out of your way to use the firewood I separated from the rest? They were a collection of the stories you’ve told me before bed!”

“Oh, if you wanted me to tell you more stories, you could have just asked.” Mom patted my head happily, smiling to herself.

“That’s not what I meant...”

...They were all gone. I felt the life drain out of me as I looked at the empty space where mokkan used to be. It didn’t matter how hard I worked to make mokkan. They would just end up burned. Why even bother, then?

The moment I gave up, drained, the heat I had been squashing down inside of me began to go wild as if growing in size rapidly. It felt as if the fevers I got when excited or tired were all forming together to make a super fever that numbed my limbs and left me immobile.

“What’s going on...?” Without even understanding what was going on within my own body, I suddenly collapsed, stricken by an extremely intense fever. My consciousness fluttered. It felt like the heat stirring inside was slowly swallowing up my soul, eating me away bit by bit. It was only then that I realized the original Myne had probably been eaten away by this fever.

It was burning hot and it hurt more than anything. Lacking the strength of heart to resist, I felt myself getting eaten away as my worried family flitted in and out of sight. In the midst of all that, I saw Lutz’s face drift through my mind for some reason. Why Lutz? I tried to make eye contact with him, and in my efforts, I pushed my consciousness out of the heat swallowing it up. I tensed around my temple and tried to look at him as hard as I could, which finally resulted in me seeing Lutz properly, rather than just as a vague vision.

“Myne?”

“...Lutz?”

“Mrs. Effa! Myne’s woken up!” yelled Lutz.

Mom immediately burst into the bedroom. “Myne! You collapsed in the storeroom and just wouldn’t wake up. I was worried about you.”

“I know. I saw your face sometimes. Sorry for worrying you. And... Mom. My throat’s dry. Also, I’m super sweaty. I want to wipe myself off. Can you bring me some water?”

“Certainly. I’ll be right back.” After seeing Mom turn around and leave the room, I squeezed Lutz's hand while lying in bed, too weak to even lift my head.

“...Lutz, it didn’t work again. Mom burned my mokkan.”

“Aaah... Well, they probably just looked like pieces of wood with weird markings on them.”

“But I worked so hard to make them, and separate them from the rest of the wood... I’m done. Finished. My dreams will never come true. I’ll never make a book.” I let out a sigh and felt the heat within my body intensify. I had to shake my head to stop my consciousness from fading away.

“Cheer up. You just have to make’m out of something they can’t burn.”

Wood’s no good. So I just make it out of something else. Something they can’t burn. Lutz’s advice gave me a flash of inspiration. *...Now’s not the time to be lying in bed with a fever. I need to figure out what else I could make something with.* I tensed my whole body, determined to survive, and felt the heat shrinking into the middle of my body.

“...What do you think I can use that won’t get burned?” I thought hard about it, but couldn’t think of anything myself. Maybe because the fever was making it hard to think, maybe because I wasn’t familiar enough with what materials even existed in this area.

“Uuuh, like, bamboo or something?”

“...Lutz, you’re a genius.” Bamboo exploded when burned, so Mom wouldn’t try using it as firewood without good reason. I felt hope brimming within me. And somehow, that made the heat shrink a little further, making it easier to

breathe.

“My my, what are you two talking about?” Mom walked in with a bucket of water. Lutz and I looked at each other, then laughed a little to ourselves.

“It’s a secret, Mom.”

“I’ll go get some for you. So, get better.”

“Thanks, Lutz. You’re so nice.”

“Th-This is just so you can introduce me to Mr. Otto, alright? I’ve already done my part, so I’ll be pissed if you don’t get better! Alright?” Lutz rushed out of the room, so I started to wipe myself down with the water Mom had brought me.

...There was something weird about that fever. It felt like it was coming from within my body and eating me away. I don’t know of any fevers like that. I definitely don’t know of any fever that suddenly expands, or shrinks when you focus. Just what is the fever stirring inside of my body right now?

When I first came to this world, I caught fevers so often I didn’t think anything of them. But now that I had built up strength and could move around without issue, there was definitely something weird. What in the world am I sick with?

Unfortunately, this world wasn’t prosperous enough for commoners to casually see doctors, nor were there any home medical almanacs. It would take some time for me to investigate this. *Since the fever shrinks if I focus hard on it, maybe I don’t need to rush?*

I passed two days thinking about how to deal with my fever, and then Lutz really did bring me some pieces of bamboo perfect for making into mokkan. He had already carved them flat so that I could write on them.

“Don’t even think about touching them until you’re better. You break this promise and I won’t ever help you again, alright?”

“Okay. Thanks, Lutz.” I watched Lutz hurry home, then gripped a piece of bamboo in my hand.

I asked Mom to store the rest in the storage room. I still couldn’t get out of bed, but once this fever went all the way down, I would write on them and

finish my book. I needed to get better. My eyelids slowly lowered as I held the bamboo Lutz had brought for me. But right before I could fall asleep, I heard loud explosions.

“Kyaaah?!”

“Wh-What?! What’s happening?!” I heard explosion after explosion bursting from the kitchen.

Mom rushed into the bedroom, looking tense. “Myne! What did Lutz bring you?!”

“...Bamboo?”

“Gracious! You should have said something! I thought he had gathered firewood for you!” Mom’s complaining made me realize what had caused the explosions. She had burned the bamboo as firewood. Those explosions had been a lot more powerful than what I expected from bamboo, but well, this was another world after all.

“Did you think it was firewood since they were carved flat...? Wait, you can’t tell bamboo and wood apart?”

“You know that bamboo and the wood of banhit trees look alike.”

“No, I’ve never seen a tree like that...” I didn’t even recognize the name. At the very least, I had never seen bamboo or any trees resembling it while going to the forest.

“What are you talking about? It’s the wood Tuuli used to make baskets over the winter. Didn’t you help her, Myne?”

“Oh, now I remember. They do look similar without any bark.” I did know about the wood, since I had watched Tuuli prepare for her winter handiwork. It looked like normal wood when it had bark, but once peeled, it looked similar to bamboo.

“In any case, bamboo is dangerous. Don’t bring it into the house. Understand?”

“...Okay.” After giving a quiet reply, I was consumed by an intense fever as I gripped the last remaining piece of bamboo in my hand.

The rage of having my belongings burned.

The frustration of my anger not being understood at all.

The despair of repeatedly failing to obtain a book despite my best efforts.

I threw my all at the world and got nothing in return. A sense of powerlessness spread through me. I didn't feel like doing anything. I didn't even care enough to fight the fever inside of me. At this point, I didn't even feel mad at Mom for burning my mokkan and then the bamboo Lutz brought me.

If only my body had been healthy and strong like an adult's. If I were all grown up, I could have ignored papyrus, clay tablets, and mokkan to just make washi right away. If I at least were as healthy as Lutz and had the strength to do a fair bit of physical labor, I could have given paper making my best shot. But my weak, sickly child's hands couldn't even cut down the wood I needed to make paper. I couldn't draw the water I needed, nor could I start fires.

Maybe all my problems would go away if I waited until I was an adult. But that was just far too long to wait. And would I even grow like a normal person? Would I get bigger and stronger...? Doubtful.

If nothing I did mattered, why not just let the raging fever inside of my body take over? What's the point in living in a filthy, uncomfortable world if all my best efforts and all my endurance wouldn't get me books? It'd be better to just disappear.

The second that thought crossed my mind, the heat inside my body energized as if to swallow me whole. I stopped thinking about anything and encouraged the fever to spread so that I might disappear.

I only had one regret: I hadn't apologized to Lutz. He worked so hard to prepare those bamboo shoots for me, and I hadn't apologized for how they had ended up getting burned. What Lutz said to me before leaving to get the bamboo flashed through my mind.

"Th-This is just so you can introduce me to Mr. Otto, alright? I've already done my part, so I'll be pissed if you don't get better! Alright?"

I hadn't kept my promise to him. He helped me so much and I promised to help him in return. Should I really let myself give up and run away into this

fever? Lutz was right. He already did his part. Letting myself disappear into the fever would be simple, but before that, I needed to get better and fulfill my promise to Lutz by introducing him to Otto.

Repeating to myself that this was for Lutz's sake, I pushed the heat back down. I could let the fever consume me after I had fulfilled my promise to Lutz. Settling matters before death was important. Last time I died so suddenly, I didn't have the time to do anything.

...Yeah, exactly. I was totally not ready to die in that earthquake... Aaaaah! What even happened after that?! It's so embarrassing! I have to know, I have to! Aaaah! I can't die yet!

All the embarrassing memories of my past life drifted up one by one, and after enough shouting that I couldn't let myself die yet, the fever within my body somehow got a lot smaller.

The Road to a Meeting

Two days had passed since I pushed thoughts of my dark past into the corner of my mind and swore never to think about them again. Dad finally gave me permission to go outside again, barring that I did not go further than the gate, which meant I could see Otto again.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Otto. You went out of your way to set up a meeting for me, but I just got sick...” Indeed. Otto’s day off passed while I was bedridden with a fever, so I missed the opportunity to introduce Lutz to him.

“I heard from the captain that your fever didn’t go down for five whole days. Are you feeling better?”

“Uh huh, thanks to you.” I smiled, but Otto just furrowed his brows and gave me a hard look.

“Are you *really* feeling better? You don’t look so good.”

I didn’t look good, but not because of the fever. It was because I couldn’t make paper no matter how hard I tried. “I have a problem that I’m having trouble solving. Would you mind telling me what you would do if you were in my situation?”

“Wha? You don’t mind telling me your problem?” Otto opened his eyes wide and peered toward me.

I nodded hard. He had surely experienced things I could never imagine as a traveling merchant, and it was more than possible that he could think up a solution I couldn’t. “I don’t mind. There’s something I want right away, but I don’t have the strength or stamina to make it by myself. I could maybe make it by myself after growing up, but I don’t know if my body will be healthy enough to grow like a normal person’s. I might not even be alive for much longer. What would you do if you were me, Mr. Otto?”

Otto, who had been nodding as he listened, immediately replied with raised eyebrows. “If you can’t do it yourself, just hire someone who can. Is that all

you're worried about?"

"Wha?!" The scales fell from my eyes. I hadn't even considered hiring someone else to get what I want for me. That was just the kind of insight I expected from a former merchant. I could easily imagine others hiring me to do things, but I had never even considered hiring someone else to do things for me.

"...I think that's a really good idea, but I couldn't afford that."

"Yeah, you're a bit too young for that. Well. If I were you, I'd find someone capable and guide them into doing whatever it is you want out of their own volition. That's no easy feat, but it's no sweat off your back if they willingly do it for free."

Yup... there's a former merchant for you. His warm smile belied his wonderfully dark ideas. *He's definitely "guiding me" into doing what he wants already. I remember him saying that paying a mathematically skilled assistant in slate pens is nice for his budget.*

"...I'll keep that in mind." Find someone who would do the work for me, get involved with them, and make them do it of their own volition. That would be pretty hard for me. But I could worry about that later.

Otto patted me on the shoulder and held out a slate. Talking time was over. This was his way of silently saying "Let's start studying."

"Oh, right. Now that you're healthy again, could you tell that kid that we can meet up the day after tomorrow? We can go to, let's see... The central plaza. How does the central plaza at third bell sound?"

"You mean Lutz. I was just about to ask you about that myself. Thank you." I didn't think I would forget, but nonetheless I wrote "central plaza, third bell."

I looked up and saw that Otto was grinning while rubbing his chin. His smile made a shudder of danger run down my spine for some reason, so I instinctively straightened up and looked back at him.

"Yep. I'm betting any kid you wanna introduce me to will be real interesting. I'm looking forward to a fun meeting."

Well... I think I can interpret that as him saying "Don't introduce me to someone boring. I'm spending my precious day off on this, y'know." Um... Otto? Isn't this just going to be a casual meeting where you talk about what it's like to be a traveling merchant? I swallowed my inner panic and nodded with a smile before dropping my gaze back to the slate.

I burst into a cold sweat. Oh no. The meeting was so soon but I didn't understand what this "meeting" really meant. And it was too late for me to say that, considering I was the one who started it all to introduce Lutz. I desperately tried to piece together the implicit meaning of the meeting while scribbling away on my slate.

"Myne, we're going home."

It was a bit early to go home, but Dad came calling for me, so I got my stuff together and left the room.

"Hey, Dad. I told Mr. Otto I wanted to introduce Lutz to him. Do introductions like that have any special meaning?"

"Given his age, I'm guessing he's looking for apprentice work? I figured he was gonna follow the family line of work, is he hoping to be a merchant instead?"

...Looking for work?! No no no, this isn't anything that serious! I mean, we're just kids, come on.

"We're going to meet up so Otto can tell him what it's like to be a traveling merchant."

"Yeah, that's definitely gonna be interpreted as him hoping Otto can introduce him to some apprentice work. Though any friend of yours is gonna have a hard time with that, Myne."

"Why's that?"

"Think about it. Taking on an apprentice means looking after them for the rest of their lives. Even if they split and go independent, there's still gonna be a connection between'm they can't cut."

Things were more serious than I had anticipated. It wasn't just a meet up for

chatting; it was Lutz wanting the former traveling merchant Otto to introduce him to someone that would take him on as an apprentice merchant.

...Aah, which means tomorrow's meeting will be like a job interview, right?! I can't believe I was setting up something so serious!

The day after I got home and realized just how serious the situation was thanks to Mom and Dad explaining the details about apprentice work, I went to the forest with a fully loaded basket. On the way there I apologized to Lutz about how the bamboo he gave me had been mistaken for banhit wood and told him that the meeting was set for tomorrow.

When he heard about the bamboo, he sighed and said, "Banhit, huh? Those get mixed up a lot, yeah." When he heard about the meeting, he said, "Thanks, Myne," and looked pretty happy.

Everyone split up to do their gathering once we reached the forest. I took Lutz's hand and headed to the river. "Okay, Lutz. This is the perfect spot. Let's get you clean."

"Wha?"

Otto took pretty good care of his personal hygiene, perhaps due to his background as a merchant. Reason being, he understood how much first impressions mattered. And I knew from seeing Otto's calculating nature at work that we didn't want to go to the meeting unprepared. If he decided after the first meeting that Lutz wasn't worth the effort, he wouldn't have introduced him to even a normal merchant, much less a traveling merchant.

"The first impression you give someone when meeting them is really important. Especially if you've been given an opportunity to prepare ahead of time. I don't want him to look down on you just because of your appearance."

"I don't think a wash will change that much, really."

The ideal would be to borrow the clothes Ralph wore at his baptism, but I didn't know if he would be willing to lend them. Neither I nor Lutz had any special clothing and would thus need to go wearing our normal outfits, but I wanted to dress things up where I could.

Thus, while explaining to Lutz about the effects one's appearance have on others, I washed his hair with my simple all-in-one shampoo. I had brought rags, a comb, and a bucket with me to really clean him up until he shined. I put river water and shampoo into the bucket before washing his hair over and over just like I normally washed Tuuli's hair. Of course, I wouldn't stop there. I fully intended to wash his entire body.

"Hey, Lutz. I can think of you wanting to talk to Mr. Otto as you wanting to become a traveling merchant, right? You want an introduction so you can become a traveling merchant's apprentice?" I talked to Lutz while washing his hair, feeling kind of like a hairdresser talking to a client.

"Eh? Yeah."

The more I wiped Lutz's hair with a rag, the more his golden blonde hair gleamed. It was such a pretty yellow color that I wanted to trade hair with him. I combed it to increase its luster and, feeling a little bit jealous, continued my questioning. "So, what do you want to do after becoming a traveling merchant? Do you just want to travel the world?"

"Where's all this coming from?"

"You really need to think this through."

"Why?"

"Mr. Otto doesn't know anything about you, Lutz. He's not like a parent or family member who's known you their whole lives. You need to really think about this if you want him to introduce you to someone."

According to what I heard from my parents yesterday, the kids of this city almost universally began apprentice work with an introduction from their parents or a family member. Due to that, they generally followed their parents into a similar profession. For example, Tuuli became an apprentice seamstress after Mom, who works as a dyer, introduced her to a friend's workplace.

Apparently it was rare for kids to go to the same workplace as their parents, in order to prevent nepotism. But kids still worked in similar jobs near their parents, both so parents will worry less and so that the kids will take their jobs more seriously. It was very rare for someone to get an introduction from

someone outside of the family due to wanting a job their parents would certainly reject, like Lutz was doing.

“Mr. Otto’s meeting you this time as a courtesy, but he’s not that forgiving. He’s a former merchant and as calculating as you would expect. If you haven’t put enough thought into this, he won’t waste his time meeting you a second time.”

The meeting tomorrow would be like a job interview. If you don’t clean yourself up and prepare a good reason for why you want to get hired, it was very possible that the interviewer wouldn’t even consider you for the position.

“...What about you, Myne?”

“Wha?”

“Could you give an answer right away if I asked what you would do as a merchant?” Lutz, pouting a bit in frustration over not being able to think up an answer on the spot, glared at me with his jade eyes. I nodded and responded immediately.

“Uh huh. I want to sell paper. If I were a merchant apprentice, I’d teach someone how to make paper and have them make it for me.”

I wanted books for myself. If possible, I didn’t want to involve other people and instead make a book on my own using the tools and materials available to me. But I was at my limit. Everything I did ended in failure. At this point I just wanted to give my knowledge to someone and have them do everything for me, from start to finish. I was sure someone would be willing if I handed over the ownership rights in return for an information fee.

“Paper? Not books?”

“I need paper to make books. And here, nobody but me wants books, really.”

“I guess if you’re the only one who wants them, nobody’s gonna buy them, huh?” muttered Lutz, exasperated.

I nodded with a smile. “Uh huh. I don’t think books will sell that easily. But paper made from plants will be cheaper to produce than parchment, so I think it’ll sell just fine. I’m sure there’s a profit-savvy merchant out there who will see

the value in my knowledge and pick me up."

"...Huh. Guess you did think this through, Myne. I'll give it a shot too."

"I think 'a friend of Otto's assistant' is a weak enough connection that most people will reject it. But if you make your intentions clear and show that you can bring value to them, I think a merchant would be willing to take care of you too."

As Lutz glared at the water's surface and fell deep into thought, I urged him forward and made him clean himself. *Lutz... This will take too long if you don't wash while thinking.*

Lutz asked Ralph if he could borrow his special outfit, but got rejected for fear of it getting dirty, apparently. Therefore, he and I were walking to the central plaza in our normal clothes, though he was a lot more clean than usual.

"Hey, isn't the meet up at third bell? We're super early."

"That's the idea. If we get there after them, we're done for. You really want to get there first. Time will fly by if we sit down and talk."

In this city, time was told by the temple's bell ringing once every two, three-ish hours. Being late wouldn't be as big of a deal in this city without clocks, but emotionally speaking, I didn't want us to arrive last; we were already in a weaker position.

"Y'know, my mom asked what was up with my hair last night. It took forever to get her off my back." Lutz pulled on his now-glossy hair with a pitiful look on his face. I understood Karla's feelings. I'd get curious too if my son's hair got silky smooth without warning.

"Girls really do care about beauty and stuff."

"I went ahead and told her you did it for me. 'Go and ask Myne this stuff,' I said."

"Bwuh?!" The thought of getting pinned down for questioning by Karla, the kind of mother with a loud voice, forceful personality, and stubborn nature made my head hurt. "I'll teach you guys how to make it on your own, so don't

ask for mine. I don't have much myself."

"...Oh, my bad. I made you waste some of your stuff on me."

"It's okay. I owe a lot to you, Lutz." I didn't mind giving Lutz some shampoo considering how much he had been helping me. But resources were limited and Tuuli worked hard to make it, so I would rather not give Karla any. As it stood I was already having to suffer with washing my hair only once per five days, with just water to tide me over in the interim.

"But y'know..."

"If it bothers you that much, you can make some extra for me. I'm so weak it's hard for me to squeeze out the oil."

"Oh, that's your problem?"

We talked to each other for a bit and eventually Otto walked into the central plaza. He stood at the entrance, looking around, and upon seeing us grinned widely enough that I could see it despite being so far away.

Aaah... He was definitely testing us. I've been careful ever since he gave me that dangerous-looking smile and that was definitely the right call. He was definitely testing to see if we would come before the bell rang.

Otto smirked, looking impressed, and waved his hand in another direction, whereupon a different man appeared and started walking this way with Otto. I felt a cold sweat run down my back. Instinctively, I grabbed Lutz's hand. He was beside me.

"He's here, Lutz. Remember to be polite."

"R-Right."

I could tell from the way they were casually chatting that the other man was Otto's merchant friend. And when that friend looked in our direction, his eyes gleamed sharply, like a predator sizing up its prey.

...Um, I thought this would be an interview between Otto and us! I didn't hear anything about a third person! Ngggh, this is Lutz's interview, but I'm the one getting nervous now!

Meeting with the Merchant

I had been right to clean Lutz against his will and teach him about how interviews worked. Otto and his friend were both well-dressed and groomed, significantly more so than the majority of people passing through the plaza.

I really wish Lutz had managed to get Ralph's good outfit. Their clothes look kinda weird... Or rather, I just wasn't used to the style. They used a lot of cloth that formed large drapes, and I couldn't find any stains or parts traced of patchwork, a stark difference from the clothes I was used to seeing. Judging from his clothes alone, I could assume that Otto's friend was making decent money. His clothes, posture, and sharp look were all leagues above the merchants I saw in the market.

But although he was a successful merchant, he wasn't like a wizened company president. He had the intensity of a CEO running a venture capital firm. At a glance, his curly, milk tea hair gave him a soft impression, but his reddish brown eyes were brimming with confidence and gleaming with the sharp ferocity of a carnivore.

"Heya, Myne. I'm guessing that's Lutz?"

"Good morning, Otto. This is Lutz, my friend. Thank you for making the time to meet us today." I didn't know what greeting would work here, so I just did my normal chest-tap salute. Otto saluted in return, so that couldn't have been too wrong.

"Hi, I'm Lutz. It's nice to meet you." Lutz looked nervous, but didn't crumble beneath the two adults' intense looks. He managed to finish the greeting I had taught him without stumbling or letting his voice shake. Challenge one, complete.

"Benno, this is Myne, my assistant and the daughter of my captain. Myne, this is Benno. An associate from my days as a traveling merchant."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Myne." It wasn't customary to bow one's head in this

world, so I made sure to keep mine up while greeting him with a smile.

“How polite. I am Benno. It’s pleasure to meet you as well. Hm... You’re a pretty well-mannered little girl, huh.”

“She’s not as young as she looks. She’s six.” Otto followed up on my age for Benno, since I probably looked like a four-year-old. Benno opened his eyes wide, looked at Otto with amusement, then curved his lips into a grin.

“...Your assistant hasn’t even been baptized?”

“Aah, well, actually. I’m in the middle of teaching her to read and write so she can become my assistant.”

“You sure made it sound like she was already helping you out quite a bit.”

“...Let it go, man.”

The subtext of their conversation made a chill run down my spine. Would Lutz and I be able to hold an interview that these two would accept? For some reason... I got the feeling that neither of them would show any mercy to us, even though we were pre-baptism kids.

Benno looked at me from above, suspiciously, and began to talk. “There’s something I’m real curious about. Mind if I start with a question?”

“Not at all. What is it?”

“What’s that stick stuck in your head?”

Hm... I see. You’re asking that now because it’d be awkward to bring up casual stuff after rejecting us, aren’t you? The interview hasn’t even begun and you’re already on the verge of rejecting us?

With a fake smile plastered on my face, I pulled the hair stick out of my hair and held it up to Benno while keeping my eyes locked on him to try and glean any information I could from his reaction. “This is a (hair stick). It’s used to keep hair bundled up.”

Otto seemed to have been curious about it as well, given by how he and Benno both curiously examined it. They lifted it up, turned it around, and stared hard at it. *Um... It’s just a stick. There’s no tricks or anything.*

“Looks like a simple stick.”

“Uh huh. It’s a wood stick my Dad carved out of a branch for me.”

“You can bundle your hair with just this?”

“Yes.” He gave back the hair stick and I bundled my hair into its usual style. I scooped up some of my hair, wrapped it around the stick, rotated it, and then pushed it forward to lock it into place. I did so every day, so I was used to it.

“Oh hoh... Impressive.” It was the first time either of them had seen me do my hair, so both Lutz and Otto looked at it with wide eyes.

Benno suddenly reached out and touched my hair, then furrowed his brows. “Hey. Your hair’s pretty impressive too. What the heck are you putting on it?” Unlike his fingers, which were gently touching my hair as if apprising its value, his gaze was so sharp I nearly gasped in surprise.

I could tell from his eyes that he had found something to make profit on, and given how all the older ladies pounced on the shampoo at Tuuli’s baptism, I could imagine that my simple all-in-one shampoo would be pretty valuable.

“It’s a combination of common things, but the details are a secret.”

“Boy, do you have the same stuff in your hair?”

“Myne put it on me, saying I needed to look clean for this...”

Ah... Mr. Benno. Did you just click your tongue? Did you take me lightly, thinking I would just tell you right away because I’m a kid? Too bad. Your interview with Lutz hasn’t even started yet. I won’t let go of a valuable card in my hand during this preliminary skirmish. Benno and I gave fake smiles to each other, sparks flying, until Otto let out a sigh and scratched his head.

“So. You want to become a traveling merchant, Lutz?” The interview was finally beginning. I heard Lutz swallow hard next to me. *You’ve been thinking about this since yesterday, right? Now’s your time to shine. Tell them your motivation and grab success!* I stealthily squeezed Lutz’s hand, hoping to convey that I was supporting him from the side.

“Ah. Right. I...”

“Give it up.” He was stopped before he could even explain himself. *At least let*

him tell you what he worked so hard to think up! I yelled on the inside as Otto looked down on Lutz with an uncomfortable, bitter look. “Only an idiot would give up their city citizenship.”

“...Mr. Otto, what’s city citizenship?” I let a question slip out by accident. I had never heard that phrase before. I could imagine that it meant one’s right to be a citizen living in a city. But I didn’t know whether or not it was similar to Japanese citizenship, which was given to anyone born in Japan even if they didn’t know about it until they learned in school.

“It’s the right to live in this city. At the same time, it’s proof of your identity. When you turn seven and get baptized in the temple, you get registered as a citizen of the city. Citizenship changes everything, whether it comes to getting a job, getting married, or renting a house. It costs a ridiculous amount of money for an outsider to get registered at the temple, obtain citizenship, and earn the right to live in the city proper.”

“Mr. Otto, did you pay that money?”

“Sure did.” Otto nodded with a frown, probably remembering what that was like.

Benno grinned and pointed at Otto. “This guy dumped all his savings so he could marry Corinna.”

“I wanted to have enough left over to buy a shop here, but it took all I had just to afford citizenship.”

I had no idea how much money a traveling merchant would have saved up, but I got the feeling nothing would be enough to afford citizenship, marriage, and opening a store.

“Plus, living in a city and living on the road are completely different. Listen, Lutz. Do you know what it’s like to live most of your life in a horse-drawn carriage?”

“...No.” Lutz shook his head. It took at most two hours to walk from one side of the city to the other, so the kids of the city fundamentally walked everywhere. Lutz had probably never ridden in a carriage in his life, so he probably couldn’t imagine such a life.

“Take water, for instance. What do you do if you need water?”

“Draw it from the well.”

“Right. But there aren’t any wells on the road. You gotta find your own sources of water.”

“A river could...” Lutz immediately imagined using a river as a source of water, like the one in the forest. But it’s not like he would be traveling alongside a river the whole time. And given how expensive paper was, I couldn’t imagine that every traveling merchant had a good map.

“When a traveling merchant first leaves town, they won’t know where the rivers are, Lutz. You won’t be traveling beside one the whole time, so...” I said.

“Myne’s right. So usually, you always follow the same routes. You learn more as the years go on, you trade information, and you gradually get to know which roads are safe and where the usable sources of water are. You pass that information onto your kids and they inherit your routes. There’s no room for other people in the middle of the cramped carriage you live in. And now, the most important part: where traveling merchants end up. Do you know what traveling merchants want more than anything else?”

Lutz fell silent and shook his head.

“City citizenship.”

“Wha?!”

“They want to end their hard life on the road and live in a city someday. They want to own a store in a city and do business safely. That’s what they save up money for. That’s the dream of a traveling merchant. No traveling merchant will take a kid who already has a citizenship. If you want to go down this road in life, you gotta start on your own. There’s no apprentice system for traveling merchants.”

If the dream of a traveling merchant was citizenship, then Otto had already achieved his dream. He didn’t get the store he apparently wanted, but still, I didn’t know why a merchant would have become a soldier.

“Mr. Otto, why did you choose to become a soldier?”

“Wait! Stop. Don’t ask tha— mgggh!” Benno started to say something, but Otto clamped a hand over his mouth and made a bold proclamation.

“To marry Corinna.”

“I-I want to know the details!”

“Listen, girl, I don’t wanna hear them. He’ll never shut up once he gets going.” Benno hurriedly tried to stop me, but Otto’s eyes were already shining.

“Indeed. It all began not long after I entered adulthood. I came to this city and fell in love with Corinna at first sight. It was like an arrow piercing my heart, or the heavens themselves shining down upon us. In either case, I could see nothing but Corinna. I knew in my heart she was the only one I would ever want to marry, and I immediately wooed her.”

“...I didn’t expect you to be so passionate, Mr. Otto.” Apparently, even a calculating former merchant with pitch-black ideas hiding behind a warm smile could be driven wild with love. His brown eyes and dark brown hair gave him a composed and down-to-earth aura, so it was hard for me to imagine him getting passionate with love.

“That’s just how wonderful Corinna is. Well, I launched a pretty impressive attack, but she turned me down at first. She’s a famous, skilled seamstress and wanted to preserve the working relationships she’d formed in the city. She told me she couldn’t live a life of traveling, as I remember.”

It’s true that you need to value your regulars, and if she’s skilled, she probably makes enough money to have a satisfying life. I can’t blame her for not throwing away her stable life to become a traveler. Not to mention that from her perspective, Otto coming out of nowhere and trying to flirt with her would look pretty suspicious. I could imagine her suspecting that he was trying to trick her.

I nodded in interest as I listened, and Otto’s tales of love gradually escalated and heated up. He spoke louder with more force and began waving his arms around.

“When Corinna told me she planned to marry a man from this city, I was so shocked it was like lightning had struck me. I couldn’t even imagine another man marrying Corinna, and after desperately thinking of a solution, I went

straight to the temple and bought my citizenship."

"Wha? Hold on a second. Isn't that a bit sudden?" I looked at Benno to see if Otto's behavior was normal for this world, and saw him rubbing his temples with an exhausted expression.

"...Yeah, even a kid would realize that. And that's not all. The money Otto spent on citizenship here was the money he planned to spend on opening a store in the city where his parents bought their citizenship."

"Whaaa?!" The price of purchasing citizenship in a city was halved if your parents had citizenship in the city, and Otto had been planning on using the rest to open a shop, according to Benno. Using your life savings to have a chance with a girl you just met instead of opening a store wasn't something a calculating merchant would do. It was something a rampaging bull with only their goal in sight would do.

"I wanted to open a store in this city, but I didn't have the money nor did I have the connections back then. I knew becoming a soldier would show Corinna that I was determined to abandon my life as a merchant and start a life here with her, so I asked your father, who I had gotten to know while passing through the gate, and he hired me as a soldier who would deal with their paperwork. Aaah... Thinking about it now, Corinna sure was surprised when I proposed to her after buying my citizenship and becoming a soldier."

Well I mean... Naturally. There's not a young woman in the world who wouldn't be surprised to see someone dump their life savings and change their life just to marry her. I want to ask Corinna her perspective. Did she say yes because she felt the need to keep Otto in control, or because her heart fluttered at the sheer intensity of his love for her? I feel like her story will be completely different from Otto's.

"I spent days wooing her, and eventually I married into her family, rather than her into mine. You have no idea how cute Corinna looked when she laughed and called me the most persistent man she'd ever met! And now..."

Otto began talking at length about just how cute his wife was. He just wouldn't stop. I wished he wouldn't use the excellent communication skills he built up over years as merchant just to brag about his wife. I mean, Lutz was just

sitting there, overwhelmed by the endless flood of bragging. I had heard that Otto was all about his wife, but I thought Dad was just exaggerating. He wasn't.

...What should I do? I didn't think Otto was this kind of person. I looked to Benno for help, and after making eye contact, he gave a light shrug. He seemed used to this.

"Otto, don't forget why we're here. Drop the wife talk and get back on topic."

"Ahem! Sorry. Anyway, that's that. Give up on being a traveling merchant."

What do you mean, that's that? I wanted to tease him a bit, but I swallowed the urge. He got pretty off topic, but we did learn that traveling merchants didn't have an apprentice system, that being a traveling merchant is rough, that the citizenship we have is important, and that falling head over heels in love is too scary.

Lutz, having been told to give up his dreams, hung his head to a depressing extent. He had thought hard about his motivations, but got rejected before he could even say them, then got the harsh reality of being a traveling merchant slammed into his face along with endless bragging. Anyone would get depressed.

"...Lutz, this is something Myne suggested, by why don't you try becoming a normal merchant apprentice? You'll at least get to leave town to buy merchandise."

"Myne?!" Lutz's head shot up and he looked at me. His eyes burning with anger made it clear he was thinking *"You knew I wouldn't be able to become a traveling merchant?"*

"I thought it would be better for you if you heard it directly from a former traveling merchant. You'll believe Otto sooner than you'd believe me, right? Since we've grown up the same way."

"...Ah." I must have been exactly right, given how Lutz looked away awkwardly.

"I knew from Otto that being a traveling merchant would be hard, so I thought it might be better if you start a job that both lets you go outside the city and won't get rejected by your family. Plus, I didn't even know about this

until now, but I don't think you should take a job that would make you lose your city citizenship."

"...Yeah." Otto's speech had definitely given Lutz something to think about. Listening to Otto's real life experience was definitely more influential to him than anything I could have said.

"Dad told me that Mr. Otto had some connections with merchants of this city, so I was just asking him to introduce you to one of them if you ended up wanting that. You can turn him down if you want, Lutz."

"...Huh. You really thought this through." Lutz let out a sigh and looked up a Benno. I looked at him too. If Lutz wanted to be an apprentice merchant, we would have to deal with Benno, not Otto.

"And that's why I'm here. You want to be a merchant, boy?"

"Yes." Lutz nodded, and Benno narrowed his red eyes. The casual atmosphere he had when listening to Otto brag about his wife was completely gone. He looked down at Lutz with the narrowed eyes of a predator who had found prey to conquer.

"Hm. So, what do you have to sell? What would you want to sell as a merchant?"

"Wha?" It was normal for interviewers to ask why the applicant wanted to work for them, but Lutz had been thinking of reasons why he wanted to become a traveling merchant. It wasn't so easy for him to come up with a new reason for becoming a normal merchant on the spot.

"I'm asking what you want to do as a merchant, and what you can do."

"I..."

Gyaaah! This interview is way too intense for a six-year-old! I wanted to tell Benno to ease up a little, but for merchants, each apprentice involved a significant amount of time and money spent. He had no reason to take Lutz under his wing and take a loss over a connection as weak as "friend of Otto's assistant." If Lutz didn't have something useful to Benno, like proper determination, motivation, or information about a product that would be worth money, it wouldn't be surprising for him to get rejected immediately. Really, we

should be grateful that he was willing to meet us at all.

“If you don’t have an answer, we’re done here.”

I could see Lutz lower his eyes a little and bite his lip in frustration. I didn’t know if what I was about to say would help Lutz or push him onto a road of unnecessary struggling. It would be up to him.

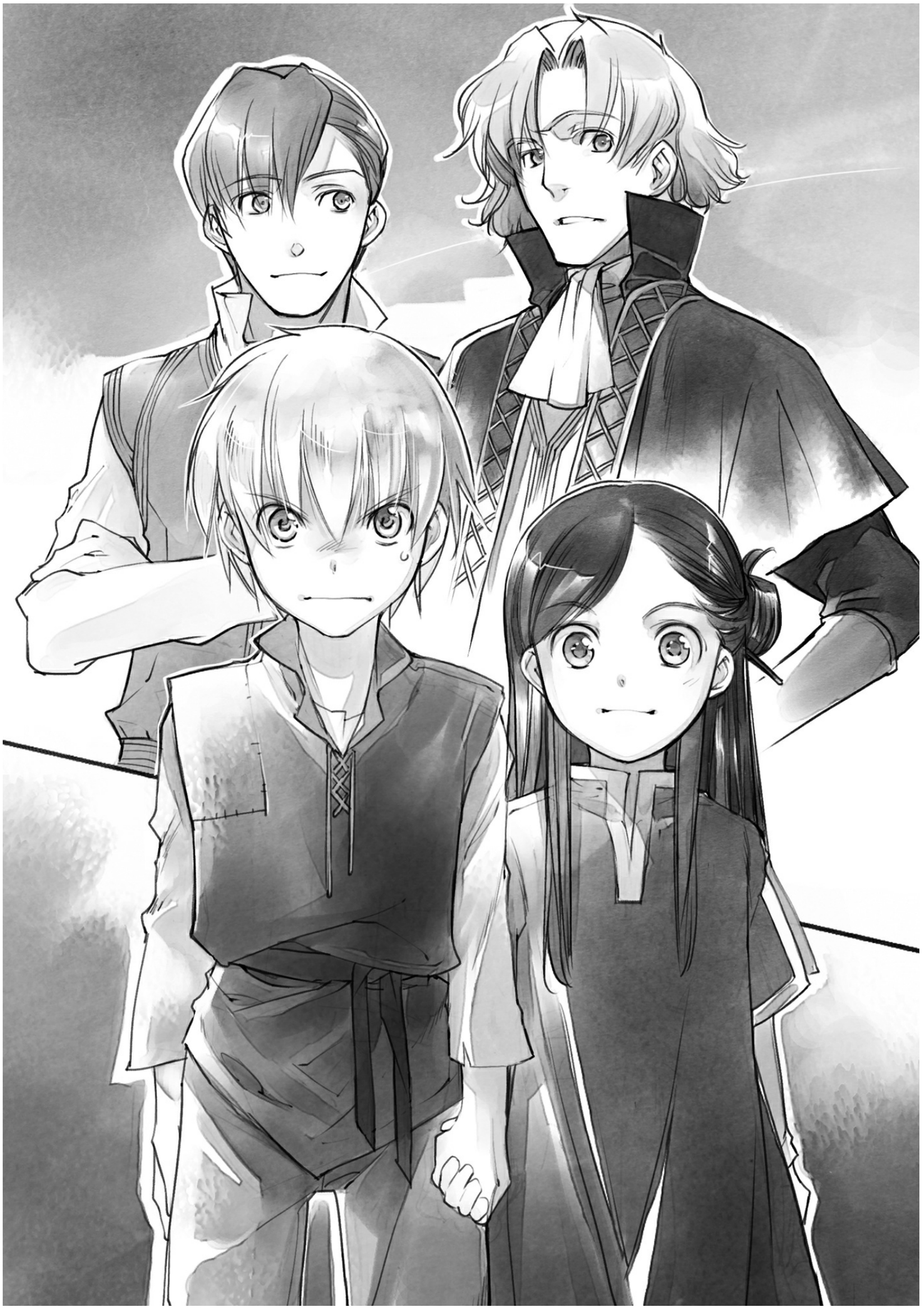
I whispered quietly to Lutz such that only he could hear. “...Will you make my paper, Lutz?”

“I will.” Lutz jerked his head up. He squeezed my hand tightly. I could feel it shaking, but Lutz was glaring at Benno with a ferocious expression. “Yeah, I have something I want to do! I want to make all the things that Myne thinks up!”

“Uh huh. That’s what you’ve been doing for a long time.”

“Myne’ll push herself too far without me, so I’ll make the stuff for her.”

Lutz... I’m proud of you. You said what you needed to say. Benno’s looking really surprised right now.



In the end, I didn't know whether I pulled Lutz into this or if Lutz pulled me into this, but if Lutz was willing to do what I couldn't, then I was willing to do what Lutz couldn't. And unlike him, I had plenty of experience with job interviews.

Still looking up at Benno, I smiled brightly. I took a deep breath, let it out, and began to speak. "I want to make and sell paper that isn't made from animal skin. It'll be cheaper to make than parchment, so I think it will be very profitable."

Hearing that, Benno grimaced. He looked at me with a far more intense glare than he had looked at Lutz with and spoke in a low, harsh voice. "...You want to be a merchant too, girl?"

"Yes. It's my second choice." I nodded with a smile, and Otto blinked in confusion.

"Is your first choice doing paperwork at the gate?"

"No, I want to be a (librarian)."

The three of them all looked confused. As expected, they hadn't understood what I said.

"...Never heard of that before."

"I want to work a job where I manage a large number of books."

After I explained what a librarian was in simple terms, Benno began laughing. "Pfff... Haha, sorry, but that's a job only nobles get to do."

"...I knew it." *Curse you, nobles.* I figured that if only nobles had books, then the librarians managing them would be nobles as well. Status-based discrimination ticked me off.

"But wait. Paper that isn't parchment, you say? Do you have some on hand?" He glanced at me, visibly on guard. I could guess that he was calculating the effects and potential profit that introducing paper other than parchment into the market would have.

"Not yet."

“Then we’re done here.”

He said we were done, but he was definitely interested. I could probably push him into a compromise in no time. I broadened my smile. “If you just want a real-life example, I can make one. Our baptism is summer of next year, so I’ll make prototypes of my paper by spring. You can decide then whether you can use them or not.”

“...Alright.” Benno had intended to turn us down, but in the end I had managed to postpone his decision. A clear and splendid victory.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Benno.”

“I haven’t said yes yet.”

“But still, you’ve given us a chance to try.” Now Lutz and I just had to do our best. His job and future were on the line here, so he would probably work hard. I couldn’t help but grin after realizing I now, out of nowhere, had a chance to finally get paper.

“Let’s do our best, Lutz.”

“Yeah.”

“Mr. Otto, thank you very much for introducing us to Mr. Benno.” I expressed my gratitude to Otto, who was looking at us while grinning. Thanks to his efforts, Lutz had wisely given up on becoming a traveling merchant and made the first step toward becoming an apprentice merchant. That was the best possible result I had envisioned for this meeting.

“This day off ended up pretty fun. I’m looking forward to the next time you drop by the gate.”

“Me too.” It seemed that Otto gave us a passing grade too. I sighed in relief and, having noticed that Otto was subtly suggesting we end the meeting here, started walking off with Lutz. *Ah... Wait. I forgot.*

“Um! I just remembered I have something I want to ask you two, Mr. Otto! Mr. Benno!” I stopped, turned around, and saw that Otto and Benno had likewise started walking off. They both turned around at the same time.

“Yeah? What’s up?” said Otto.

“Do either of you know of a disease where there’s like, heat inside of you that grows and shrinks rapidly?” Otto had traveled the world and Benno seemed like a guy with connections everywhere, so it was possible that one of them knew about the heat inside of me. “It feels like the heat is eating away at your very being, and if you desperately push it back, it shrinks. Sorry for the subjective explanation, but...”

“No clue. I’ve never heard of anything like that.” Otto casually shrugged.

I looked toward Benno. He briefly lowered his eyes, then slowly shook his head. “...Never heard of it.”

If neither of them were familiar with it, then it was safe for me to assume that nobody in my sphere of interaction knew what it was. Apparently, I was sick with something fairly rare.

“...Okay. Thank you.”

Lutz and I resumed walking, holding hands. I didn’t learn anything new about my sickness, but I had won conditional employment and gained a helper for making paper. One step forward.

“Let’s make paper together, Lutz.”

“Yeah!” Lutz, having managed to forge ahead a path in life without his family’s help, gave me a smile filled with hope and excitement.

Epilogue

Otto returned home to his loving wife after the meeting with Myne and Lutz.

“I’m home, Corinna. Just got back. Benno’s with me.”

“Welcome home, Otto. I hope you kept a good eye on my brother. Though I can’t say I approve of you coming home with a smile after teasing those young pre-baptism kids.”

“You look cute even when you’re pouting.” Otto wrapped his arms around his adorable wife’s hips and kissed her cream-colored hair repeatedly before heading to the parlor. Benno thumped him on the head and said, “Do that when I’m not around.”

Otto, being as utterly devoted to his wife as he was, wanted to reply with *“Don’t interrupt our sweet time together,”* but if he said that in front of Corinna she’d probably get mad and say not to embarrass her in front of her brother, so he had to swallow it down.

The parlor in Otto’s home was usually used as a room for Corinna to have meetings with her clients. The center of the room had a circular table, unlike the dining room, and it had four-legged chairs placed around it. The right side of the room had a shelf with samples of clothes she had sewn before. On the left wall hung tapestries that she had sewn with leftover cloth.

“Maaan, I didn’t expect things to go like that at all. To think she’d force Benno into negotiation like that...” Otto, having sat in one of the chairs, grinned at the frowning Benno sitting across from him.

“Oh? My brother, forced to negotiate? Please share the details with me, Otto dear.” Corinna’s gray eyes shined and she scooted her chair toward Otto a little as she asked for details with a sweet voice. It was rare for her to act so sweet, so while clapping enthusiastically in thanks for Myne on the inside, Otto casually told her what had happened.

“...And just like that, Myne made the meeting a lot more interesting than I

thought it would be."

"Myne is the daughter of your captain, isn't she? The one you said was incredibly smart."

"Yep, that's the one. But you know, it's been about half a year since she became my assistant and I still don't get her. She's so abnormal I really have no idea what kinda parenting would make a kid like her."

Otto had met all sorts of people of various statuses across the world as a traveling merchant, so Myne's abnormality stood out even more to him. The same went for Benno, who had accompanied him to meet her today. Benno knew people from all ranks of society thanks to the range of his work as a merchant. While Otto the former traveling merchant had a wide but shallow range of knowledge, Benno the rich city merchant had a deep and profound understanding of his city's people.

"Hey, Otto. Was that really the daughter of a soldier?"

"Yep. Not a single doubt about it. But I'm with you in thinking that's odd."

"What do you two mean?" Corinna tilted her head, curious.

Otto thought of what made Myne seem weird and said what came to mind. "First, her looks. She's way too clean to be a soldier's daughter. Her clothes are the kind of raggedy hand-me-downs you'd expect, but her skin and hair are as clean as a whistle. The captain's an older man like any other soldier, but neither of his daughters are dirty at all."

"Perhaps their mother just takes good care of them?" Corinna had been raised as the daughter of a wealthy merchant, and although she had seen poor people around the city, she didn't have a good understanding of their lifestyle. It took time, money, and resources to take care of one's skin and hair. She didn't understand that those in poverty did not have the leeway to spare any of those.

"Mmm, I saw her during the winter, and it didn't look like their mother was putting that much effort into grooming. Though she and Myne do look alike. She's a real beauty, totally wasted on the captain." Myne had been told to wait at the gate during the winter once when the family went out to gather parues.

Otto saw her mother when she came to get Myne, but didn't get the impression that she was particularly more clean than average.

"...Do you think Myne is odd as well, brother?"

Benno put down his cup, looked up at the ceiling, and let out a slow sigh. "Yeah. Her hair was the color of the night, so silky that light gleamed off it. Her skin was pure white with not a speck of dirt to be found. Her hands were smooth like those of a noble who knows nothing of labor or household chores. Even her teeth were white. Everything about her conflicted with her raggedy clothing. No matter how I look at it, things don't add up."

"Hair so silky that light gleams off of it, you say?! What does she do to make it like that?!"

"Wha? Corinna, you're plenty pretty already."

"Quiet, Otto. I'm asking my brother."

Otto blinked in surprise at just how serious she was. Women really did care quite a lot about how silky their hair was. Corinna rarely showed this much interest in anything but sewing.

"Seems like she's putting something on it, but she wouldn't tell me what." Benno's answer led Corinna to look at Otto, eyes full of hope.

"Would she tell you, Otto?"

"...She's probably on her guard now. I don't think she'll tell me." Otto nonetheless resolved to ask Myne the next time he saw her, for the sake of his wife who wanted to know the secret to silky hair. He was a man who would do anything for his beloved.

Otto continued, "Well, besides her hair, she's got clean hands since she's too small and weak to help around the house much. Her skin's probably so white because she's bedridden with fevers all the time and doesn't go outside in the sun much."

"...Now that you mention it, our meeting originally got postponed because she got sick," murmured Benno to himself. Otto nodded with a frown, remembering how much of a pain it had been to deal with how on edge the

captain had gotten after five days of Myne's fever staying strong.

"If Myne looks the way she does due to being sick, should you two really be calling her abnormal?" Corinna determined from their conversation that Myne wasn't a big deal. She shrugged as if having lost interest, but Benno shook his head.

"No, it's not just her looks. What really got to me was her attitude and tone. She carried herself in a way only those trained to do so would. This is a stretch, but her parents aren't fallen nobles who are strict with their parenting, are they?"

"The captain's got another daughter, and she's normal. She's got silky hair too and relatively clean skin, but that's all. She doesn't stick out like Myne does."

Benno nodded at Otto's explanation and looked Corinna head-on. "Corinna, there was a lot more off about that girl than her looks. She had enough guts to not look away when I glared at her, the smarts to hide the details of her hair from me and turn things in her favor, the courage to gamble on making a prototype with a deadline, the negotiation skills to add conditions to her terms... Nothing about her was like a kid that hasn't even been baptized yet."

"There exists a child that didn't look away after you glared at them?! That girl is certainly odd, no doubt about it!" exclaimed Corinna, her eyes wide. Benno was the oldest child of the family and Corinna the youngest, so when their father died not long after her birth, Benno had taken his place in many ways. She had grown up being scolded harshly by Benno and thus knew very well how terrifying his glare could be.

"Aaaah, y'know, she's got a great memory and mind for math too. I couldn't believe it when I gave her that slate. She knew how to hold the pen and use it without any instruction at all. Almost like she already knew how to write, somehow."

"Perhaps she learned from watching you?" suggested Corinna as she poured Otto more wine, having noticed that his cup was empty.

Otto took a sip while thinking about how to word his response. "Well, I did show her how I did it, but it's not so simple to write without hands on practice. You could explain how to hold a pen to a kid for a hundred years and they'd still

struggle to draw lines at first. Letters, all the more so."

"You do have a point..." Corinna knew from teaching her own apprentices that verbal explanations alone were not enough for children to learn.

"Myne's math skills are bizarre too. She said her mom taught her numbers at the market, but knowing your numbers doesn't mean you know how to do math, yeah?"

"Hold on," Benno said. "The apprentices at my place know how to do a little math. They learn it from spending time with their parents." Most apprentice merchants were the children of merchants, so many of them knew how to read, write, and do math on some level by the time their baptism came around. Otto himself had learned to read and do math while traveling the world with his merchant parents. But the math Myne could do was on an entirely different level.

"Myne knows a lot more than a little math. Budget reports involve calculating the stock and price of all the stuff we use at the south gate, yeah? The numbers get a lot bigger than the small ones at the market. Multiple digits larger. But she can calculate them without issue, like it's the most natural thing in the world. And she doesn't even use a calculator. She just writes the numbers next to each other on the slate."

"...I knew it, you *have* been making her work as your assistant. How could you make a little kid like that help with budget reports? Shameful."

Otto, glaring at Benno's amused grin, lowered his voice. "I've never said this to anyone, but listen. She's doing most of my paperwork for me. Seventy percent, at least."

"...Wha?!"

"...Seventy percent? Dear..."

Both of them were shocked. Benno briefly froze, eyes opened wide in shock, and Corinna wasn't much different.

Otto couldn't help but laugh. "If she knew how to read more words she'd be doing it all. She's something else. One time, I was away at a meeting, and she dealt with a noble's letter of introduction perfectly."

That incident really surprised him. Otto had received Myne's report after the meeting. She told him that a merchant with a letter of introduction from a laynoble was waiting. Normally, visitors with letters from a noble introducing them to another noble are given the highest priority, and their needs were accommodated to immediately so that they could be sent to the castle gates as soon as possible. Even commoners are treated like laynobles.

On that day, however, a meeting was being held by an archnoble. It was obvious that the archnoble should be prioritized. But one mistake in treatment and the visitor could potentially get furious enough that they'd use their letter of introduction as a shield to force their way into the meeting, which would earn the ire of the archnoble and spiral out of control.

The situation was complex, and in the midst of that complexity Myne exploited the commoner merchant's pride by sending them to the waiting room for laynobles, and framed the situation in an agreeable way by telling them that an archnoble's meeting is underway. To top things off, she gave a report on the situation as soon as the meeting ended, which deftly avoided a situation where the commander left before giving the proper signature. The situation was resolved quickly and in such a way that the commander could reprimand the confused soldier for relying on a child for help. It was perfect.

"She must be amazing, then."

"Amazing's one way to put it, but it's more like... she's abnormal. Something's weird about her. But I don't think her dad, the captain, has noticed that at all. He treats her just like he would any cute and sickly daughter. If I hadn't said I wanted to make her my assistant, he probably never would have noticed how intelligent she is."

"Good for her that she's got thick parents. If they had noticed, they might've thrown her out for being a freak," said Benno, making Corinna furrow her brows.

"Don't even joke about that. I don't want to imagine it."

"Don't worry, Corinna. Even if her parents threw her out, Benno would pick her up. She's skilled enough to fight Benno and win," said Otto with a grin. Corinna giggled.

“...Hey, Otto. Do you think that girl’s really gonna make the stuff?” Benno gave Otto a hard look while drumming his fingers on the table. His reddish-brown eyes had become those of a merchant probing the future for profit.

“The paper that’s not parchment made from animal skin? Yeah, she’ll make it. No doubt about it.”

“You seem pretty confident in her.”

“Not long ago I gave her the idea that if she can’t do something herself, she should make someone else do it. Now that Lutz has become her arms and legs, she’s got nothing to fear.”

Myne had been frustrated with her weakness above all else, which was a clear sign that she knew the method for making paper and just couldn’t execute it herself. She had said she would make prototypes precisely because she knew she could do it. Otto didn’t think she had been gambling at all.

“...Paper like that will turn the market upside down. I wonder how I should deal with her.”

“Woah now, are you thinking about hiring Myne?” Otto, sensing from Benno’s words that he intended to take not just Lutz but Myne too as apprentices, opened his eyes wide in surprise.

“Of course! You think I’m gonna let someone else have her?! Do you have any idea how many products that girl will invent all on her own? That hair stick, that stuff that makes hair gleam, the paper that’s not parchment... Those are all the inventions I learned about today, but she’s definitely hiding more. She’s going to become a living natural disaster that destroys the market and remakes it anew.”

“Hold up! She’s my assistant. I’m not gonna let you take her from me.” Benno was completely right, but Otto wasn’t having any of it. He had spent the past half-year training her specifically so she could help him during budget season. He wouldn’t let someone snatch her away without a fight.

But Benno just gave a smug laugh and curved his lips into a grin. “The girl said being a merchant was her second choice. She even said she wasn’t interested in being your assistant. You’ve only spent half a year on her, right? Give it up. Look

for someone else.”



“I’ll never find someone who only needs six months of training to become even half as competent as her! If Myne’s just doing the thinking and Lutz is doing all the making, what’s the problem with her working at the gate?!”

At the very least, he wouldn’t budge on having her help for budget season. Or so he thought, glaring as hard as he could, but it was Benno who wouldn’t budge an inch. He put his cup down and leaned forward.

“No! I’m going to get a contract with her at the Merchant’s Guild. I won’t risk letting anyone else take her.”

“Myne doesn’t have what it takes to survive in the Merchant’s Guild! She’s so weak and sickly you would hardly believe it. Any work that involves moving around is too much for her!”

“...Is she really that sick?” Benno was so stunned he lost his momentum, which Otto took as an opportunity. He drove his point home.

“I figured she would be fine in a room with a furnace and left her on her own for a single bell’s worth of time, but when I came back, she was collapsed and sick with a fever.”

“What?”

Otto had needed to stand by the gate when on guard duty, so he left Myne in a furnace-warmed room for a bit, but when he came back to check on her, she was collapsed with a burning-hot forehead. When Gunther came to get her, he said, “Don’t sweat it. This happens all the time.” Otto could imagine that meant that Myne’s abnormal weakness was accepted by her family as a fact of life.

“Things were horrible back when spring just began. She couldn’t even walk from her home to the gate.”

“Oh? But I don’t believe it should be that long of a walk to the gate from any home in the city, dear.” Since the outer walls circled around the city in its entirety, it wasn’t actually that big of a city. A kid should be able to walk from the west gate to the east gate within the time span of a single bell ring.

“That’s right. The captain’s house isn’t too far from the southern gate. But she couldn’t manage it. She’d get exhausted halfway through, get carried the rest of

the way, and then rest immobile in the night shift room. After that, she'd be bedridden for two or three days every time."

"Hey, isn't that, uh, dangerous? Wouldn't she just die if someone put her to work?"

That was a legitimate concern. In particular, Benno's store was growing in size and was as busy as it was successful. Otto didn't expect that Myne would be capable of working there with her sickly body.

"Ngh..." Benno had been told that she was sickly, but he must not have expected that she was *that* sickly. He rubbed his temples and fell into thought.

With that topic settled, Corinna stood up to prepare lunch. On the table was a lamp, a small jug for refilling cups, and a plate with dried meat piled on top for snacks. Otto, chewing hard on the salty dried meat, watched Benno pour himself a fresh glass.

"Hey, Benno. You sure you don't know anything about that sickness Myne mentioned? The one with the heat inside of her?" Otto figured from the reaction Benno had to Myne's question that he actually knew what the sickness was, and that was correct.

Benno looked up a little, wondering whether or not he should say it. After some thought, he let out a quiet murmur, which was rare for him. "I figured she might have the devouring. But I can't say for sure. Not enough evidence."

"...The devouring? What kinda disease is that?"

"It's not a disease. It's when the mana inside of you grows too much and eats you alive from the inside out."

Otto's eyes shot wide open in surprise. Mana was a mysterious, powerful energy that commoners didn't have. He didn't see it that often and thus didn't know too much about it, but as far as he knew, it was said that no country would be able to survive without the assistance of mana. Which is why nobles, possessing mana as they did, stood above commoners and led countries.

"...It's rare, but sometimes those who aren't nobles end up having mana too. But magic tools needed to unleash mana are incredibly expensive, so it's true that only nobles are capable of properly using mana." Benno, given his market

connections to nobles, knew more about this country's inner workings than Otto did.

"I can't say for sure, but if that girl has the devouring, it would explain both her sickly nature and small size. The thing is, though, if this really is the devouring we're dealing with here, then without a magic tool it won't be long before that girl... dies."

"Wha?!" Otto, with thoughts of Gunther doting on Myne passing his mind, locked his eyes on Benno as if he'd been hit with a bucket of cold water. But Benno's expression was serious, and Otto could tell he wasn't joking around.

"The mana in her will grow as she does, and eat her alive in the process. Commoners with mana generally don't survive until their baptism without a magic tool."

"Is there something we can do?" asked Otto desperately. Maybe Benno would know a solution to the problem.

Benno sighed and scratched his head. "She can avoid dying if she signs a contract with a noble. They'll lend her magic tools. However... that'd be signing her life away. She'd become living furniture that exists just to use her power for nobles. Hard to say whether dying young with her family would be better or worse than that."

Benno's words provided no easy out. Otto himself couldn't tell which would be better. He didn't want to die, but he didn't want to live a life serving nobles like cattle, either.

"Otto, don't get too serious. We don't know if she really does have the devouring yet," said Benno. "In the first place, she would already be on the verge of death if she really did have it. She wouldn't be able to walk around outside like that."

"I see..." Otto's chest was flooded simultaneously with slight relief and great unease. Myne had been on the verge of death multiple times. He heard that she was only capable of walking outside due to months of hard work, and that before now she had barely gone outside at all.

Would she really be okay? Should he report this to Gunther? Otto swallowed

down the whirlwind of feelings within him by taking a gulp of alcohol from his cup.

Extra Story: A Day Without Myne

“Hey, Lutz. I’m going on ahead.”

“Got it. I’ll be right behind ya, Ralph!”

Upon hearing that my brother Ralph was on his way out, I hurriedly wrapped my ham and bread before stuffing it into my basket along with my hunting tools. Then I hitched the basket on my back and dashed out of my house.

Ralph didn’t have to go to the forest with everyone else anymore, since he was baptized and working every other day. But now he could go to the forest whenever he wanted, which meant he generally went with friends from work. I didn’t get to go to the forest with him often anymore, so I felt a little excited as I ran down the steps.

“Oof, guess today’s gonna get pretty hot.” As I headed to the group of kids who were waiting to go to the forest, I felt the changing of the seasons through the heat of the sunlight hitting my skin.

I could see Fey and Tuuli at the meeting place too. Despite also being baptized, they were going to the forest with the little kids today. Seeing all three of them together here made me feel nostalgic.

“Ralph, Lutz! Good morning.” Tuuli turned this way and waved after seeing us.

“Morning, Tuuli. How’s Myne? It’s been three whole days, so I’m guessing her fever’s going now?” Myne had apparently gotten so exhausted from cutting wood and making those mokkan things that she ended up bedridden for days.

“...No, not at all. It’s been three days since she collapsed in the storage room and her fever’s still super high. I’m really worried.” Tuuli, brows furrowed, looked down and shook her head. A day or two of being bedridden was normal for Myne, but not a high fever lasting three days. She looked sick with worry.

“She’ll be fine, I’m telling you. Myne hasn’t made a book yet, she won’t die that easily.” Myne was weak and sickly, but she was always chasing her dreams

with all she had. I never understood what she was talking about when she brought up books. The explanations just didn't get through to me. But I did know that Myne was doing absolutely everything she could to make them. Nothing inspired me to do my best more than seeing her work so hard to get what she wanted in her tiny, weak body.

...Plus, she said she would introduce me to a former traveling merchant. Since traveling merchants were always moving between cities, it was hard for me to find one that would take me as an apprentice. I heard that Myne's teacher at the gate used to be a traveling merchant, so I asked Myne to introduce me to him. Someone like him probably still had connections with current traveling merchants. Maybe he could introduce me to one and I could become their apprentice.

When Myne promised to introduce me to him, she said, "I'm helpful to you too sometimes, Lutz" and then laughed kinda proudly.

"I've got a promise with Myne, so she's definitely gonna get better."

"You're right, Lutz. Myne will be okay. Definitely." Tuuli's expression brightened a little.

"We're heading out!" With Ralph's announcement, the group of about ten kids started walking to the forest.

"We can walk a lot faster without Myne, huh?"

"Ahaha. Myne really does walk slow. But that's okay, since you're always helping her."

Once the group of kids was past the city walls, Tuuli, being an older girl with a strong sense of responsibility, always ended up taking care of everyone. She wasn't able to spend all her time watching over just Myne.

"Ralph, I'm going with Fey to lead the group. Would you watch over the back with Lutz for me?"

"Yeah! Anyway... Lutz, I'm surprised you bother doing all that," Ralph murmured to me in an exasperated tone of voice after seeing Tuuli walk off.

I glared at him. "Doing all what?"

“Taking care of Myne. I can tell just by watching it’s a huge pain in the ass.”

Ralph was known throughout the neighborhood as a nice guy that takes care of others, but he just acted that way in public because he wanted to show off to Tuuli. He treated me completely differently when she wasn’t around.

“I’m glad I’m the same age as Tuuli.”

His tone was pretty heartfelt, but I just shrugged. I was taking care of Myne partially for my own benefit, so it wasn’t a big deal. Nobody else seemed to know this but me, but Myne knew all sorts of weird stories, and she knew how to write. She could even introduce me to a traveling merchant.

“Myne’s good in her own ways,” I said, almost reflexively. Ralph peered toward me, eyes full of interest.

“Like how?”

The first thing that came to mind was the stuff about the traveling merchant, but I didn’t want to talk about that. Ralph and my other older brothers always laughed and called me stupid when I said I wanted to become a traveling merchant. I wanted to become one in secret and surprise my whole family.

“Myne shares her food with me and teaches me good recipes, so yeah.”

“All you care about is food, huh?” Ralph laughed, but food really was the biggest reason why I was so serious about watching over Myne. Spending time with her meant more food for me. And if I helped her, I could eat really tasty food.

“What’re you getting smug about? You eat that food too.”

“Yeah, cause it tastes good and I help make it. Why wouldn’t I eat it?” My older brothers generally stole my food, so I filled myself up by eating nuts and fruits while gathering. Winter was the worst, since I couldn’t go gathering. No gathering meant no fruit, and since the blizzards kept us locked in all the time, food was more scarce than other seasons.

The parue cakes that Myne thought up one day to help fill my stomach over winter were simple to make, using mainly the parue leftovers we normally left for birds. You could make tons of them no sweat, and they were so good I still

couldn’t believe it.

...And best of all, since everyone got their own plates with their own parue cakes, I didn’t have to worry about my brothers stealing them from me!

That day marked the beginning of Myne teaching us delicious recipes each sunny day we gathered parues. If I followed Myne’s instructions, I would get lots of tasty food. The moment I realized that, I promised her that I would help her and be the strength she didn’t have. In return, I would get to eat a lot of food. I would work as hard as it took to get tasty food.

“Okay, we’re meeting back here once fifth bell rings. Alright?”

“Okaaay!”

We settled on a meeting place upon reaching the forest and then let the kids scatter to do their gathering. Since Ralph and Fey were here today, I was going hunting.

“Should be about shumil season now. I’m bettin’ there’s tons of them running around here.” Ralph grinned, holding onto a net.

Shumils were small feybeasts that even kids like us could hunt. They were about as tall as my knees and were useful for their meat, pelt, bones, feathers, and fat. Their meat was especially soft and delicious compared to other things we could hunt. Since shumils loved to eat rutrebs, a summer fruit, their meat got even better as they grew in number over the summer.

When hunting shumils, you wanted to split into groups. One to chase the prey, one to lie in wait with a net.

“Me and Lutz will chase’m. Tuuli and Ralph, keep the net ready,” said Fey, name unrelated to feybeasts, as he began discussing a plan to catch the shumils with us. There was a smallish hill deeper into the forest, and since shumils had a tendency to run to high places to escape predators, the best thing to do was chase them up and into a prepared net.

After seeing Ralph and Tuuli go up to the arranged location with the net, Fey and I picked up stones and started searching for shumils close together. If we could find a patch of rutrebs, we could expect to find shumils nearby. Hunting shumils was important to stop them from eating our share of the rutrebs.

“There’s one! Hohwoah! Hohwoah hohwoah!” We discovered a shumil eating a ton of rutrebs super fast, his mouth bright red with juice, and immediately started mimicking the noises of large animals. The shumil jerked and began dashing into the shrubbery.

“Phiiiiih!”

“Phih phiiiih!” Other shumils that had been eating nearby also ran off after hearing their friend’s squeals. They all ran off at once, spreading apart and all rushing to the small hill in hopes of maximizing their chances of survival.

“Hohwoaaaah!” Fey’s voice rang out from a different angle. The shumil that had been running his direction hurriedly changed course. I ran as well, shouting to keep the shumils packed together so that as many as possible ran into Ralph and Tuuli’s net up ahead. In the end, six shumils ran together in a tight group and ran straight into the net. We caught them all without letting a single one escape.

“Yes!”

“Alright, let’s go to the river!”

After stabbing our knives into the net to slice the shumils’ throats and remove their talons, we took them out of the net and dragged them by their back feet to the riverbed. The talons on a shumil’s front feet were poisonous, so we chopped them off preemptively to be safe.

You only hunt as many animals as you can carry home. Ralph and Fey could carry two, but that was still too hard for me, so I guessed I would just be carrying one. Same went for Tuuli. Even while being dragged to the river, those shumils that hadn’t finished dying flailed and struggled, trying to attack with their front legs. I tightened my grip so that mine couldn’t run away.

When we reached the river, we began butchering them. I felt a pulse in my shumil and let out a sigh of relief. If it had died, the stench of blood would have seeped into the meat more. The faster I could bleed its meat, the better.

“Be careful,” warned Ralph. Everyone nodded as we readied our knives. Shumil were feybeasts: magical creatures. If we didn’t butcher them carefully, our knives would hit the hard stone known as a mana crystal within their

bodies, and the moment they did the shumil would melt and disappear.

We all smacked the shumils' heads with the handles of our knives to knock them out before stabbing their lower stomachs and drawing the knives upward.

"Kyaaah! I messed up!" Tuuli, looking pitiful, watched her shumil melt into a dark, thick liquid. She then took the mana crystal out of the dark liquid and washed it in the river, shoulders slumped in sorrow.

"Tuuli, you can have one of mine. Butcher this one and take it home," offered Ralph, pointing toward one of the shumil he had brought with him.

"Really? Thanks, Ralph. You can have this mana crystal, then." Tuuli, resolving not to mess up this time, delicately slid in her knife.

Fey gave a mean smirk. "That shumil kinda looks like Myne, huh? They're both blue and stuff."

"No they don't! Shut up, you're making this hard for me!" Tuuli resisted Fey's bullying and safely finished her butchering, removing the shumil's organs and washing the blood off them.

"Think about it. Myne and shumils are both super weak, right? But when they get mad their eyes get all rainbowy and stuff. What's the difference?" Shumils normally just ran away, but if parents saw you kill their children, their eyes shined like rainbows and they charged you down. Fey said that was just like what Myne did when she got mad. It was true that when Myne got truly mad, her eyes narrowed and her atmosphere totally changed. Then, her normally golden eyes would start changing colors, as if a layer of oil had covered them.

"That was your fault for getting her mad, Fey. You stomped all over those clay tablet things she worked hard to make." I glared at Fey as I got ready to leave. I had finished butchering my one shumil, but he was just getting started on his second.

"I didn't think she'd get that mad... Gah! Crap, I messed up." Thoughts of Myne's anger had apparently messed with Fey's focus while he was cutting. He clicked his tongue at the sight of the black pool of once-shumil beneath him and then, sighing, took out the mana crystal to wash off the blood.

"Hey Lutz, go home early with Fey and sell this at that crystal store. Me and

Tuuli gotta stay here to watch the little kids.”

“Got it.” I caught the mana crystal Ralph threw at me and started going home with Fey. We had to get back to the city before the store that bought mana crystals closed.

We took our shumils, which had finished bleeding, and fastened them to suitable branches which we carried on our backs. We left before the others and got back to the city. Then we slipped through thin side streets, rushing to the crystal store near the west gate. Fifth bell rang right before we got to gate, which meant the more hasty stores were already packing up. Including the one next to the crystal store, which was scary, but in a stroke of luck our destination was still open. We slipped inside together.

“Mister, we’re selling these.” The crystal store bought mana crystals, and so we put our pinky-sized mana crystals on the counter. The owner of the store pinched a crystal and held it up to examine it.

“...Judging by the size, I’d say these are from shumils?”

“Uh huh. We messed up when butchering them.”

“Hahaha, that’s rough. Here, one middle copper each.”

“Thanks, mister.” After selling the small mana crystals we couldn’t use ourselves for a middle copper each, Fey and I rushed out of the store. Fey flicked the middle copper in his hand and listened to the nice ring.

“Lutz, c’mon, let’s hang at the east side.”

“This is Ralph’s money, not mine. I’ve got nothin’.”

“He won’t mind sharing a little, c’mon.” The east side of the city had a lot of merchants, inns, and places to eat. With bars opening and merchants calling over potential customers, the east side of the city was definitely going to get real busy real fast.

We headed that way and Fey immediately used his middle copper to buy two ranshels, a tasty fruit that’s easy to eat. He then threw one my way while telling me not to drop it. I jumped in the air to catch it, definitely not wanting to drop the fruit Fey was going out of his way to give me.

We started walking home, loudly chewing the ranshels down. Sixth bell rang soon after, which signaled the closing of the gates. Stores and workshops all over the place began closing down. In moments, the street we were walking down was flooded with people walking home just like us.

We slid into a side alley to avoid the crowds and take a shortcut home. The sun began to sink and I could see the alley getting darker before my eyes.

"...Y'know, Lutz, you spend a lotta time with Myne. Dont'cha think she's scary?" said Fey in the darkness, his voice a little quieter than usual. I turned to look at him in surprise and saw that he wasn't wearing his normal mischievous grin. He looked afraid.

"When Myne glared at me with those rainbow eyes, it felt like, like, I couldn't breathe. It hurt. Just thinking about that freaks me out. Myne's just weird and scary."

I tilted my head a bit and tried thinking hard about Myne's scariness. "She's kinda scary, since it's like her head's built different from ours. If she came swinging at us with like, a club, we'd beat her easily. But Myne would never do that. She's scary 'cause you don't know what she'll do to you. But that's fine. You just have to not make her mad. And the only thing she gets mad about is book stuff, so yeah."

I heard Fey let out a relieved sigh. "Alright. Well, I'm just gonna try to avoid her. I dunno what'll make her mad or not." He shook his head. "I couldn't ask anyone else this, 'cause they wouldn't get it. Glad I know what to do now," he murmured as he threw away the core of his fully eaten ranshel.

...Weird and scary, huh? I dunno about that. I threw away my finished ranshel too and looked up at the darkening blue sky. As it came closer to resembling Myne's hair, the moon rose, looking just like the color of her eyes.

Unchanging Daily Life

“Okay, Shuu. I’ll be here.”

“Yeah. I’ll come getcha when it’s closing time. Don’t leave without me, alright?”

“I don’t get to come to this library often, so believe me, I won’t waste time like that,” responded Urano, pushing up her glasses before spinning around and practically skipping into the library.

Her hair was done up in braids on both sides. She didn’t do it herself, naturally. Her mom insisted that she should look nice on their trip and wouldn’t let her go until it was done. *Don’t get why, really. Urano’s never gonna care about anything but books.*

Whether you did her hair or bought her new clothes, Urano would always do the same thing on her trips. She’d go to the nearest library, search for books she hadn’t read before, and then read them until I came to get her. It was that or I’d travel from bookstore to bookstore with her, working as both a guide and a pack mule. I’d been her friend long enough to know it’s one or the other. And I was actually interested in enjoying this trip, so I didn’t want to spend all day at bookstores. I was much happier throwing Urano into a library and having the day to myself.

“This library closes at... 6:30PM on Saturdays, 5PM on weekends and holidays.” I set my alarm on my phone and walked away.

Once outside the library, I looked around and saw a large park with a gigantic silver globe at the end. It was the roof of a planetarium that had continents drawn on it in the style of a globe.

“...Been ten years now, huh?” Urano and I traveled here ten years ago as well. Or to be more accurate, Urano’s mom wouldn’t accept any gifts despite how much time I ended up spending at her house, which led to my mom organizing a trip under the pretense of it being something like an educational field trip. A gift

in disguise.

At this point I was more than old enough to stay at home alone, but I kept going along with the trips anyway out of respect for the both of them. “Urano’s mom just can’t get any rest when she’s around.”

Anyway, time to figure out what to do ’til the library closes, I thought while heading to the planetarium, which had reasonably aged over the past ten years. I passed by a stone marker with “City Park” carved onto it and watched kids playing beneath the warm sun and families feeding birds in the pond as I walked.

“I gotta be more careful this time...” I clenched my first, remembering my mistake from ten years ago.

◆

Ten years ago, I was an elementary schooler and I was absolutely pumped to be going on one of our bi-yearly field trips, both because it meant I got to spend time with my busy mom and because I got to go somewhere new.

It was our fall field trip. Upon arriving at the station and checking into a hotel where we could unload our stuff, I stuffed napkins and candy and all sorts of things into a backpack, ready for adventure. But my mom was sleep deprived from paper work, and said, “Since it’s already past three, let me take a nap until suppertime,” before preparing for bed. Which meant I went straight to the neighboring room.

“I’m here to play, Urano!” I went into the room, excited, and saw Urano’s mom slumped over in a chair, exhausted. Urano was sitting across from her and reading.

“Shuu, Mom’s clocked out; she’s really tried. Let her sleep for a bit. We can play tomorrow.” That didn’t leave much room for arguing. I slumped over and went back to my room.

“Mom, Urano’s mom is resting too...”

“Mmm, okay. You can have this, Shuu.” Mom, yawning sleepily, took out a map from her bag. She spread it out and marked on it with a red pen. “The pedestrian deck here is really big and connects to all sorts of places. If you go

out the exit by the receptionist's desk on the second floor of the hotel, you'll end up here. There're no cars in this area, so you can explore all you want. Your final destination is here, the planetarium. Use this map and try to see if you can make it there. If you make it, bring back an entry ticket as proof. Good luck, hun."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll give it a shot!" With the map, compass, and cash in hand, I felt like I had become a hero. I was in unfamiliar territory and I would be going all the way to a planetarium on my own.

"Shuu, tell Urano's mom where you're going!"

"Got it! Sleep tight." I once again headed to the neighboring room. When I told Urano's mom that I was going on an adventure to reach the planetarium, she asked me to bring Urano with me. I didn't really want to. She was slow and would get in the way...

"I don't mind, I guess, but Urano probably wants to keep reading here." All my experience led to me being certain that Urano would choose to keep reading, but after looking at the map for a bit, she started preparing to leave.

"Okay, let's go, Shuu."

With the unusually adventurous Urano at my side, I followed Mom's instructions and left through the automatic door by the second floor's receptionist desk. It was my first time seeing it since we walked straight into the hotel from the train station, but the pedestrian deck really was massive. It branched off in a thousand directions, and my job was to find the right way to go.

I grinned with the map spread out in front of me. But my first obstacle appeared immediately in the form of a fearsome foe.

"Shuu, let's go to that department store over there. It definitely has a bookstore inside," said Urano, pointing toward a building on the other side of the deck from the hotel. But I wouldn't have any fun going there. *This... This freakin' Super Monster Bookworm!*

"No way! No! I'm going to the planetarium today."

"A new bookstore will definitely be way more fun than a planetarium!"

“Not for me!”

Urano mumbled unhappily under her breath and started reaching into her bag for a book, but I grabbed her hand to stop her and instead walked to the city park. The planetarium was at the back end of the park. *I won’t let this Super Monster Bookworm get in my way!*

We walked along the pedestrian deck, and after crossing the big street, it sloped downwards and led to a path with big trees lined up on both sides. Once on the path, the sounds of cars on the street faded and were replaced with the cries of playing children and the rustling of leaves in the wind.

“Shuu! It’s a library! There’s a library here!”

“H-Hold on, Urano. We’re going to the planetari—” I was about to stop her, like normal, but suddenly realized something. If I let her go into the library, she definitely wouldn’t leave on her own. And thinking about it, Urano was just getting in the way of my adventure. If I came to get her at closing time, she could read like she wanted to and I could explore like I wanted to. It was perfect.

“Okay, Urano. Don’t leave until I get back.”

“Okay. I’ll read books and wait for you.” Urano waved goodbye with a broad smile while dashing into the library.

Having vanquished the Super Monster Bookworm, I spread out my map, heart racing with excitement to begin my adventure as originally planned. I turned my back to the library Urano entered and ran toward the big silver globe I could see further inside the park.

“Aaah, that was fun.”

The globe contained more than just a planetarium. There were tons of interactive science exhibits I could play with, so I just did that instead of seeing the show. I made friends with the kids there and competed to see who could move the most sand with magnets. We got stunned together over the weight of a meteor and fought to see who could generate the most electricity by pedaling. I kept playing until it was closing time at 5:30PM.

When I left it was already pretty dark, since the sun fell early in autumn, and I felt the temperature drop immediately. It had been warm at noon, but not even a jacket was enough to stop me from feeling chilly. I jogged down the path lit by streetlights to the library with the shadows of swaying trees falling over me.

"...Huh?" The library's entrance was lit, but it was completely closed. The windows were covered with white curtains, and what I could see of the inside was pitch black. Nobody was there. I circled around the library, checking for lit up places where Urano might be reading and waiting for me. But I couldn't find her.

"She's gotta have gone back to the hotel by now." The hotel was close enough that it was just across the street. It just made more sense to go back to the hotel than to wait around for someone in an unfamiliar place.

I ran toward the hotel.

"Urano? No, she hasn't come back." The moment I went to her room and heard her mom say that, I felt the blood drain from my face.

"Shuu, weren't you supposed to be with her?" Mom glared at me, and I confessed that I had left Urano at the library to go to the planetarium alone.

"'Cause I mean, I wanted to go to the planetarium, but the second we went outside Urano just kept talking about going to bookstores and going to the library. She was being selfish."

Urano's mom looked up, as if she had realized something. I realized it too. "...A bookstore?!" Urano had been interested in going to a bookstore inside the department store. She always got active when it involved books. She definitely decided to go to the bookstore after the library closed.

"I'm gonna go look for her!"

"Hold on, Shuu. I'll go with you." Mom and I ran to the department store together, checked the map, and headed to the bookstore on the fifth floor. It was a big store, but it was just one of many. It didn't take long for us to search every inch of the place.

"She's not here."

“...Maybe there’s another bookstore?”

Mom asked a bookstore employee if there were any other bookstores nearby. She said, “I have a friend waiting at a bookstore, but I can’t figure out which one,” while spreading the map. The employee told her about two bookstores, both a short distance away from the pedestrian deck.

“Let’s go, Shuu.”

“...Mom, I don’t think Urano will be at either one of those.”

“Why not?”

“Urano only wanted to come here ’cause she thought for sure a huge department store would have a bookstore. She probably doesn’t know about those small bookstores, and I don’t think she’s proactive enough to ask around for directions to a bookstore and then walk all the way there in a place she’s never been before.”

Urano would jump like an idiot into any bookstore she saw, but she wouldn’t walk around in the dark asking strangers for directions to nearby bookstores in a new place.

“Oh? But didn’t you go on a bookstore pilgrimage as third graders on summer vacation? You surprised everyone by biking with Urano all the way to a bookstore miles and miles away, remember?”

“We did that because she used a map and phone book to mark all the bookstores before we left. You didn’t tell us we were coming here until today, so it’s different. It’s more likely that she got kidnapped waiting for me at the library.”

“I see... I suppose we should return to the hotel and call the police, then.”

“Uh huh...”

It was very likely that she had just been kidnapped while waiting in front of the library. She’d probably get tricked in a second by any kidnapper saying “Get in the van, I’ve got books.”

This never would have happened if I checked when the library closed first...!

“She wasn’t there, then? I’ll call the police,” Urano’s mom sighed, her brows furrowed. She first contacted the local city hall and told them a girl might be closed inside the library, but they replied that an employee had confirmed that nobody was still inside.

“We should still go to the library and check, just to be sure. Urano has a history.” Urano had a habit of sitting in the oddest places to read, so back at home, she had once before been shut inside the library without realizing that it had closed. Ever since then, Urano ended up as a “person of interest” in the library and the employees there would always make absolutely certain that she didn’t stay inside past closing time.

Urano’s mom called the police with shaking hands. She told them that Urano hadn’t returned, and asked if they could start their search in the library. “Although she would keep reading even if the library closed, she definitely would never leave the library on her own. If she’s not in the library, she has been kidnapped.”

She informed them of Urano’s past history of being closed in libraries, and at the police’s request, the library opened for us immediately. I had called the insides of the library pitch-black, but in one corner the large lined-up windows drew in a lot of light from the outside, making the curtain seem kind of bright.

“I do think that your daughter was most likely kidnapped. I checked the library before closing, and even if someone was left, an elementary schooler would know to use the desk phone to call for help, no? They could call for help through the window, open the curtains, try to attract the attention of passerbys...” A library employee, unfortunately forced into working past his normal hours, turned on the light switch.

I ran through the now well-lit library, looking for the windows that had looked bright from the outside. As expected, Urano sat at the windowsill, reading books spread out across the short bookcase beneath it.

“Urano!”

Upon hearing my voice, she looked up from her book, shut it, and turned toward me. Despite how desperately we had been searching for her, to the point of calling the police, she looked completely calm and unbothered.

“There you are, Shuu. You sure took a while. It’s pitch black outside.”

“It’s pitch black inside the library, too! How could you not notice that, you idiot?!” I reflexively let out a scream.

Urano glared at me, cheeks puffed into a pout. “Don’t be mean. I noticed that it was dark and hard to read.”

“You’re an idiot for noticing that and not getting out of here! You Super Monster Bookwoooorm!”

◆

This time, after seeing the show in the planetarium, I went shopping and made sure to get back to the library before closing time. Urano’s favorite spot was whichever chair was placed closest to a bookshelf. No matter what library it was, she always sat in the chair closest to a bookshelf, so it wasn’t ever that hard to find her.

I looked around the library that I hadn’t really taken the time to examine ten years ago. The underside of the staircase had a plastic chain with a “no entry” sign on it, which was fitting because Urano had avoided the light from the setting sun ten years ago by moving to the underside of the staircase. Really, it was probably there because of her.

As those thoughts crossed my mind, I soon found Urano. She was reading books, like always. Despite her newly bought clothes and her dressed-up hair, she was doing the same thing she always did. Her eyes ran across the page as she consumed word after word with a slight smile on her face.

“Urano, it’s almost closing time.”

“Oh, Shuu. Looks like you managed to get here before dark this time.” Urano shut her book and stood up, smiling.

“...You remember that?”

“Of course. Mom got mad at me and said she’d never buy me a new book again if I kept reading after dark. Ever since then, I kinda snap out of my trance whenever it gets dark while I’m reading.” Urano sighed, which reminded me that ever since then, she would also say “I’m still here!” if the library she was in

started to close while she was in it, rather than just keep reading without really caring or noticing.

“Looks like even the Super Monster Bookworm has grown up a little...” As I thought about how she had matured a bit over the past ten years, I saw her standing in front of a bookshelf and reading a new book instead of cleaning up like she was supposed to.

“You haven’t grown at all!”

“Huh? What’re you talking about?”

I took the book out of Urano’s hand and put it back in the bookshelf, then took her arm and left the library while listening to her grumbling. She pointed at the department store and said, “Let’s at least go to the bookstore there while we’re here,” but I just kept dragging her to the hotel where our parents were waiting.

She had grown so little, it honestly hurt me on an emotional level. *Urano, I hope that someday you get stuck in a world without books and suffer!*

Afterword

Hi, I'm Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm Part 1: Volume 1.*

In this volume, Urano's life of being surrounded by and reading books was turned completely upside down. This is the story of Myne, a soldier's daughter, striving to survive in a world without accessible books while inflicted with a disease that could reasonably end her life at any moment.

If you can't buy books, make books. But she doesn't even have the paper necessary to make books. If you don't have paper, make paper. But she doesn't have the stamina, strength, height, age, or money to make paper. In the midst of lacking almost everything imaginable, she wields her knowledge to gain allies in her struggle. All to grant her dream of living a life surrounded by books once again and to make up for having died right before starting her dream librarian job. If you enjoyed watching Myne go wild in her reckless quest for books, well, consider me happy.

Now then, it's been one year and four months since I started writing this story on *Shousetsuka ni Narou** and I can say I never even dreamed that it would actually get published like this. Especially because, to be frank, this is a very long story. It's a web novel, so I've been casually packing it full of all the things I love and want to write about without a care in the world for how long it ends up. I've been writing for over a year and it's still not done.

But despite that, I was very pushy when it came to this published version. I wouldn't let them abridge "Part 1: A Soldier's Daughter" into a single volume, for instance, and I requested that not only the cute girls of the series but the older guys that are slowly introduced over the course of the story get cool drawings as well. I asked for a map of the city and an illustration of her apartment... I asked for everything I could think of, expecting my requests to be denied, but they kept granting them one by one. Isn't that amazing? Everyone at TO Books accepted my selfishness and made this wonderful book. For that I

cannot thank them enough.

I would also like to thank You Shiina for drawing these cute and pretty illustrations despite being so busy. Thanks to these illustrations, it's much easier to imagine the characters moving around in my head. Thank you.

And finally, I express my greatest gratitude to those of you who are reading this book now. I hope that we can meet again in volume two.

December 2014, Miya Kazuki.

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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 1 Daughter of a Soldier Volume 1

by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof Edited by Aimee Zink

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Original Japanese edition published in 2015 by TO Books, Tokyo.

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